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What's Your Tier? Introducing Library Partnership (LP) Certification for Journal Publishers

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As libraries consider how to support the global transition to open, choices and priorities can be overwhelming. Annie Johnson [described](#) the difficult place librarians inhabit, including shrinking collections budgets and greater needs to provide paywalled content and support open publishing efforts. In addition to financial concerns, libraries also need to make “informed, strategic decisions about which initiatives to support (and which not to support) [while acknowledging that] each agreement takes so much time to evaluate.” In this situation, so aptly described by Johnson, assessing publishers’ practices is a useful approach.

As two librarians involved in scholarly communication, who have either taken on a new role leading collections strategy (Robin) or been increasingly working with librarians in acquisitions and collections strategy (Rachel), we want to improve clarity in discussions about openness and publisher practices among our library colleagues, and what those things mean in relationship to our professional responsibilities and values. Our proposed Library Partnership (LP) certification system for journal publishers updates an earlier [provisional system](#) called Publishers Acting as Partners with Public Institutions of Higher Education and Land-grant Universities (PAPPI) and its [associated scorecard](#). As with PAPPI, in LP certification, a publisher’s actions are quantified based on points earned for practices that align with the values of libraries and many institutions of higher education. The more points a publisher earns, the higher their overall score. LP certification is similar to the U.S. Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) architectural certification. Where LEED certification assesses a building project’s practices in “[credit categories](#)” such as *water efficiency* or *indoor environmental air quality*, LP certification assesses a publisher’s practices in four categories: *Access*, *Rights*, *Community*, and *Discoverability*. The overall score a publisher earns places them in one of four tiers.

Tier	1	2	3	4
Score	57 - 40	39 - 30	29 - 20	19 - 0

These tiers represent how well a publisher’s practices align with actions we in academic libraries would expect from a partner organization that shares our values.

On the LP Certification

Four categories and an open-ended response are the heart of LP certification for journal publishers:

- **Access** examines when and how the public can view an article and what barriers exist to author participation in publishing. There is substantial nuance in this category, in part because publishers often approach access very differently. In broad strokes, publishers that provide full and immediate open access (OA) across all journals earn more points than those that simply allow author-led open archiving. Publishers with no or low APCs earn points, as do publishers offering APC waivers for any of their journals (not forcing waiver-eligible authors to publish only in particular journals, that is, fully OA journals). 16 possible points.
- **Rights** focuses on author rights and reuse rights. Publishers that allow authors to retain all rights, or use Creative Commons licenses, earn points. 11 possible points.
- **Community** considers ethical and business aspects of publishing. Points are awarded to nonprofit and society publishers. Legal actions against libraries or lobbying against OA do not earn points for a publisher, while evidence of transparency and responsible handling of user data do earn points. Membership in [COPE](#) is a plus. 12 possible points.
- **Discoverability** deals with the technical side of publishing. Publishers earn points through accessibility, ORCID integration, participation in preservation organizations, and similar practices. 15 possible points.
- The **Open-Ended Response** allows publishers to describe other actions they take to support equitable and open science/scholarship. 3 possible points.

The overall score comprises 57 possible points, ultimately classifying publishers into one of four certification tiers.

Using our current version of the LP certification scorecard, we evaluated five different publishers: one large commercial publisher, two societies, one library publisher, and the faculty-owned Evolutionary Ecology Limited, which publishes one journal, *Evolutionary Ecology Research (EER)*. The overall scores of this evaluation are shown in Figure 1 (see the [certification scorecard and five detailed scores here](#)).

Figure 1: LP scores for five publishers divided by categories.

As seen in Figure 1, the University of California's eScholarship, a library publisher partnering with 85 open access journals, earns the highest score in the Discoverability category. Society for Neuroscience, publisher of two peer-reviewed journals (one fully OA and one delayed OA), scores highest in Access, Rights, and Community. Despite these differences, both publishers achieve Tier 1 status, earning 40 or more points overall. Both *EER* and American Chemical Society reach Tier 3 status, yet earn substantially different scores in the categories Rights and Discoverability. Elsevier, with a total score of 12, lands in Tier 4, with the lowest scores in Access and Community affecting its overall standing.

Using LP to Make Decisions & Discern Practices

LP certification tiers can help librarians make a wide range of decisions. A librarian, for example, may evaluate a single publisher to make collections/funding determinations. Quantification can also be useful when librarians want to compare publishers. The partnership tier and overall score provide the information needed for at-a-glance, high-level comparisons, but scores in the individual categories provide the transparency needed for a deeper dive into a publisher's strengths and weaknesses.

This transparency is especially important in revealing practices of publishers outside the list of “most prolific publishers” ([Larivière, Haustein, & Mongeon, 2015](#)) for two reasons. First, practices among smaller publishers differ greatly. Second, publishers with fair-to-good partnership practices may be obscured by a low overall score due to differences in technical resources when compared to their more prolific counterparts.

The latter consideration is important as more libraries offer publishing services. A library press may consider a journal publisher’s individual scores in LP categories as the basis for justifying an offer of support to a publisher with fair partnership scores but needing particular help in one area. (Note that LP certification was in part created to bring to light smaller publishers’ practices so that librarians could better evaluate and compare among publishers’ offers for transformative agreements.) One example can be seen in the case of *EER* and the Discoverability category. *EER* is one of many journals run on a shoestring budget. *EER*’s overall score places the journal into Tier 3, making it presumably equivalent to the American Chemical Society. However, individual category scores reveal that *EER*’s otherwise exemplary partnership performance is obscured by an extremely low score in Discoverability (D), a category that deals with metadata, persistent identifiers, and preservation. This is an instance where library publishers might decide to offer practical guidance and partnership support to raise *EER*’s overall score.

Similarly, a library could look at *EER* and see its scores in Access, Rights, and Community (ARC) reflect desirable practices to the extent that warrants attention and financial support. We call such publishers “High ARC, Low D” publishers, i.e., those that match many values held by libraries and institutions of higher education, but still struggle with technical aspects of publishing vital to discoverability and preservation. We want to raise the visibility of *High ARC, Low D* publishers because we believe they are deserving of attention and support from libraries and library publishers; additionally, this support will help publishers recognize libraries not just for our budgetary investments but also—due to librarians’ development of and professional expertise in metadata, discoverability, and preservation standards—our potential as publishing partners.

Possible Implementations

The more publishers evaluated under this certification system, the more information librarians will have to support their decision-making. Additional actions libraries might

take based on LP Tier status and/or individual category scores include, but are not limited to, the following:

- *LP Tier 1 Publishers:* Publishers earning Tier 1 partnership certification exhibit exceptionally high overall trustworthiness as a partner. Support of new, untested approaches with such publishers may lead to successful, innovative, and mutually beneficial models of funding, equity in publishing, and so forth. Publishers earning 50 points or more earn Tier 1 Starred status.
- *Open Access Support:* Libraries often offer funds to help institutional authors pay Article Processing Charges (APCs). Such funds commonly cover APCs in fully OA journals but not hybrid OA journals. In doing so, library funds continue to flow to publishers that do not score well as library partners. Rather than using journal-level access to determine OA/APC funding, libraries may instead consider a publisher's LP Tier. Paying APCs for a hybrid journal published by a Tier 1 publisher is likely a worthwhile investment to a publisher exhibiting strong partnership practices; conversely, libraries may consider paying no APCs (or a fraction of APCs) to OA journals published by a Tier 3 publisher. Using the examples above, this means a library might pay any APC for an article accepted by the Society for Neuroscience (Tier 1) but only a small fraction of an APC for an article accepted by the American Chemical Society (Tier 3). Colleges, departments, funders, or authors would need to contribute additional funds to cover the latter.
- Beyond APCs, a publisher's LP certification Tier could inform other OA-related decisions, such as serving to justify prioritizing a partner's transformative or innovative agreements.
- *Tier 3 and Tier 4 Publishers:* Beyond APCs, libraries may want to strongly negotiate or limit financial support for publishers earning low overall scores, especially those with low ARC scores (noting the exception of *High ARC, Low D* publishers as described above, which should be considered separately.)
- Moreover, if a librarian is primarily interested in one category, or even one particular action (no embargos, for instance), they could use LP certification to find publishers that fit those criteria. Similarly, faculty and researchers seeking to publish may use LP certification to find journals and publishers whose values match their own.

Certification criteria may also be useful for audiences other than librarians. For example, publishers may find utility in perusing an outline of practices that garner library support.

Next Steps / How to Get Involved

While described here as more independent in scope, LP certification could also be used in conjunction with other evaluation systems. Examples include: SPARC's [Good Practice Principles for Scholarly Communication Services](#); SPARC's [ESG \(Environmental, Social, and Governance\) Primer](#); COPE membership guidelines; Library Freedom Institute's project on [Vendor Privacy Scorecards](#); Educopia's [Next Generation Library Publishing Project](#); Certified B Corporations, etc. Potential for growth also exists beyond the scope of journal publishers (e.g., LP certification for textbook publishers), although one of the main focuses of this particular process is to identify areas where we as a scholarly community may step in to help elevate smaller, under-resourced journal publishers.

Considering the certification system's potential to scale and help inform resource decisions geared toward openness and equity, the authors invite and hope collaborators will join and help expand this project. Feedback from several individuals in libraries and library organizations has greatly improved the certification scorecard. We are now [seeking feedback](#) regarding operational questions, for instance the qualifications and selection of raters and other contributors, the frequency by which publishers should be evaluated, and what additional requirements might be needed to increase the usefulness and functionality of LP certification to libraries, institutions of higher education, and other stakeholders who may wish to adopt the system. Ideas and guidance on methods for sustainability will also prove most valuable.

Individuals, groups, and organizations looking to provide feedback, ideas and/or guidance, as well as those interested in getting involved as raters, partners, or other contributors are encouraged to fill out [this form](#) or email the authors. Conversation and collaboration are welcome.

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