Commonplace

Balancing Investments in Open Access: Sustainability and Innovation

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Over the past year or so my colleagues at Temple University Libraries and I have been engaged in a project to assess various open access publishing initiatives. Led by myself and Collections Analysis Librarian Karen Kohn, our goal was to develop a plan for how the Libraries might more strategically use the collections budget to support the global transition to open. Towards this end, we organized all-staff discussions, brought in a speaker, and did a lot of reading about what other libraries are doing.

Throughout this project, I have been struck by what I see as the central tension within this work: we want to experiment and support innovative approaches to open access but at the same time we need these initiatives to be sustainable for our organization.

Temple is a Research 1 university with a sizable collections budget, but we are not MIT or the University of California (UC). Like many other academic libraries, our collections budget has been shrinking, not growing. So how can we ensure that our support for open does not become unsustainable in the face of continued cuts to our collections budget? And perhaps more importantly, how can we make informed, strategic decisions about which initiatives to support (and which not to support) when each agreement takes so much time to evaluate, and staff are already spread so thin?

The tension between innovation and sustainability has been particularly apparent in our discussions about transformative agreements. Temple was recently approached about participating in the [ACM OPEN](#) program that was pioneered by MIT, the UC, Carnegie Mellon, and Iowa State. At first glance, it seemed like a very exciting proposition. We wouldn't be paying individual APCs like other transformative agreements, and because not many Temple faculty publish in ACM journals, we are in a low tier and our initial cost is not very high. But as our Head of Acquisitions and Collection Development Brian Schoolar pointed out, while the cost increase for ACM OPEN is small in absolute terms, it still represents around a 30% increase over our current ACM pricing. Temple couldn't come close to sustaining similar agreements with other scholarly societies unless the Libraries were able to tap into a lot of additional institutional funding. And that seems unlikely.

Of course, sustainability for the Libraries is not just about the cost of individual initiatives. It's also about staff time. Historically, decisions about which open access initiatives to support were made on a case-by-case basis. That worked ok, but now that there are so many options, with very detailed particulars, we knew we needed a more coordinated approach, which would bring together staff with different types of expertise. So, in order to evaluate the various transformative agreements,

collective/crowdsourced open content, and other open publishing initiatives, Karen and I assembled colleagues from both our collections strategic steering team and our scholarly communications strategic team with the goal of writing an internal document that could guide our institution's decision-making about funding for open publishing initiatives. Our collections group brought to this project an understanding of the big picture as well as experience negotiating with publishers. Our scholarly communication team brought a strong understanding of open access as well as a knowledge of faculty publishing practices.

Our plan was a good one, but it was also more complicated than Karen and I expected. We quickly learned that understanding the ins and outs of every option, as well as staying on top of each new initiative, is extremely time consuming. We often found ourselves getting in the weeds. Is it a transformative agreement or a pure publish agreement? Is it a collaborative funding opportunity or a community investment program? Would we be members or partners? And what does it all mean anyways? Many of our colleagues did not feel like they had the expertise to undertake this evaluative work (nor the extra time to develop the expertise). Finally, while some open publishing initiatives only ask for a small amount of support, if the Libraries continues to grow the number of individual organizations it funds, it seems likely that maintaining all of these separate agreements (and regularly assessing them) will undoubtedly add to work levels.

After a year spent learning, thinking, talking, and writing, our group came up with four priorities that will guide future decisions as to which open publishing initiatives we support. These priorities include:

1. Non-APC or BPC-based models
2. Initiatives that focus on disciplines that are less likely to have researchers with grant funding
3. Initiatives spearheaded by university presses or scholarly societies
4. Models in which the cost is comparable to a similar paywalled product and/or the change in cost over time is predictable

It's just a starting point, but we hope it will help make these decisions somewhat easier going forward.

Openness is one of the core operating principles of Temple University Libraries. The Libraries are committed to increasing access to scholarship, and our collections budget has changed significantly over the past five years as a result. At the same time,

it has become clear to me that if we really want to move towards a world of open knowledge we need to focus more of our efforts on finding sustainable models not just for publishers, but also for libraries.