Commonplace • Series 1.3: Global Transition to Open

Bringing Transformative Agreements to a Large Consortium

Corrie Hutchinson¹, Corey Murata²

¹GWLA, ²University of Washington

Published on: Nov 16, 2021

DOI: 10.21428/6ffd8432.93cf52ef

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Transformative agreements (TA), those which move the fee libraries have traditionally paid for read-only subscriptions to publishing content open access, are not new. Projekt DEAL began negotiations with Elsevier as far back as 2016 with the goal of moving towards a transformative ‘read & publish’ agreement on behalf of all German academic institutions.¹ For the past few years, we have been working on behalf of our institutions and the Greater Western Library Alliance (GWLA) to bring transformative agreements out of the realm of discussion and into action at the consortial level. GWLA members are trying to find a sustainable way to provide access to scholarly research produced and needed by our communities with continual decreases in budgets and resources. This essay discusses our experiences, frustrations, and hopes for the future.

GWLA’s Experience and Principles

GWLA is a consortium of research libraries that seek to leverage our collective talent to further members’ goals in the areas of “scholarly communication, interlibrary loan, shared electronic resources, cooperative collection development, digital libraries, staff development and continuing education.”² The 39 member libraries which constitute GWLA are a diverse group of public and private institutions, spanning 20 states reaching from Hawaii to Delaware. This consortium of libraries support large, research institutions which collectively comprise a significant portion of the scholarly publishing consumers in the United States. Working collaboratively towards a TA seems natural so that members might leverage their collective purchasing power and share staffing resources to the benefit of all members. A GWLA-wide agreement ensures opportunities for members who perhaps do not have the resources, either financially or in staffing, to individually negotiate packages or agreements. Plus the more institutions that move towards TA, the sooner the future of OA is realized and all scholars benefit.

Much of the discussion of collection development and shared licensing takes place in the Collections Committee which is made up of a representative from each of the member libraries in GWLA. In the spring of 2018, the Offset Agreements Task Force formed as a subgroup to the Collections Committee to focus attention within GWLA on open access and transformational agreements.³ Soon after formation, the Task Force broadened its scope and attention to the new and emerging open access and transformative agreements that were beginning to appear. The Offsets Task Force started by developing an internal set of Open Access Agreements Criteria to help guide

us in evaluating open access agreements that were emerging at the time. In 2020, the Offsets Task Force drafted a set of Licensing Principles that articulates member priorities for all GWLA negotiated licenses. These Licensing Principles focused on sustainability and transparency in our agreements, while establishing the centrality of accessibility and the privacy of our users and protecting the scholarly ecosystem through the preservation of established practices such as interlibrary loan, and expanding the scholarly commons through the pursuit of open access and transformative agreements. With the diversity of member libraries in GWLA, establishing these Licensing Principles, formally adopted by the GWLA Board of Directors in 2020, was a critical first step because, as we state in the introduction to the Licensing Principles, “it is important that we remind ourselves and declare the values and principles that bind us together.”

Up to now, GWLA has primarily focused negotiating towards a TA on expiring contracts and those for which a publisher initiates the conversation. With only 2.5 staff and other priorities to attend to, GWLA is not able to pursue TA agreements with all publishers patronized by their members. Some publishers have been proactive and reached out to GWLA, while others seem to be quietly waiting to see how the agreements manifest. But the publishers aren’t the only ones who are divided on what type of open access agreement will work.

Challenges to TAs for a Large Consortium

To begin, not all institutions are ready to move towards supporting open access publishing by means of an agreement where the cost of publishing is what drives expenditures and not the reading of the article (the most common type of agreement GWLA has explored to date). Philosophically, some librarians disagree with incorporating publishing expenses into the libraries budget. Should not these expenses be paid by the researcher, grant funding, the department, or graduate studies for example? Will the library be setting a difficult precedent if they move forward with an agreement resulting in a possible shift of the mission into unknown and possibly unwanted territory? There is no single one-size fits all solution for bringing transformative agreements to GWLA libraries.

Philosophy aside, most challenges are logistical and practical in nature. For example, if an agreement does not come with unlimited coverage of author publishing charges (APCs) or publication of all articles published as open access, determining how

approval of funding will be mediated is rife with potential pitfalls. Who will mediate the process? GWLA cannot take on the additional work of verifying and approving coverage of an APC for an affiliated-author at all or any of its member institutions. That burden then falls to the libraries who are often already short-staffed. How do the libraries decide which articles will be published using the limited APC funding? Many libraries are not comfortable setting guidelines on how an article is approved due to politics or culture at their location institution.

The diversity of GWLA institutions has also been a barrier for consortial TA. Some publishers have been unwilling to extend their Read and Publish style agreements to GWLA institutions with lower publishing output. This practice further disenfranchises scholars from lower publishing output institutions from publishing their research open access and prevents GWLA from negotiating TA as a consortium. Often, publishers want one type of agreement for all GWLA members which is simply not possible. It is often sold as easier for the publisher and therefore more cost-effective, but the single offering usually consists of a package of all journals published which is not financially feasible for many members. We need a way for all libraries to participate and benefit from a consortial TA.

Lastly, all agreements in the past few years offering a transformative option are more expensive than the current traditional agreement. Sometimes it can be only an initial one-time investment, but often it is a recurring expense that only conceptually leads us to lower costs in the long run. Institutions which have high publishing output are suddenly hit with skyrocketing prices that cannot be absorbed in a single fiscal year. The increased costs of these agreements are difficult to align with stagnant or shrinking library budgets. As these agreements are relatively new and scarce in the US, we have no solid data or studies on how they impact faculty publishing behavior, the cost of the agreement going forward, and, ultimately, the total cost to the institution making the investment or increased costs hard to justify.

The finer points of the obstacles to a TA through GWLA are reflective of what makes GWLA great: our diversity. While we share much in common, we are also different due to our funding sources, programs offered, research goals, grants received, and patron communities. Each state supports higher education at different levels and the pandemic has done much to diminish or at least impair enrollment for many institutions. With strained budgets at most members, disagreements on how to spend that limited amount abound. It can be hard to sell coverage of publishing charges

when faced with cuts to access to content or layoffs of staff. Long-term OA goals can seem less pressing compared to short-term changes in collections and services.

Moving Forward

The agreements reviewed thus far haven't been as forward-thinking as GWLA members would like. The scholarly publishing landscape seems unstable and publishers are often unwilling to commit to untested business models that threaten their bottom line. Some of the proposals from commercial publishers seem designed to lock in revenue and maximize profits, cloaked under the guise of supporting open access. Discussions are entertained, but the status quo is maintained and new avenues are delayed another year as the time to negotiate dwindles like the calendar year. But some of that could be alleviated if publishers were more transparent. How publishers decide which institutions “qualify” for a TA and if so, the cost of participating is often a mystery. Much is unknown of the variables and formulas used to determine if and how a TA will be offered to an institution. Transparency from publishers and a more cooperative relationship, akin to a true partnership, would do much to remove the barriers towards the purported shared goal of open access.

While we see many challenges, we don't see dealbreakers. Nothing discussed is insurmountable and as these agreements increase in number, the case studies to support them grow stronger. New models of open access like subscribe to open (S2O) and Diamond OA journals that don't perpetuate the APC model are simpler for libraries to support and are expanding open access to smaller non-profit publishers. No one model works for all publishers or libraries and all must be explored and tested. Just as the business model of the 1980s no longer works in 2021, the transformative agreements of today will change the landscape and usher in a new era. GWLA will continue to pursue and hopefully begin initiating TAs for its members to help usher in the next era.

Footnotes

1. “About DEAL.” Projekt DEAL, <https://www.projekt-deal.de/about-deal/>, Accessed 22 October 2021. [↗](#)
2. “Greater Western Library Alliance.” <https://www.gwla.org/>, Accessed 22 October 2021. [↗](#)

3. The Offsets Agreements Task Force took its name from early conversations around traditional subscription agreements that included offsets that account for open access article publishing costs paid for by authors, and to address double-dipping by publishers. [↗](#)