

Faculty Speak Out on Publication Issues: Escalating Costs of Journals

Over the next four issues of *OSU This Week* members of the Faculty Senate Library Committee will be presenting a series of articles discussing scholarly communication. Last year the Task Force on Scholarly Communication issued a report to the Faculty Senate that documented the threats to “an open and sustainable system of scholarly communication” (http://oregonstate.edu/dept/senate/committees/other/tfosc/final_report/). The forthcoming series of articles will cover four topics: cost of journals, journal impact factors, open access journals, and the OSU campus repository for digital scholarship.

In early 2000, the average scholar at a university such as Oregon State University read about 130 journal articles each year, up from 100 a decade earlier. While scholars read more journal articles, they subscribe to fewer journals, from an average 5.8 personal subscriptions in 1975 to 2.2 in 2002. Scholars increasingly rely on libraries for access to timely research.

University libraries face increasing challenges due to a synergistic combination of increasing journal prices, expanding number of journals and shrinking budgets. Annual institutional subscriptions for journals often exceed \$1,000 and some cost as much as \$20,000. Between 1986 and 1998, real prices for academic journals doubled and the number of academic journal titles increased 60 percent, while real acquisition budgets for libraries rose only 50 percent. These trends have continued or accelerated during the last decade.

Libraries have responded to this situation by cost cutting. Overall, libraries have reduced the number of books purchased by 26 percent and journal subscriptions by 6 percent. Libraries are experimenting with more effective ways to deliver timely scholarly research including group purchase agreements, package discounts, and shared databases.

However, innovations in library purchasing will not deal with the fundamental problem of escalating journal prices. Some researchers contend that the problem lies in increased dominance of the journal publishing industry by commercial publishers rather than professional organizations. Theodore Bergstrom, an economist at University of California, Santa Barbara, found that the six most-cited economics journals listed in the Social Science Citation Index are all nonprofit journals with library subscription prices averaging \$180 per year. In contrast, the five most cited commercially published journals in the same field cost an average \$1,660 per year. Bergstrom contends that nonprofit journals are a better bargain and estimates that a library could spend less than 10 percent of its subscription budget on nonprofit economics journals, which would contain 60 percent of all articles cited in economics. In contrast, spending 80 percent of its budget on commercial economics journals would yield only 33 percent of all cited articles. Bergstrom found similar commercial/nonprofit differences in chemistry, agriculture, mathematics, physics and medicine. See the OSU Library Web site (below) for price comparisons for specific journals in which OSU faculty publish.

With evidence of monopolistic pricing on the part of commercial journals, Bergstrom and others urge scholars to help discipline commercial publishers into price structures more inline with their nonprofit counterparts. One remedy is increased support for nonprofit journals and for open access electronic journals. Additionally, libraries must pay close attention to the cost effectiveness of journals and cancel subscriptions to overpriced journals. Finally, Bergstrom and others argue that scholars can help rein in

high commercial journal prices by using their clout as editors and referees and by considering a journal's institutional pricing policy in deciding where to submit new papers for publication.

Actions by scholars may be part of the solution, but Phillip Davis, a Cornell University librarian, urges libraries to be proactive by paying attention to cost and relevancy in selecting journals, to explore means of paying for information only when it is used, and to accelerate information exchange with other libraries. Davis also suggests that libraries consider providing incentives for campus scholars to submit papers to cost-effective journals and, perhaps, to charge scholars for journal access to increase awareness of the true cost of obtaining information. Additional information on the cost of journals, including cost comparisons for specific scientific fields can be found at the OSU Library Web site at http://osulibrary.oregonstate.edu/scholarly_communication/.