

# NAVIGATING OPEN ACCESS INITIATIVES IN A SEA OF MIXED SUPPORT

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**E**ast Carolina University (ECU) is a large, public doctoral institution with medical and dental schools, located in rural Greenville, North Carolina. ECU Libraries comprise a health sciences library and a main academic library with a separate music library. The libraries are institutionally separate but collaborate frequently, including their efforts to support open access (OA). ECU Libraries' OA efforts began around 2008 with the establishment of the institutional repository (IR). Since 2008, OA support has grown into a three-pronged approach that includes working with faculty to deposit the appropriate, publisher-permitted version of their article in our IR; providing funding for open access articles through an Open Access Publishing Support Fund (OAPSF); and offering recurring classes to faculty and graduate students on selecting and evaluating journals, with a focus on OA publishing. The three efforts were created to address the informational, financial, and infrastructural and procedural barriers to OA publishing identified through local conversations and in the literature.<sup>1</sup>

To date, we have taught at least one class per semester on evaluating publishers, supported over ninety OA articles through our OAPSF, and deposited 1,178 journal articles in our IR. Faculty members provide positive feedback about the libraries' OA efforts. The authors note increased awareness of OA publishing among faculty, annual depletion of the allotted OAPSF funds for both the health sciences and academic affairs campuses, and increased demand for classes on selecting and evaluating journals. While the quantitative and anecdotal observations indicate the fruitfulness of our efforts, our OA efforts have also revealed unforeseen challenges in convincing campus stakeholders of the value and legitimacy of OA publishing. Occasionally, our OA efforts have landed the libraries in the middle of campus politics.

Unsurprisingly, the omnipresence of predatory publishers underlies many of the challenges the libraries face in supporting OA. Despite nearly two decades of OA publishing and the rise of respected OA publishers like PLoS, many faculty still conflate OA with predatory publishers. This varies by department but problematically becomes evident in personnel decisions. ECU faculty report learning that departmental tenure committees will not favorably review faculty dossiers that include too many articles published in OA journals. Faculty also report unfavorable annual evaluations resulting from publication in OA journals, even when the OA journals are reputable.

ECU Libraries have a vested interest in remaining uninvolved in external evaluation or tenure and promotion decisions. However, one unintended effect of our advocacy and support for OA has been that faculty associate the libraries with all matters related to OA. While this is a welcome association, there have been instances where faculty members involved in unfavorable evaluation or tenure and promotion decisions related to OA publications looked to the library to provide support for these publications. Responding to such requests requires delicacy. When the libraries have decided to meet these requests, the response has involved carefully crafting requested documentation to avoid embroilment in personnel decisions. Typically, we preface our response with a statement that the libraries support OA, provided the publishing practices of an OA journal ensure meaningful peer review, discoverability of contents, adherence to publishing ethics, and long-term preservation of scholarship. The statement precedes an evaluation of a specific journal according to specified criteria. Even these measured responses cause anxiety among the librarians involved in crafting them; we reason, however, that we provide similar evaluations of journals for faculty members asking for journal assessment during reference interactions.

As more OA articles are included in dossiers, ECU personnel committees and chairs seek definitive journal quality criteria for OA publishers and journals. Faculty previously used Beall's List and desire a vetted replacement for it. ECU's institutional governance became involved in meeting the demand; the Faculty Senate, Faculty Senate Libraries Committee, and Scholarly Communication Committee were tasked with creating a set of general guidelines on publishing, subject to full Faculty Senate approval. Additionally, the Scholarly Communication Committee revised a checklist, developed at the University of Toronto, to fit our campuses' needs.<sup>2</sup> The guidelines are meant to provide institutionally approved criteria for assessing journal quality, equipping faculty to assess journal quality themselves or refer to librarians. Notably, departmental use of the guidelines is not mandatory and thus real adoption uncertain.

Our OAPSF has periodically been at the center of campus politics as well. The fund started during the 2014–2015 academic year and was initially entirely supported by ECU's Advancement Council, which includes high-ranking administrators. The Advancement Council provided \$15,000–\$20,000 per year until 2018, when the Advancement Council declined to continue support for the fund. The reasons for the loss of university-level funding are unknown, but likely result from budgetary decisions. In lieu of university-level funding, ECU Libraries provides \$10,000 per year, with each campus receiving \$5,000.

Under the previous Advancement Council funding model, navigating the OAPSF guidelines proved challenging. All applications were shared with representatives from upper administration, in addition to our ongoing practice of application review by a committee comprised of librarians and faculty representatives. We encountered disagreements among stakeholders about awards, with nonlibrarian members suggesting making OAPSF a competitive award, preferentially granted to faculty publishing in high-impact journals, refusing support for graduate student applications, and requiring departments to help fund article processing charges (APCs). ECU Libraries advocated for equity in awards, educating administrators about issues with impact metrics, including disciplinary variation in impact metrics. We compromised on graduate student support, accepting only student submissions with a faculty mentor as coauthor. ECU Libraries steadfastly declined becoming involved in impelling departments to help cover APCs; we asserted that requiring departments to allocate funds to support faculty publishing would necessitate broad, university-level mandates. We do, however, suggest to applicants that departments *may* be able to use facilities and administrative funding to assist with APCs.

The challenges we have experienced underline that OA support involves institutional cultural changes that must include addressing the mindset of administrators, who are critically placed to influence faculty publication choices. This is not always a comfortable effort for librarians, but an important one. Taking multiple approaches to OA and involving multiple librarians to provide OA support has also been critical, especially when difficulties arise.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you handle a request to become involved in an evaluation decision related to open access? Should librarians be involved in these questions?
2. What type of funding is provided to support open access at your institution? How vulnerable are your funding sources to budgetary changes? In what ways do funding sources effectively constrain how you can use your funds?
3. Has your library identified administrators who may be resistant to open access publishing? What strategies might you employ to address their concerns?

## NOTES

1. Nature Research, “Author Insights 2015 Survey,” Figshare, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.1425362.v7>; Martin Duracinsky et al., “Barriers to Publishing in Biomedical Journals Perceived by a Sample of French Researchers: Results of the DIAzePAM Study,” *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 17, no. 1 (December 2017): article 96, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-017-0371-z>; Gareth J. Johnson, “Cultural, Ideological and Practical Barriers to Open Access Adoption within the UK Academy: An Ethnographically Framed Examination,” *Insights* 31 (2018): article 22, <https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.400>.
2. University of Toronto, “Identifying Deceptive Publishers: A Checklist,” University of Toronto Libraries and Office of the Vice-President, Research and Innovation, 2018, <https://oneseach.library.utoronto.ca/deceptivepublishing>.

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