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## **“Academic Publishing is a Business Interest”: Reconciling Faculty Serials Needs and Economic Realities at a Carnegie R2 University**

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “Academic Publishing is a Business Interest”: Reconciling Faculty Serials Needs and Economic Realities at a Carnegie R2 University

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** This article explores faculty conceptions of academic publishers, their willingness to circumvent paywalls and share content, and their understanding of who holds the responsibility to pay for this body of scholarly work to which they all contribute.

**Methods:** The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 faculty at their Carnegie R2 university to explore scholars’ perspectives with respect to the costs of serials and the responsibilities of the University and library in support of scholarly publishing.

**Results:** Participants reported a broad spectrum of perspectives with respect to circumventing publisher paywalls and offered nuanced practices for interacting with paywalled content. They explained which library services work well and offered suggestions on how best to support faculty needs for serial literature. Although most participants agree that the University has the responsibility of making academic literature available to the community, they differ in their conceptions of academic publishers as good-faith partners in the knowledge enterprise.

**Discussion:** The results suggest a great deal of ambiguity and diversity of beliefs among faculty: some would support boycotting all commercial publishers; some understand academic publishers to be integral to the dissemination of their work, not to mention tenure and promotion processes; and many acknowledge a variety of tensions in what feels to them an exploitative and fraught relationship. These findings have implications for library services in acquisitions, collection management, scholarly communication, discovery, and access.

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**Conclusion:** The data provide insight into the nuanced perceptions that faculty members at a Carnegie R2 hold concerning the costs of scholarly publishing and the role of academic publishers within scholarly communication.

**Keywords:** academic libraries, academic publishing, scholarly communication, collection development, acquisitions, qualitative research

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

1. Faculty members' needs for academic serials are informed by disciplinary and personal conceptions and practices, all of which must be considered in the design and delivery of library services.
2. Studying usage information and access behaviors only tells part of the story; serials acquisition and library access models require the triangulation of multiple datapoints, including the direct input of faculty across disciplines.
3. This study offers the understudied perspective of teaching faculty at an R2 university, as well as the challenges and opportunities encountered by librarians that serve them.

## INTRODUCTION

Negotiating agreements with academic journal publishers can be difficult under the best circumstances, but it is almost impossible when resources are limited and the needs and principles of stakeholders seem to be in direct opposition. Unlike some European countries that have successfully negotiated national agreements, within the United States most agreements are specific to universities or regional consortia. Agreements with academic publishers to provide access to serials at consortia or state levels remain uncommon. Faculty hold deeply divergent perspectives on the costs, models, and roles of stakeholders in academic publishing. Academic librarians navigate the challenge of receiving impassioned requests for content, fairly distributing resources across departments, considering a variety of access options, balancing diminishing budgets, and, awkwardly, fielding complaints about the profit margins of some academic publishers or even requests to boycott them.

In this paper, the authors report the passionately held and sometimes conflicting perspectives of faculty participants regarding academic publishers and who is responsible for providing access to the scholarly literature to which they all contribute. The authors interviewed 25 faculty members across the disciplines at Illinois State University (ISU) to explore the following three research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How open are faculty to circumventing paywalls, and what does this suggest about their conception of academic publishers?

RQ2: Who do faculty see as responsible for providing access to scholarly serials?

RQ3: What do faculty think is working well, and what suggestions do they have for improvement with respect to serials?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The increasing costs of academic journals have been well-documented and will not be repeated here (Stoller et al., 1996; McGuigan & Russell, 2008; Wenzler, 2017). Stoller, Christopher-son, and Miranda attribute the serials crisis to the monopoly power of commercial publishers and the third-party payment system (1996). McGuigan and Russell note that the dominance of three major commercial publishers and the prestige of their large portfolios create an inelastic demand for the journals that scholars need for tenure and promotion purposes, as well as what libraries are compelled to make available (2008). Wenzler attributes rapid increases in subscription prices to librarians' having outsourced the management of online journals to publishers (2017).

Several studies chronicle the rise and fall of “Big Deal” subscriptions, which increased the size of serial collections in academic libraries almost fivefold from 1986 to 2011 (Frazier, 2001; Strieb & Blixrud, 2012; Shu et al., 2017). Big Deals have been called into question for unfavorable pricing, undermining libraries' budget flexibility, rigidity on the part of publishers, exclusion of print options, licensing terms that conflict with library needs and values, and yielding poor cost per citation, among other concerns (Frazier, 2001; Strieb & Blixrud, 2012; Shu et al., 2017). Frazier famously drew a parallel to the Prisoner's Dilemma experiment: “The current generation of library directors is engaged in a dangerous ‘game’ in which short-term institutional benefits are achieved at the long-term expense of the academic community” (2001, para. 10). Frazier indicated that Big Deals lessened librarians' “opportunity to shape the content or quality of journal literature through the selection process” and thereby limited their input on scholarly communications (2001, para. 9).

The staggering profit margins of certain commercial publishers, especially relative to the actual cost of publication, has also been reported in the literature (Van Noorden, 2013; Frankland & Ray, 2017; McGuigan & Russell, 2008). Some research has taken the question of profit margins further and called for the disruption of a business model that benefits commercial publishers and does not serve the authors and editors responsible for the intellectual content of the work (Schimmer et al., 2015). Schimmer, Geschuhn, and Vogler conducted calculations of current subscriptions and projected open access (OA) publishing costs and argued that “there is enough money already circulating in the global market – money that is currently spent on scientific journals in the subscription system and that could be redirected and

re-invested into open access business models to pay for APCs [article processing charges]” (2015, p. 4).

Online access to journal content has been attended by increasing unpaid options to access scholarly content, some of which are potentially in violation of copyright. Several studies have confirmed the broad availability of articles—even the version of record—on academic social network sites (e.g., ResearchGate), which some refer to as “gray” OA (Björk, 2016; Zhang & Watson, 2018).<sup>1</sup> Gray OA refers to manuscripts available on academic social network sites, and green OA refers to manuscripts deposited in repositories or posted on an author website. Green OA is most typically done by the author or with the author’s knowledge, whereas gray OA may be done without the author’s knowledge or consent. Although uptake of green OA has increased, it is far outpaced by gray OA; Zhang and Watson reported the availability of 14% green OA and 37% gray OA in a study of Canadian Institute of Health Research funded publications (2018). A recent survey of 3304 scholars confirmed what many suspected: namely, that more than half of scholars admit to using piracy sites such as Sci-Hub (Segado-Boj et al., in press). The same report shared a variety of other options for accessing journal content, such as paying for it, using an interlibrary loan (ILL), reading the abstract, requesting it from the corresponding author or a colleague, and searching for a publicly available version (Segado-Boj et al., in press).

Considering that scholars have a variety of “free” options to access content, and that libraries have been priced out of comprehensive journal subscriptions despite spending an increasing proportion of their flat or decreased budgets on these same, what options do librarians have? Many libraries that had previously signed on to various Big Deals have moved to single-title subscriptions or have negotiated a smaller, more affordable bundle. Some publishers and platforms have offered pay-per-view article token options that provide patrons with point-of-demand access (Jabaily, 2018). Librarians have increasingly turned to paid document delivery to provide on-demand access to previously available content or access to new titles instead of pursuing a subscription (Murphy & Buckley, 2018). Some librarians have played a role in flipping journals to OA, and many libraries offer OA publishing services (Vandegrift & Bolick, 2014; Stapleton, 2019). Other libraries have surveyed faculty about OA publishing to inform personnel about “creative solutions to the collections budget shortfall” (Shook & Vecchione, 2022). Barr recently wrote about balancing “pragmatic gains and the limitations of a dysfunctional, commercial marketplace in library acquisitions” (2023). The authors—all academic librarians—are aware of their own participation in a highly dysfunctional marketplace and endeavor to bring to the forefront the ethical considerations of serials acquisition by listening to the needs of their community and having honest conversations with publishers.

## METHODS

The ISU Institutional Review Board approved the protocol and interview instrument as exempt. The team, i.e., librarians at Milner Library, recruited participants using the University faculty email list and reviewed 56 prospective participants, selecting those whose college, school/department, and rank promoted the most diverse perspectives. According to Joseph Maxwell, purposeful selection increases the relevance of contributions and richness of the pool (2013, pp. 96–97). Two members of the team conducted 25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews via Zoom in 2022. At the beginning of each session, they received permission to record and enabled transcription. They took notes during the interviews, which they reconciled.

The authors relied on these notes, transcripts, and recordings to analyze the data and used inductive coding to organize the data into themes and subthemes. The authors implemented a variety of measures to promote validity: triangulation, i.e., searching for convergence among multiple and different sources; member checking, i.e., taking the data and interpretations to participants for their input on the credibility of the information and account; the audit trail, i.e., inviting professionals external to the project to examine and consider its credibility; and thick, rich description, which “creates verisimilitude, statements that produce for the readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described in a study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129).

### Limitations

Interviewing 25 faculty members does not allow the authors to assert the generalizability of their findings. Interviews were conducted by librarians who were known to many participants, and the intent of this research is not only to understand the issue but also to inform and improve library services; the interview questions reflect that this study was not conducted in a controlled or neutral setting (See [Appendix A](#)). The interviews lasted up to 90 minutes and covered a diverse array of serials-related topics. This generated a considerable amount of data, which the authors discretely split into multiple manuscripts. Although separating data may be seen as a limitation, it allowed the authors to provide thick, rich descriptions and amplify the voices of participants.

### Demographics

All of ISU’s academic colleges and 22 distinct departments/schools (see [Appendix B](#)) were represented by the participants. Participants indicated that they conduct research across disciplines using diverse methodologies within the applied sciences, arts and humanities,

business, formal and natural sciences, health sciences, and social sciences. Participants represented a spectrum of faculty ranks, with ten Assistant Professors, seven Associate Professors, six Professors, and two Instructional Assistant Professors. As reported in [Appendix C](#), participants completed their terminal degrees between 1987 and 2022.

## RESULTS

RQ1: How open are faculty to circumventing paywalls, and what does this suggest about their conception of academic publishers?

Participants expressed a variety of perspectives, ranging from very open to circumventing publishers (“I think they are robbers”) to passively opposed (“It’s not worth the effort”). Most participants landed a bit closer to “You do what you gotta do, in part because you know the keeper of the paywall is going to be fine,” but some were indignant: “Philosophically, I am opposed to paywalls blocking access to knowledge that the journal did not create. I am morally opposed to corporate profiteering at the expense of my access to what people have done before.” Participants expressed frustration for the high profit margins of many commercial publishers (“I don’t worry about Elsevier too much; I think they’re doing okay”) and outright contempt for the perceived gatekeeping that slows down scientific progress and precludes engagement with scholarly materials. One participant summarized, “Academic publishing is a big business; business interests and scholarly interests don’t usually go together.”

Although many participants are open to circumventing paywalls to access or share content, most are not doing so in public or traceable ways. One participant is “aware of many tools that allow users to access papers behind a journal paywall on a journal website,” but no one admitted to engaging in systematic or sustained illegal activity with respect to content downloading or sharing. A participant quipped, “I’m not going to become like the Napster of the academic [content].” Most will not actively pirate content, but many are not opposed to obtaining unpaid access to research.

The rationale participants frequently offered is that “Faculty do all the writing, reviewing, and editing, and the publishers make so much money off it. [...] The library is a victim of it, too, in having to pay fees.” One participant summarized their perspective by saying, “I’m not hostile to the paywalls. I am hostile to them [commercial publishers] being exploitative of the scientists and the universities with their subscription fees. I’m more than happy to undermine their bottom line.” Several participants suggested following the money: “And the thing is who’s getting the money? It’s not the authors, not the reviewers and the editors. They aren’t getting paid enough to make it worthwhile. Who is getting the money? It’s a business that has a free labor force.” Another person said, “I would love to know what the journals are doing with

the incredible amount of money.” Others hinted that, although publishing has significant costs, the profit margins of commercial publishers are simply too high.

Some participants highlighted the gray area in respecting paywalls. One scholar shared, “I don’t want to circumvent the paywalls illegally, [but] if a collaborator sends me the paper, that’s because he or she’s on the paper [...] which means we’re not circumventing anything.” Another participant similarly stated, “If I’m working with another colleague on a systematic review or integrated review and [we] may be doing different searches initially, we might put those into a shared OneDrive folder.” Others shared more brazen approaches; faculty in one participant’s department set up individual subscriptions with generic login credentials: “Coincidentally, no two of us have the same subscription.”

A few participants highlighted the absurdity of being asked to pay to access content that they have written. A humanities scholar shared, “It is always frustrating to publish something in an academic journal, not get paid for it, and then be asked to pay to see it.” They came to this realization after explaining the process to nonacademic friends. Although they acknowledge the costs of publishing, a business scholar was appalled at being charged to temporarily access their own content: “I understand that we need to pay the [publisher’s] staff [...] but it is odd to have to pay for temporary access to an article that the authors weren’t paid for.” One scholar has posted some articles to ResearchGate that they should not have: “I do try to wait the year [because the publisher] will do everything they can to ensure compliance.”

Although most participants feel no compunction about accessing their own paywalled work (“especially if it’s for me to use in a different format and the distribution is for a party of one”), a few expressed similar sentiments about all publications. One participant will “go to whatever lengths are necessary, as long as it’s ethical, to acquire materials necessary to my research.” Yet another scholar has “no issue at all getting articles from another website as opposed to the publisher.” That depends on someone else assuming the risk of posting paywalled files. Several comments reiterate that much paywalled content is available depending on one’s comfort with risk.

One participant shares articles with clinicians and also checks the public availability of publications before including them in a presentation. They observed that some content is posted illegally, and people “are gaming the system” by posting content to sites such as Pinterest, Teachers Pay Teachers, and Etsy: “This lets me have a wider ethical conversation with clinicians, who are underpaid and overworked, and students—they want to help kids.” They discussed the need for scholarly literature when providing evidence, for example, to submit claims to insurance: “We are in helper fields. We try to help people in any way we can, not pass judgement.” They fleshed this out with an example of comparing options based



on the information available: “In Milner I see there’s so much more evidence for Therapy A, but if I go out to Google Scholar, it’s all going to be about Therapy B. [...] They’re going to choose Therapy B. Not because it’s the best, but because that’s what they have evidence to support.” Another scholar tied access to need: “Ethically, I don’t have a problem. In graduate school, we would find ways to download books—if you need something and don’t have money, you find a way to get it.”

Intensity of concern about circumventing paywalls also ranged considerably. One participant is incredibly open to circumventing paywalls, but, as a grant reviewer, they get temporary access to some publisher content: “I access the content legally when I can do so.” Another scholar indicated, “I don’t do that [circumvent paywalls] because there’s a legal way to do it. It’s really not that much harder.” They also expressed concerns about the possibility of getting a computer virus and indicated that access via the library would be more accurate and up-to-date. Another participant concurred, “If you circumvent those paywalls, those sites are shady enough [that] I don’t think I really want to be putting them on my personal or my office computer [...] To me it’s not worth the risk of infecting my computer and losing all my data.”

A current doctoral student finds it important to go through proper channels: “It’s content I will be referencing in my writing, and I need to show a record of how I got the information. It’s important to me to keep that integrity intact; if someone wants to replicate my study, it is important to explain how I did my search.” They contrasted this to their professional work, in which they are not as opposed to using unauthorized channels, including sharing articles via email: “We do evidence-based practice and journal article discussions/reviews, so we make copies so people can use them in that scenario.”

For a few participants, the topic is not a concern. One person indicated that they have never had to circumvent a paywall: “Between Google Scholar, interlibrary loan, and library subscriptions, I have access to everything I need. Sometimes I email the author if it’s in press or accepted—if it’s going to take six months or a year to come out, they send it to me.” Another scholar similarly noted that it is rare that they would even have the occasion to do this: “Since the University has a membership for most of my journal venues, I get material that way. I also have IEEE [Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers] and ACM [Association for Computing Machinery] memberships, so I get access through those.”

Participants also differed in what paywalls mean for their disciplines, institutions, and libraries. A natural sciences scholar finds it positive that journals in their field are moving toward freely distributed papers online without charging APCs. A formal scientist feels that “free access is the way to go; information is not something to sit on, it belongs to everybody.”

A social scientist indicated that although they personally have not prioritized making their research accessible to readers, they appreciate trends in sharing publishers' portable document formats (PDFs) via green OA: "We should make it easier to share our work and paywalls are getting in the way." A social sciences scholar shared that they are not happy with consolidation in publishing and submission fees, and they do not submit to journals that charge fees. An applied scientist has never paid for a journal article and never will: "I tell my students the exact same thing."

An education scholar thinks that paywalls highlight the importance of stable access via the library: "Immediate access via a subscription is my preference." A social sciences scholar indicated, "I wasn't very aware of the paywall issue, but getting ready to speak with you, I learned a lot. The publishers are getting filthy rich, and faculty don't get paid to write and do reviews. [...] What publishers are doing is exploitive and they're not going to miss any meals. I read about the UC [University of California] system and the war that they waged; I say, 'Go for it.'"

RQ2: Who do faculty see as responsible for providing access to scholarly serials?

Most participants indicated that their department does not provide access to serials, and there is not currently a precedent for sharing scholarly content among departmental colleagues, although an exception within the natural sciences is noted earlier in the paper. A few participants mentioned that their department was not funded at a level to accommodate subscriptions, and one person emphasized, "Our department operates on a shoestring budget." Some participants use personal subscriptions that are offered through society or organization memberships, but several noted that they have either dropped such memberships or that the memberships come with trade periodicals instead of scholarly journals. Using the example of paying for a dataset, a social scientist stated that, if a department pays for something, it should be available to all faculty in the department.

Most participants indicated that the funding responsibility lies with the University and, specifically, with those who require research outputs as part of faculty positions. Participants representing diverse disciplines noted that scholarly content is just as essential as other University-provided resources. A humanist said, "To the same extent that I need a blackboard and computer in my classroom, I need books. I need films like I need this desk that I'm sitting at. I could not do my job without them." Similarly, a natural scientist indicated, "If the university wants us to do these activities, they need to provide us with the resources, just like whiteboards, classrooms, and technology." A social scientist acknowledged, "I took a faculty job partly because I get access to a lot of things, including access to research." One participant articulated the general consensus: "This is part of the cost of my being employed here."

They want me to publish, they want me to be informed, they want me to be able to teach courses and interest students, [advise on] masters' theses, then they should provide the articles."

The research profile and identity of the University was evoked by a handful of participants, usually with the suggestion that there is a desire to increase research productivity. One participant quipped, "[If] the president of the University wants us to research more, she's got to figure out a way." Another participant shared, "Rumor has it we want to increase research rigor on campus, but without having access to articles, how do we do it?" Another scholar echoed, "Do you want to be a good university? Are you aspiring to be an R1? Start with the library."

Some participants tied their needs for serials to their work with students, whether in the classroom or via research. An applied scientist stated, "Having access to articles and books is a condition of possibility for the work that we do as scholars, absolutely, and for teaching, too." A natural scientist shared, "If you want learning to happen, you need access to do that. I do literature exercises with students. When we do research with students, it's considered teaching." A social scientist indicated that their degree program assumes that scholarly literature can be easily accessed: "Our pedagogy still reflects that we should be able to access anything in the literature, even though economically, that becomes harder and harder." Participants noted that articles are important for teaching graduate courses in education ("how to do assessment methods, data collection, empirical research methods") and health sciences ("We're doing this, not just because we feel it's important; we're doing this because there is evidence that shows that when we do these things, these are the outcomes we can expect").

Participants in some fields highlighted information literacy and open educational resources (OER) in discussions about responsibility. One health sciences department has included information fluency in its strategic plan. An applied sciences scholar shared their experience compiling reading lists for students: "I see why some teachers don't like using textbooks, because they summarize really complicated concepts in their own words [...] I don't want to teach my students using this language that doesn't make sense [to me]." They have taken OER workshops and see colleagues moving away from using textbooks ("commercial textbooks are such a racket"). They declared that "it's hard enough to be a student. I think if you want them to read something you should just give it to them. If they're doing research projects, they might need to use library databases, but for coursework the professor should make articles available." This faculty member was among a few who shared that they simply share PDFs with students instead of linking to the library's licensed content. As noted in the literature, although doing so is common, it is also problematic (Haggerty et al., 2022).

Many participants made the point that the library needs to be sufficiently funded to meet scholars' needs for serial content: "The University needs to give Milner the funds to enable this. If something got cut, I would get mad at the University, not the library." Participants in chemistry, communication sciences and disorders, economics, geography, kinesiology, and special education offered that Milner has done a good job of managing the needs for diverse content. One participant shared, "I appreciate that you have a limited budget, and your hands are tied. The library is the backbone of the scholarship that gets done. [...] I couldn't do anything without library resources, it's crucial to teaching and scholarship." Although not having immediate access is frustrating, participants understand that the library must make hard choices: "Some of the items are very expensive. I realize they are important, but they keep increasing the price for you guys. Especially with not many PhD programs, it is hard to justify." A few participants made the point that, although the library cannot offer everything, it is important to keep standards higher rather than lower. Otherwise, "At what point do we stop being a major library when we don't have some of the basic resources?"

One scholar stated that Milner's offerings have no bearing on their scholarly career, and a second implied as much. The former stated, "When I write a grant, I'm competing with people at [R1 Universities], so I need to be competitive. I have no ill will [toward the library], I understand they need to cut [expenses] and it makes sense to me to cut one expensive journal to save thirty other journals." They need access to scholarly literature to do their job and be competitive for grant funding: "We are scholars, and we need these things, we don't want to be criminals. I get it immediately knowing it's wrong, but I need it." Several other participants used this opportunity to reiterate that they will do whatever it takes to get journal content: "We can survive because our colleagues [share], so we can get articles. But it shouldn't be this difficult to get what we need."

A business scholar indicated that the future of research is much more interdisciplinary. Accordingly, the University should avoid fostering silos, and funding should be centralized in the library. Several participants agreed that centralizing the acquisition and management of scholarly content makes the most sense to ensure stable access for students and faculty across all colleges and schools. As a health sciences scholar put it, "The resources transcend disciplines so having them in a central location makes sense."

RQ3: What do faculty think is working well and what suggestions do they have for improvement with respect to serials?

Participants offered strategies for the provision of serials and suggestions for improvement. Unsurprisingly, many participants spoke to their current modes of access to serials, expounding on what works well from their perspective. Several participants rely on the library's licensed

content. An applied sciences scholar, for example, said, “You are supporting me with 95% of what I want.” Most participants are pleased with the timeliness and fulfillment rate of the library’s ILL service. One person declared, “Make sure this service is staffed so faculty can get timely copies of resources.” Others were more critical, such as a social scientist, who said, “ILL is a great Band-Aid, but doesn’t address the whole issue,” and a natural sciences scholar who indicated that, if ILL takes a day to arrive, “it is one day too late.” A natural sciences scholar has been “a big advocate of Get It Now.” They felt some of their senior colleagues were hesitant because they did not want to lose the print subscription and were concerned about the persistence of a digital file. “Some access in whatever form is better than no access. At least in [my field], we’ve all come to that conclusion that as long as you give us access, we’ll deal with it as long as we can still get what we need.”

Some participants commented on the help of library personnel via virtual reference and subject librarians. The ability to easily ask for help is most welcome given the perceived lack of intuitive search interfaces. Similarly, some participants agreed that having a dedicated librarian is beneficial in ensuring that their needs will be considered and understood. One participant in the health sciences has been pleased with the level of input their department has in making decisions about subscriptions and cancellations: “The department needs to maintain budget to help faculty do their jobs—teaching and research—so they should work with Milner to give faculty a voice to ensure access. Communication with Milner has been important: [subject librarian] regularly communicating journal costs and usage has been helpful.” A few participants shared that they appreciated receiving data showing cost-per-use and other data in support of renewal or cancellation: “I fully support doing something like that. I think that’s the most cost-effective way of doing it.” A social scientist reiterated that teaching faculty are often not in a position to know all the alternatives and options or to invest the time to investigate; therefore, sharing this information is essential.

One participant noted using BrowZine, one of the few search platforms optimized for mobile apps that Milner Library currently offers. Another participant mentioned Unpaywall and, through comments that suggested a desire to gain access to content on publishers’ platforms, others provided evidence that apps, plugins, and tools that connect users to full text within their own workflows are desirable.

A participant in the humanities recently benefited from Milner’s transformative agreement with a large university press and appreciated the opportunity to make a piece of great personal significance openly available. A few scholars mentioned depositing articles in ISU ReD, the institutional repository, to make them available as green OA. An applied sciences scholar spoke to the potential of ISU ReD as “a helpful venue. I’m isolated, and it [could be] a great source of information for what other people are doing on campus. When people have a publication

come out, is ISU ReD a place they think of to put it?” Another participant shared awareness of the option to host OA journals in ISU ReD and knew of a title in the process of migration to ISU ReD.

## Suggestions

Participants across disciplinary lines advocated for consortia agreements and collaborative collection development. One natural scientist expressed surprise that there has not been more activity at the state level and wondered how much of that was “the University of Illinois not wanting to join others.” They thought “finding ways to pool resources is very important to helping as many people as possible.” Another asserted, “It would be more effective if the State of Illinois covered the cost – not University of Illinois but the other directional universities – Eastern, Western, etc. If you’re a public institution, there should be some funding for this.” An applied scientist shared that consortia agreements for journal subscriptions should account for the size of the school and research activity because “that seems like it would lower the cost since there are so many institutions.” Two humanities scholars advocated for sharing collections among universities: “The idea that comes to mind is sharing, and not every university has to have all the relevant journals if they’re willing to scan and share as needed.”

Participants suggested considering individual access where appropriate and minimizing redundancy. Scholars in business and the arts mentioned that there may be certain situations in which individual access may prove preferable to institutional subscriptions. “So we’re not going to subscribe as an institution, but we’re going to give him the money to acquire a personal subscription to that. That meets his needs, because we’re literally never getting requests from any students or other faculty members to engage with [it].” A health sciences scholar indicated, “Trying where possible to reduce redundancy and subscriptions to particular journals.” This comment highlights that some journals are only digitally available from the publisher, and several others are also available in aggregated databases. Untangling these availabilities and the different levels of access they come with is a challenge, especially when OA availability is added into the mix.

Several participants spoke to the importance of promoting the public availability of University research outputs. One social scientist discussed how the library might support expanded awareness of University research via a repository, saying that such efforts would make the research more visible, shareable, and citable. Having a platform that integrated with Watermark Faculty Success (“where we have to add our publications”) but also provided the full text would mean that faculty would not have to maintain personal websites to make their publications and outputs publicly available. Scholars in applied sciences and education advocated for support for OA publishing and related outreach. One shared, “[My field] is favorable

toward OA but needs support for gauging the quality and rigor of OA publications.” Another scholar said that some colleagues have the career goal of starting an OA journal and raising its reputation but understands how challenging this can be depending on ownership of the journal, whether a professional organization or a commercial publisher. A scholar in the applied sciences indicated that University-provided grants, including University research grants and seed grants, have enabled them to fund OA publishing costs but acknowledged that other departments or disciplines may not have similar opportunities for funding. Their suggestion to standardize requesting OA publishing funds in grants may, accordingly, not be suitable for others.

Several suggestions had to do with supporting authors by providing research resources, software, and instructional support. One scholar noted that expanding service to reference management software and teaching students how to use them would be beneficial. They also indicated that access to personal knowledge management software (such as Roam Research or Obsidian) would be welcome among faculty. A humanities scholar talked about what they call “the secret code of academia, all these things you’re supposed to know, but nobody actually will ever sit down and teach you: how to publish, pick a journal, find a book publisher, write a book proposal, all of these kinds of things.” They also commented that Offices of Research (across institutions) are not designed for humanists, rather “they are designed for people applying to big NSF [National Science Foundation] grants and do a good job of supporting those people. But I can’t apply for those grants and what they do doesn’t help me get tenure. There is a big gap.” Although book subvention money is important, they also identified needs around image rights, OA publishing charges, legal questions, indexing, copyediting, and creating maps.

The most notable contrast came from suggestions to foster relationships with publishers on the one hand and end or minimize agreements with commercial publishers on the other. A business scholar reiterated the importance of relationships between libraries and publishers, saying, “There has to be a dialogue between publishers and libraries, [with both] entertaining possibilities to increase access to research.” They suggested considering all options, including deals with consortia, pay-per-article models, transformative deals, and “doing the math” to prioritize strategically. They also reiterated the importance of carefully considering equity implications of various models: “In developing countries, this would be a real drag on research.” A natural sciences scholar acknowledged that, although it may not be realistic, “I don’t think anyone would be upset [about] destroying for-profit publishers by refusing to play their game. I know that this is one of these things where we’d have to hurt ourselves by denying access to these journals.” An applied sciences scholar similarly suggested, “Libraries should boycott having journal subscriptions. That’s going to be a huge problem if it gets to the point where you can’t afford it.” The same natural sciences scholar elaborated, “You just have to decline referee requests from these journals, and if people’s papers don’t get reviewed when they submit to a Springer journal and Springer sits on the paper for three months, because they can’t find

reviewers, people will [...] go to a different journal. This is my way of being the change I want to see in the world.”

A social sciences scholar urged the library to embrace evolving acquisitions and access models: “The industry has to change with the times or get shut down like movie rental retail spaces.” They highlighted innovative practices and services in libraries as examples that Milner is evolving. “I would put it in your hands to know what’s best, what’s most advantageous for us, I would defer to you almost completely.” Participants offered their suggestions with acknowledgements, as a social scientist put it, that “the electronic landscape keeps changing and the dust has not settled yet.” Some participants offered thanks for the work the research team is doing to collect faculty thoughts and share them broadly: “We don’t often get our voices heard on this particular topic.”

## DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate the willingness of scholars to circumvent publisher paywalls, which has been established in survey-based literature (Segado-Boj et al., in press). The interview format allowed the authors to explore what such behaviors say about authors’ conceptions of academic publishers. Although participants are willing to acknowledge the costs associated with scholarly publishing, they do not feel that their labor and contributions are appropriately credited. Some indicated that the revenue of commercial publishers far outpaces their contributions to the scholarly enterprise. Several social scientists and humanists shared the perception that commercial publishers will not be harmed by such activities, whereas some scientists expressed outrage at the perceived exploitative behaviors. Both of these perspectives reiterate that business practices do not necessarily align with the scholars’ conceptions of knowledge creation and dissemination.

Although most participants are somewhat open to circumventing paywalls, many indicated that they prefer to access serial literature through legal channels. Notably, none of the participants are willing to pay for articles. Participants differ considerably in how they define circumventing a paywall. Sharing papers among collaborators may be seen as paywall circumvention to the publisher, but it was seen as part of academic collaboration to participants. Finding freely available versions online is a common activity, but using publicly identifying or dangerous mechanisms to circumvent paywalls was a boundary that all participants observed. The prospect of losing data or infecting University computers with a virus is simply not worth the risk. Scholarly articles are the essential academic currency; faculty must have access to participate in and contribute to the discourse. Because of this necessity, publishers truly are “gonna have to work pretty hard if they don’t want me to get it.”

Overwhelmingly, faculty see the University as being responsible for funding access to scholarly serials and the library as the most logical office for centrally acquiring and providing access to the



literature. Some scholars indicated that, given changing publishing models, the University should also be responsible for funding OA publishing of all faculty- and student-authored content as well. The findings align with scholarship showing the historic model of the academic library caught between faculty demands and university budget constraints (McGuigan & Russell, 2008). Participants felt strongly that it is the responsibility of the institution, not the department or even the library, to support the information needs of scholars. Beyond requesting that the institution increase the library's budget, however, they had no concrete ideas to realize this.

Faculty suggestions included some solutions that have considerable implications for library services. There were various calls to support authors and promote research outputs. Connecting interested faculty authors with their subject librarian and the scholarly communications librarian might provide point of need contact for the types of support articulated by many participants. Participants also articulated considerable interest in support for OA publishing or at least opportunities to make faculty-authored scholarship publicly available. Comments from faculty reveal that, although the institutional repository is known to some, it is not yet seen as a viable mechanism for preserving, collocating, and providing access to faculty work—a challenge that is echoed in the literature (Joo et al., 2019).

Participants' suggestions for partnering with or boycotting publishers are the hardest to reconcile with the authors' daily work supporting access, acquisitions, collection development, discovery, and scholarly communications. Librarians have long been torn between faculty needs for scholarly literature in support of their teaching and research and the economic realities of their institutional budgets and publisher pricing. It is important to recognize that faculty have a broad range of perspectives on academic publishers as good faith participants in the scholarly communication landscape. Librarians would do well to take to heart concerns about publisher pricing and practices and provide robust feedback to vendors about the experiences, needs, and frustrations of the communities they support. By listening to the needs of their users and discussing opportunities with publishers, librarians may aspire to find some middle ground between complicity and a boycott.

## CONCLUSION

A primary goal of this study was to highlight the diversity of perspectives articulated by participants across disciplines and to amplify the voices of scholars regarding their access to and use of scholarly serial content. The authors hope that by collecting and sharing these data, they can advocate for collections and services that better serve their community. This study also articulates the uncomfortable position in which librarians commonly find themselves: seeking to serve a community with limited financial and personnel resources, making decisions based on the information available to them and receiving contradictory input from stakeholders.

The authors heard from some participants who were ready to boycott all commercial publishers and others who insisted that established academic publishers, including commercial ones, are essential to the dissemination of scholarship in their field.

Many faculty members appeared willing to do whatever is necessary to acquire needed articles. Although faculty members appreciated the library's diverse efforts to provide needed information, when desired sources are not readily available, some feel the commercial publishing landscape justifies alternatives such as sharing directly with colleagues or acquiring articles via gray OA. As far as transforming the scholarly publishing landscape more broadly, one participant indicated that their general philosophy with respect to reviewing and submitting manuscripts for publication is "Be the change you wish to see in the world." This aligns with Milner Library's approach to serials; the authors are intentionally prioritizing OA agreements with publishers that have shown good faith efforts to serve ISU and the broader scholarly community well, especially nonprofit publishers and university presses. Although librarians will not be able to satisfy all their stakeholders' serials needs and preferences, it is only by receiving faculty input that they can understand and advocate accordingly.

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## **APPENDIX A.**

### **Interview Questions**

#### Demographic

- In which department(s) do you teach?
- Which subject area(s) do you research?
- In what year did you complete your terminal degree?

#### Access

- How open are you to circumventing journal paywalls?

#### Cost

- Do you or your department maintain journal subscriptions, and whose responsibility is it to provide access to serial content to University faculty and students?
- Understanding that the cost of journal subscriptions has skyrocketed while library budgets have remained flat or decreased, what thoughts can you share about how the library can best support your needs for scholarly literature?

## **APPENDIX B.**

### **College and School/Department**

College of Applied Science and Technology - Criminal Justice Sciences; Family and Consumer Sciences; Information Technology; Kinesiology and Recreation

College of Arts and Sciences - Chemistry; Communication; Communication Sciences and Disorders; Economics; Geography, Geology, and the Environment; History; Languages, Literatures, and Cultures; Mathematics; Physics; Psychology; Social Work; Sociology and Anthropology

College of Business - Finance, Insurance & Law; Management & Quantitative Methods

College of Education - Special Education; Teaching & Learning

Mennonite College of Nursing - Nursing (2)

Wonsook Kim College of Fine Arts - Music (2)

**APPENDIX C.**  
**Year of Terminal Degree**

<u>1987</u>
<u>1993</u>
<u>1994</u>
<u>1999</u>
<u>2005 (2)</u>
<u>2006</u>
<u>2008</u>
<u>2009 (2)</u>
<u>2011 (2)</u>
<u>2013</u>
<u>2016</u>
<u>2017 (5)</u>
<u>2018</u>
<u>2020</u>
<u>2021</u>
<u>2022 (3)</u>