

The bewildering new world of scholarly communication

Helping faculty understand the issues

by Howard M. Dess and Myoung C. Wilson

In April 2002, ACRL announced that its scholarly communication initiative would be one of its highest strategic priorities during the next three years.¹ Among other issues, this initiative emphasized the need for close collaborative partnerships between librarians and other faculty to improve the current system of scholarly communication. This report is offered as one such example of a productive alliance between librarians and faculty members to initiate an informational program at Rutgers University about scholarly communication issues.

The traditional print-based world of scholarly communication is caught up in a whirlwind of change and uncertainty as the electronic publishing revolution raises a host of questions about time-honored practices and procedures governing the dissemination and archiving of new information. Academic libraries are at the center of the storm, buffeted from all directions by the often conflicting demands of different constituencies. Librarians are also keenly aware of the frustrations arising from attempts to satisfy often incompatible pressures from:

- Library users, especially in the sciences, who increasingly prefer the convenience and power of electronic access over print, but also expect such access to be unlimited in scope.

- Publishers who impose access restrictions and pricing structures that in themselves often comprise a form of restraint.

- University administrations that must exercise budgetary discipline and hold spending down to acceptable limits.

It is ironic to note that faculty members have generally been well insulated from these problems largely through the efforts of the libraries. As a result, the faculty have been unfamiliar with or largely indifferent to the broader issues of scholarly communication until such time as their favorite journal is cancelled or electronic access lost because of budget cutbacks, and then the library becomes a convenient focal point for grievances about loss of service.

More recently, however, the realization has been growing that the faculty needs to be better informed about the changes that are occurring in the area of scholarly communication. This would serve as an important first step toward building support in the academic community for adopting new approaches to the publication and dissemination of its creative output.

At Rutgers, the university administration has expressed its determination to encourage this educational process and enlisted the sup-

About the authors

Howard M. Dess is physical sciences resource librarian in the Library of Science and Medicine, e-mail: dess@rci.rutgers.edu, and Myoung C. Wilson is social sciences librarian in the Alexander Library at Rutgers University, e-mail: mywilson@rci.rutgers.edu

port of the library to provide leadership in developing and implementing programs that would help raise the level of awareness among faculty about scholarly communication issues and promote a greater willingness to explore new avenues of publication.

Organizing for action

The Scholarly Communication Steering Committee (SCSC) at Rutgers was created by University Librarian Marianne Gaunt in December 2000 to address the previously described issues. The committee was charged with leading a university-wide discussion about the changes occurring in the realm of scholarly communication and the impact of these changes on the academic community. The immediate goal was to promote a better understanding of the evolving scholarly communication milieu. In the longer term, the committee was charged with exploring possibilities for more positive action, such as encouraging Rutgers journal editors to move from boards of high-priced commercial publications to lower-priced journals that are supported by professional societies.

To achieve these ends, SCSC initiated a three-pronged action program. First, the committee decided to launch a fact-finding campaign organized around a series of faculty luncheon discussions to explore in greater depth faculty attitudes and the extent of their knowledge about scholarly communication issues. Second, the decision was reached to create an informational brochure and a Web site outlining the current troubled state of scholarly communication and possible remedies. Third, a symposium was planned around the theme of scholarly communication, to be presented by nationally prominent experts on this topic.

Fact-finding investigation

Throughout the spring and fall semester of 2001, the committee hosted seven luncheon discussion sessions with selected research and teaching faculty. The selection of faculty attendees initially focused on journal editors, who were thought to be in a position to influence journal publication and pricing policies, and also included some of the most highly published researchers, who may certainly be considered major stake holders in any system of scholarly communication

The sessions varied in the representation of academic disciplines. Some comprised faculty

from a single discipline while others contained a mix (e.g., science plus arts and humanities). In some sessions only senior faculty attended while in others more junior ranks were also present. Each discussion was initiated with introductory remarks from the host SCSC member that addressed scholarly communication issues and the immediate objectives of SCSC. Existing brochures on scholarly communication issues were also distributed to the participants. These discussions were not rigidly scripted and were intended to serve more as information gathering sessions that were judiciously guided into relevant channels by the host librarians.

Not surprisingly, these luncheon sessions revealed large cultural differences between the faculties in the natural sciences and those in the humanities and social sciences. Natural science faculty were generally far more knowledgeable about digital publishing than their colleagues in the humanities and social sciences. Although researchers in the humanities and social sciences reported that they relied less on journal literature (with the possible exception of those in economics), they nevertheless were distressed about the negative impact exerted by high-priced science journals on their monograph budgets.

Worse yet, if current trends in scholarly communication continue, arts and humanities faculty are very aware of the diminished opportunities that their graduate students will have to publish their own work. Faculty journal editors and those on editorial boards informed us that they are largely responsible for the content of the journal and are excluded from the decision-making process concerning journal pricing and other business-related matters. However, some gratifying exceptions were also noted: several Rutgers faculty members have played leading roles in establishing new low-priced (or free) online journals that are explicitly intended to compete against much higher priced commercial titles.

What also emerged from these sessions was the strong faculty concern with the quality of scholarship in their respective disciplines. It became abundantly clear that any future scholarly communication system must continue to maintain the highest quality of scholarship, firmly grounded in and reinforced by a suitable system of refereeing. Moreover, it was also stressed that any new system must be compat-

ible with the faculty tenure and promotion process.

Developing an informational brochure and Web site

Early on, the university librarian met with SCSC and updated its members on the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources (SPARC) efforts with regard to scholarly communication and her own role as chair of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Scholarly Communication Committee. The committee was informed that an informational brochure entitled "Create Change,"² developed by SPARC, ARL and ACRL, was available that could be tailored to meet individual institutional needs.

The committee agreed to adopt this brochure as a model and to modify it to fit the Rutgers context. The brochure was given the deliberately provocative title "Stop Reacting: Take Action" and distributed to the entire Rutgers faculty in April 2002. SPARC was prominently mentioned in the brochure and SPARC's "Declaring Independence" booklet was also noted.

Creation of the Web site was the brainchild of one committee member, James P. Niessen, World History librarian, who developed the content with input from members of the committee.³ While the brochure was planned to reach all faculty at the same time, the Web site was intended to be an ongoing effort providing a venue for faculty to participate in future dialogue about the shape of the evolving scholarly communication system.

Organizing a symposium on scholarly communication

The initial reaction of faculty lunch attendees to the notion of a conference on scholarly communication issues was decidedly negative. Librarians were reminded of the dispersed nature of the Rutgers campuses and how difficult it is to attend the many worthwhile meetings and conferences already scheduled by various units of the university. One more conference on a topic such as scholarly communication, it was averred, would not be expected to result in overwhelming attendance by busy faculty researchers.

Luckily for the committee, in spring 2002 the university vice president for academic affairs asked the New Brunswick Faculty Council

to address how the current scholarly communication system impacts access to scholarship. The library committee cochairs then requested that the university librarian call a joint meeting of the council officers to discuss an appropriate strategy for organizing a symposium. This group recommended that personal invitations extended by the vice president for academic affairs to a select group of faculty members would ensure the highest response rate. And to achieve the broadest base of support throughout the university community, the symposium would be cosponsored by the University Libraries, the Office of the Vice President for Research, the New Brunswick Faculty Council, and the university's Academic Leadership Forum.

The final invitation list included deans and department chairs, the director of the university press, all of the luncheon group discussion participants, Rutgers journal editors, and faculty authors who had been actively publishing in the past five years. Finally, the Chief Collection Development Officers of the New York metropolitan research libraries were also invited. Ultimately, out of nearly 500 invitations, over 130 people attended the May 9, 2002, symposium entitled "Scholarly Communication: New Challenges, New Directions."

The half-day symposium was structured around two panel discussions. The first three-member panel focused on "The Digital Challenges: Dissemination and Control of Academic Creative Output." The second panel, also with three participants, focused on the theme "New Directions: What More Can We Do?" and addressed the issues raised by the first panel.

The speakers were nationally prominent journal editors and scholars. The symposium aimed to dispel the faculty's perception that scholarly communication is solely the "library's problem" and to inform them that scholarly communication is directly linked to the question of access to their own scholarship, now and in the future. To underscore this point, a nonlibrary campus setting was deliberately chosen as the site of the conference location, and the event was moderated by a computer science faculty member. It is gratifying to report that the symposium was so well received that the Faculty Council passed a unanimous resolution recognizing the library's extraordinary contribution to the success of this joint endeavor.

Outcomes

A key lesson learned from this year and a half of effort was the importance of building coalitions throughout the university to accomplish goals that could never have been achieved by the library on its own. The realm of scholarly communication is too complex and too extensive for any one library or indeed any single institution to change on its own. In keeping with this understanding, SCSC in its final report recommended the establishment of a new university office, tentatively titled the Digital Publications Office, under the aegis of the vice president for academic affairs and closely linked to the University Libraries, the Computing Center, and the University Press. The primary mission of this new office would be to facilitate faculty exploration of how the new electronic media can be utilized for the purpose of dissemination of scholarship not only within their own disciplines but also across allied disciplines. A continuing role for the library was also considered vital as the ideal locus for monitoring, facilitating, and coordinating access to new forms of scholarly communication. A successor committee to SCSC was proposed as the most effective way to carry on with this work.⁴

Notes

1. See the ACRL Web site at <http://www.ala.org/acrl> (go to Issues and Advocacy/Scholarly Communication).
2. The Create Change Web site is at <http://www.createchange.org/home.html>.
3. The Rutgers Web site on scholarly communication is at <http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/about/rusci/rusci.shtml>.
4. The authors served as cochairs of the Scholarly Communication Steering Committee and gratefully acknowledge the contributions made by the other members of the committee: Veronica Calderhead, Helen Hoffman, James P. Niessen, Wen Hua Ren, and Julie Still. ■

Correction

In the February 2003 issue, the author of "Entering academic librarianship," Brent Singleton, was incorrectly named; he is reference librarian at California State University-San Bernardino.

The editors regret the error.

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