

Comparing Institutional Membership to Per-Article Payment in an Open Access Model

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Is it cheaper in an Open Access producer-pays model to take an institutional membership over paying per article published? The results of this analysis of two research institutions suggests that institutions could save money if they paid by the article.

This study looked at Cornell University and Yale University, both institutional members of BioMedCentral and compared the number of article published in 2004 to the amount their institutions paid for membership. In both cases, each institution could have saved money if they simply paid their author's publication fees. For Cornell University, the savings was as much as \$3,390.

In order to do this calculation, the authors, Philip Davis and David Stern, looked at the list of items published by their faculty. In order to count as a chargeable unit, the item must have been an article, methodology or review (letters to the editor, posters, retractions, or poster presentations from conferences were not counted as chargeable units). Secondly, it had to be published in a journal that is fully Open Access (several journal published by BMC charge subscriptions for full access). Lastly, to avoid duplicate counting, the first author had to come from either Cornell or Yale. The spreadsheet of their analysis can be found at: <http://people.cornell.edu/pages/pmd8/bmc.xls>

Results

Of the 32 items listed on the Cornell University list of published items <<http://www.biomedcentral.com/inst/36>>, only 7 of them were chargeable units. If Cornell University paid each author charges rather than taken an institutional membership, the savings would have been \$3,390. Of the 22 items listed on the Yale University list of published items <<http://www.biomedcentral.com/inst/36055>>, only 8 of them were chargeable units. If Yale University paid each author charges, it would have saved \$458 in 2004.

Analysis

These results are neither an attack nor defense of the Open Access or producer-pays model. They are merely the results of an evidence-based collection analysis. For major research institutions like Cornell and Yale that produce a great deal of published articles, we expected that a membership model would be more cost-efficient than a pay-to-publish model. This was not the case. If the argument for OA producer-pays journals revolves around decreased costs for libraries, institutions should consider revisiting the value they derive from these memberships, since the savings may be considerable.

Leaving the issue of access aside, a producer-pays model is no different than a subscription model from the author's perspective. If the institution is a subscribing member, the author remains desensitized to the cost of publishing. Yet, memberships to Open Access journals can be beneficial. In the case of Public Library of Science, an institutional membership subsidizes but does not subsume all author costs. This has the effect of keeping authors sensitized to the true costs of publishing, while enabling institutions to subsidize their authors, many of whom may be unable or unwilling to bare the full costs.

The question of who will subsidize Open Access producer-pays publishing is significant if libraries cannot justify their memberships on financial grounds. This will be especially true for smaller institutions that publish few (if any) articles. Unlike the subscription model, there is little risk of losing access if a membership is not renewed. Subvention from foundations and other sources may be necessary to support the producer-pays model.