

Breaking the Mold of Promotion and Tenure Policies that De-Incentivize Open Access Publishing

A Case Study of an LIS Faculty

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For almost thirty years, academic librarians have encouraged their faculty peers and patrons to publish in open access (OA) journals and other venues. Despite these efforts, one of the most difficult barriers to OA still exists: academic faculty at US higher education institutions lack strong incentives to publish in OA venues. This article describes one library school's adoption of a faculty promotion and tenure policy—with evaluative criteria—that strongly and clearly supports OA publishing. The author concludes with recommendations for further research on how academic rewards systems can better incentivize OA publishing, as well as how to effectively develop and implement such policies.

The results of empirical research improve people's lives. For example, an individual might benefit from the discovery of a cure for a disease, but also the world as a whole would benefit from solutions to environmental problems, such as pollution. The speed at which such improvements can be made depends on how fast research can be conducted and results made available to the public. When the dissemination of research results is impeded—for instance, by expensive journal subscription costs—then the implementation of improvements to people's lives is also impeded.

The open access (OA) movement emerged as a means of more rapidly and equitably disseminating research results. OA refers to “the free, immediate, online availability of research articles coupled with the rights to use these articles fully in the digital environment.”¹ A decade ago, Peter Suber—a longtime advocate of OA as well as the current senior advisor on open access for Harvard Library and director of the Harvard Open Access Project—spoke of OA as a “revolutionary kind of access these authors, unencumbered by a motive of financial gain, are free to provide to their readers. OA literature is digital, online, free of charge, and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions.”²

The term “open access” was coined a quarter of century ago, but OA as a concept has existed for even longer. Despite advances in OA publishing—such as faster, more equitable dissemination of research results—barriers to OA publication still exist. The Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) summarizes the background of one such barrier, the outdated system for scholarly communication:

Our current system for communicating research is crippled by a centuries old model that hasn't been updated to take advantage of 21st century technology:

1. Governments provide most of the funding for research—hundreds of billions of dollars annually—and public institutions employ a large portion of all researchers.

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2. Researchers publish their findings without the expectation of compensation. Unlike other authors, they hand their work over to publishers without payment, in the interest of advancing human knowledge.
3. Through the process of peer review, researchers review each other's work for free.
4. Once published, those that contributed to the research (from taxpayers to the institutions that supported the research itself) have to pay again to access the findings. Though research is produced as a public good, it isn't available to the public who paid for it.³

Scholarly communication practices among academic researchers are influenced by the academic rewards system by incentivizing researchers' choices about where to publish the results of their research.⁴ The academic rewards system compensates researchers not through financial remuneration but via career advancement in the tenure and promotion process. Tenure and promotion are often awarded based in part on publishing research results in highly visible, highly impactful scholarly journals. In other words, researchers may earn greater compensation for publishing the results of their work in one journal rather than another. Open access journals are often not among the journals for which researchers earn the greatest compensation. This is how the academic rewards system can become a barrier to OA to research and advancing the public good.

There is research to support the existence of this barrier. For the past three decades, researchers have compared researcher and faculty beliefs about and acceptance of OA publishing to their actual publishing behavior. Ithaka S+R has been surveying faculty since 2006 on topics relating to research, publishing, and teaching. In their most recent report in 2021, faculty continued to express strong positive feelings about OA publishing, but ranked content coverage, wide circulation, and journal impact factor (jif) as the top three characteristics of journals driving their choices about where to publish. In other words, "early career researchers are more likely to report behavioral patterns that are inconsistent with their expressed enthusiasm for open access publishing."⁵

Librarians are often strong proponents of OA, not only because access is a core value of librarianship, but also because of the potential for OA to be instrumental in advancing other core values of librarianship, such as social justice, diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility.⁶ Nevertheless, current research reveals that even librarian educators who teach these values to pre-service librarians are not immune from the pressure to publish in non-OA journals.⁷ That Library and Information Science (LIS) faculty continue to publish in non-OA venues despite the professional values they teach suggests that incentives to publish in OA venues are still absent, even from library school's departmental promotion and tenure policies.

The aim of this article is to tell the story of a library school faculty who recently revised the school's promotion and tenure policy, including evaluative criteria, with language that strongly and clearly supports OA publishing of research output. The context for the school's policy revisions, the policy itself, and its development are discussed, followed by recommendations for further research that may serve to advance the adoption of similar OA policies and evaluative criteria by other library schools in

hopes that this will set a positive example, by experts in the topic, for other academic disciplines to follow.

The Early Open Access Movement

Open access is the product of the information era. It became possible on a wide scale as advances in information communication technology were made.⁸ The conceptualization of OA preceded the coining and adoption of the term. With the dawn of the internet, researchers and scholars in multiple and diverse disciplines began to recognize the benefits of free access to reports of research. OA publishing venues like scholarly journals and repositories began to appear, including a repository developed by computer scientists for article preprints, as early as the 1970s.⁹ A free, online psychology journal, *Psycoloquy*, was launched in 1989 by well-known OA advocate Stevan Harnad,¹⁰ and the arXiv, a repository for sharing article preprints, was created by physicists in the 1990s.¹¹ Three events in the early 2000s popularized the term “open access”: the Budapest Open Access Initiative, Bethesda Statement on Open Access Publishing, and the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities.¹²

The advantages of OA publishing were also clear to librarians, who not only understood its role in advancing research and scholarship, but also recognized its potential to stem the serials crisis. In short, “Rapidly rising journal subscription prices have severely eroded the ability of libraries, universities, and scholars to purchase the publications necessary for research and education.”¹³ The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) founded SPARC in 1998. SPARC is “a non-profit advocacy organization that supports systems for research and education that are open by default and equitable by design.”¹⁴

Institutions of higher education created digital repositories, often managed and promoted by librarians, to house and disseminate the scholarly works of their faculty following SPARC’s *Institutional Repository Checklist and Resource Guide*.¹⁵ Institutions encouraged researchers to submit manuscripts and other reports of research results in the form of journal article preprints, unpublished research documentation such as grant reports, and even raw datasets to their institutional repositories to make them freely and publicly available.¹⁶ For-profit journal publishers were wary that such practices would undermine their profits, but some subsequently allowed authors to retain the copyrights to their works and deposit copies (or preprints) of articles reporting research results in their local repositories, making those articles open access. Other publishers would make articles reporting research results freely available on their own websites for a fee.¹⁷

In 2005, the US National Institute of Health (NIH), a major funding agency of medical research, began requiring that results of NIH-funded research be made open through deposit in the NIH’s PubMed Central.¹⁸ Shortly thereafter, researchers were being encouraged to deposit not only research results but also raw data and other artifacts to repositories for preservation by both their home institutions or by consortial repositories such as the Texas Digital Library and the California Digital Library.¹⁹ Preservation of raw data makes it possible for research to be replicated and verified.²⁰ Despite the

increasing ease with which reports of research results could be shared freely and openly, studies of the information behavior of scholars and researchers suggest that researchers associated with academic institutions continued to publish in non-OA venues to achieve promotion and tenure over OA publishing, even when they were strong supporters of OA.²¹

Literature Review: The Academic Rewards System as a Barrier to Open Access Publishing

In 2004, a Finnish economist, Bo-Christer Björk, published (in an OA venue) a discussion of what he viewed as the barriers to OA publishing based on his perception of “ten years of experimenting” with it. Included in his list of barriers is the academic rewards system.²² Two decades later, the academic rewards system remains a barrier to academic scholars publishing the results of their research in OA venues because it continues to force scholars to choose between the value of OA publication and advancement in their careers via promotion and tenure. Aside from the policy that is the subject of this article, the author has identified no promotion and tenure documents that provide researchers with positive incentives to publish in OA venues, including among LIS faculty policies. However, it is important to note that such policies are seldom freely and publicly available.

There is a modest body of literature that examines the barriers to OA publishing presented by the academic rewards system, which primarily consists of surveys of researchers’ perceptions of and behavior toward OA publishing and the academic rewards system, with a very few directly focused on LIS scholars. There is scant research that makes use of promotion and tenure policy documents themselves. The focus of the next sections of this brief review is on the extant literature of each type that the author has identified.

LIS Researchers’ Perceptions of the Academic Rewards System

It is through institutional promotion and tenure policies that the criteria used by institutions to evaluate, promote, and award tenure to faculty members are communicated. Studies that examine researchers’ perceptions of and behavior toward OA publishing and the academic rewards system consistently reveal that despite valuing OA, faculty and researchers perceive that their chances for promotion and tenure lie in publishing their research in traditional, non-OA journals and other non-OA venues.²³ The evidence of this is primarily based on survey responses showing that researchers perceive promotion and tenure committees to place a greater value on traditional publications than OA publications.²⁴

A series of publications based on two surveys of LIS faculty are among the few studies dealing with LIS faculty perceptions of OA publishing. Peekhaus and Proferro surveyed LIS faculty in North America in 2013 to gain a greater understanding of how LIS faculty interact with OA publications.²⁵ One of their findings was that LIS faculty were as likely as their peers in other disciplines to believe that publishing in OA venues would negatively impact their chances of promotion and/or tenure. Both having

previously published in OA venues and believing OA publications to be comparable in quality to subscription-based non-OA venues lessened the degree of this belief. However, like their peers in other disciplines, tenure status was found to have an influence on faculty's perception that publishing in OA venues might negatively influence their careers. Although some tenured faculty expressed ambiguous feelings about the career influence of publishing in OA venues, "Untenured LIS faculty (37 percent) are more likely than tenured faculty (12 percent) to agree to some extent that publishing their work in open-access journals may adversely affect their careers."²⁶ Peekhaus concluded that "there exists some disquietude among LIS faculty about how tenure and promotion committees would assess open-access publications."²⁷ They also suggested that recent policy changes encouraging and/or mandating that federally funded research results be made open access in the United States and Canada might improve perceptions of OA as measured by their survey.

However, in 2018 Peekhaus repeated the survey (the results of which were published in 2019), and this was not the case. The results of Peekhaus's 2018 survey revealed that, as they did in the first (2013) survey, LIS faculty in 2018 held positive beliefs about OA but perceived that their colleagues on promotion and tenure committees did not share those beliefs.²⁸ In fact, the perceptions and beliefs had changed very little in the five years since the first survey was conducted.²⁹ This result parallels what others have found about faculty in other disciplines³⁰ and underscores "the fact that career impact tends to outweigh mode of delivery as a determining factor for academics when selecting in which journals to publish."³¹ The 2018 survey results did, however, reveal that many more respondents had published in OA venues when compared with 2013.

Using a different methodology, Chang compared LIS scholars by occupation—librarians (defined as practitioners) and academics (defined as LIS scholars and faculty)—to understand whether they were publishing in OA or non-OA venues.³² They found that LIS scholars/faculty tended to publish more in non-OA venues (31.8 percent published in non-OA venues compared with 15.5 percent in OA venues), whereas practitioners tended to do the opposite (25.5 percent published in non-OA venues compared with 53.95 percent published in OA venues). Chang attributes this to scholars'/faculty's concern for career advancement, which, they say, is often influenced by perceptions of journal quality. Regarding this, they note that non-OA journals have generally been in existence longer and therefore have had more time than OA journals to develop reputations among promotion and tenure reviewers for being of high quality.³³

Examinations of Policy Documents Related to Academic Rewards

There is a dearth of literature related to what is found in institutional policy documents related to the academic rewards system.³⁴ This is primarily because of the difficulty in obtaining such documents at the academic department level.³⁵ Three recent studies, however, overcame the difficulty of obtaining access to academic unit-level and/or institution-level policy documents related to faculty rewards.

Wical and Kocken obtained access to unit-level policy documents at the institution where they were employed.³⁶ They sought to identify bias toward or against OA publishing within the documents. They

found that “none of the evaluation plans examined specifically mentioned ‘open access’ anywhere within the department evaluation plan or program.”³⁷ In fact, although some of the language in the documents they examined seemed to support OA publishing, other language was “vague and occasionally contradictory language that could create confusion regarding the status of open access scholarship in the review process.”³⁸

Alperin et al. conducted a broad study of promotion and tenure policy documents at both the unit and institutional level from academic institutions across the United States and Canada.³⁹ The collection process took more than a year to complete. Like others, they concluded that even when faculty’s research is publicly funded, their institutions have missions to serve the public good, and OA research results are highly valued, their decisions about where to publish are still largely driven by promotion and tenure processes that are viewed as rewarding publication in “traditional” (non-OA) over OA journals. Their results revealed that “the concept of traditional [research] output is present in 90%” of the documents they examined across a variety of types of institutions, from bachelor’s-degree-granting to high-research-output institutions. Furthermore, the term “open access” appeared in only 5 percent of the documents they analyzed, and always in unit-level documents from departments that they categorized as social sciences and humanities. Finally, they reveal that “Contrary to our expectation that these mentions would promote public access to research outputs, we found the majority of these few instances call for caution around publishing in OA venues.”⁴⁰

Pontika et al. confirm that there is some recent work that examines the academic rewards system, but not much, and most is very broadly focused.⁴¹ Whereas Alperin et al. focused on institutions in the United States and Canada,⁴² Pontika et al. focused on international institutions.⁴³ They were interested to learn “how prevalent are criteria related to open and responsible research in” promotion and tenure policies of institutions in seven countries in Europe, North America, and South America. They include OA in “open and responsible research.” Similarly to Alperin et al., they collected data via web searches and then emailing the institutions over the period of November 2019 through March 2021.⁴⁴ They examined only institutional-level documents (not unit-level documents). They discovered “no institutions mention data sharing or Open Access publishing.”⁴⁵

Breaking the Mold: A Policy that Rewards OA Publishing

In light of reports in the literature, it is less surprising that even the work of LIS faculty, scholars, and researchers is still being evaluated using criteria that fail to recognize the value of OA publication, or that many OA publication venues use rigorous peer review and may achieve the same or greater quality as traditional, non-OA publication venues. In fact, considering that institutional-level academic reward policies are created and applied by faculty from multiple, diverse disciplines, many of whom have proven to lack knowledge of the potential for quality in OA publishing venues, it is not surprising that LIS scholars would behave similarly to their peers in other disciplines.

In an effort to promote the value of OA and the professional values that surround it, the faculty of the School of Library and Information Management (SLIM) at Emporia State University (ESU) created *Guidelines and Evaluative Criteria for Faculty Evaluation and Recognition* in an effort to incentivize faculty to publish in OA venues in the school (unit) level. A review and revision of this policy document began in spring 2018. Several important changes had occurred at the department and university level since the adoption of the existing document, including the appointment of a new university president and provost, as well as a new dean of the school and an influx of new faculty at the school. The university had also adopted a new strategic plan since the existing document had been revised. These changes prompted the department-level policy review and revision.

Like many of the institutional policies examined in the research literature, ESU's institution-level policy manual contains all university policy related to academics and personnel. Also, like most of the policies examined in the literature, it does not mention OA. Further, it leaves the choice of criteria for evaluation for promotion and tenure almost entirely to individual academic units, which are required to "reflect the highest professional standards associated with university work."⁴⁶

The SLIM Faculty Recognition Committee includes all tenured faculty in the unit. It was with this committee that the policy review began, and it was during these initial discussions that the value that the SLIM faculty places on OA became clear. The importance of OA to faculty as a core competence of librarianship and as a means of advancing the common good drove the faculty's desire to address it specifically in the criteria for promotion and tenure by which their work would be evaluated. All current full-time SLIM faculty and the dean were included in the revision process. The new document went through several revisions before being unanimously approved by SLIM faculty and the dean in May 2021 and by the provost in October 2021.

The final policy contains fourteen instances of the phrase "open access." These are grouped in three sections of the policy: an opening statement, a definition of OA, and instructions for quantifying the value of OA publishing. The opening statement appears at the beginning of the policy after the introduction and explanation of the school's degree programs. It states:

SLIM faculty value the transition to open access as the model of publications in scholarly outputs. SLIM faculty members are encouraged to publish in open access journals. For this purpose, open access is defined in Appendix A of this document to clarify and inform inclusion of acceptable open access publications in SLIM Promotion and Tenure Annual Review documents.⁴⁷

OA is defined for the purposes of the policy in Appendix A using SPARC's definition:

Open Access is "the free, immediate, online availability of research articles and artifacts coupled with the rights to use these articles and artifacts fully in the digital environment" (SPARC, 2020). Open Access ensures that anyone can access and use these results—to further scholarly inquiry and knowledge for the common good. Open Access does not preclude or in any way limit peer-review or other forms of quality control of the results or outputs of scholarly activity.⁴⁸

The last substantial group of references to OA appears in the introduction to Appendix F, “SLIM Tenure & Promotion Research Output Quantification,” and in the instructions contained within Appendix F for quantifying the value of publication in an OA venue. The introduction to Appendix F states:

The American Library Association, Emporia State University, and the School of Library and Information Management all recognize equitable and open access to information as being instrumental to the promotion of social justice, equity, and inclusion. In the case of journals, we would not look favorably on publishers that do not feature a verifiable rigorous peer-review process and/or that require payment for publication. The following guidelines recognize the value of these foundational values.⁴⁹

The instructions for quantification of the value of various publications toward promotion and/or tenure specify increasing the point value for each publication when they are published in an OA venue.

What Lies Ahead

SLIM is proud of having accomplished the strong, positive inclusion of OA in its promotion and tenure criteria and policy. The literature that describes the inclusion or exclusion of support for faculty publishing in OA venues in academic rewards policy is sparse at least in part because of the effort required to obtain access to such policies.⁵⁰ The descriptions that exist suggest that it is unlikely that there are more than a handful of academic rewards policies that indicate support and/or rewards for OA publication. This makes the steps taken by SLIM to enact—and by ESU to approve—a policy that so clearly and strongly supports and rewards faculty publishing in OA venues all the more important and noteworthy. The author hopes that SLIM’s policy and evaluative criteria may become an example followed by other LIS faculties. Despite being created during a time of institutional turmoil, SLIM’s policy is general enough to be replicable by others, particularly the definition of OA, the statement of the value of OA to the profession of librarianship, and the application of additional value toward promotion and tenure for OA publication. Adoption of elements of SLIM’s policy by other schools for library education may in turn serve to educate faculty in other disciplines and administrators alike and influence the adoption of policies that support OA publishing among additional academic disciplines.

However, there is additional work to be done and research to conduct. One potential research question is whether the addition of incentives for publishing in high-quality, highly visible, peer-reviewed OA publications will in fact move SLIM faculty to actually publish in OA venues more often. A longitudinal study measuring the OA publishing frequency of both tenured and tenure-track faculty using the revised criteria compared with the previous criteria would answer this. This line of research could be extended to LIS faculty at other institutions, both nationally and internationally following the work of Chang.⁵¹

Another line of research might be undertaken following the examples of Alperin et al. and Pontika et al. to examine academic reward policies in LIS, again both nationally and internationally.⁵² The current focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, access, and social justice in higher education in the United States,

in combination with the values held by members of the library professions, should drive further research on this topic, the results of which have the potential to make important contributions to the public good.

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