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What Collaboration Means to Us

The SPARC Journal Negotiation Community of Practice

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Introduction

Negotiations are a particularly challenging area for collaboration among libraries. Driven by the prevalence of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) and confidentiality clauses, the culture of information sharing outside of consortial arrangements is not a ready tendency by academic librarians, despite some notable exceptions¹. The perception of potential antitrust concerns chilled discussions about negotiation strategy and tactics, and large publishers continue to exploit this asymmetrical information environment aggressively. Even before the current COVID crisis, many libraries reached a breaking point in the serials cost increases that their budgets could no longer bear.

These challenges around effective collaboration drove the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) to work with our members and the wider library community over

the past two years to develop a journal negotiation community of practice. Initially focused on supporting libraries exploring cancelling their Big Deals, the community of practice quickly expanded to include negotiations more broadly, reflecting the need to better align the remaining publisher contracts with library needs and values and to better support libraries in this work.

The Journal Negotiation Community of Practice has become a platform for dialog, sharing data and best practices, and creative problem solving. SPARC's role is focused on both community building and catalyzing discussions as well as disseminating resources produced by these discussions. We work to create a welcoming environment for librarians to share both their questions and their experiences and to provide support by building tools to share actionable, on-de-

¹ Including the Canadian Association of Research Libraries' (CARL) [release](#) of member expenditure data for their contracts through the Canadian Research Knowledge Network

(CRKN) and the work of Stuart Lawson to use FOIA requests to uncover previously hidden pricing data.



mand information about both negotiating subscription packages and walking away from these packages altogether.

As part of this work in 2019, SPARC launched the [Big Deal Knowledge Base](#), which contains thousands of pricing details from library subscription packages that can be downloaded and searched across a number of dimensions – including publisher, Carnegie classification, and FTE counts. It also contains unredacted license agreements, details about Big Deal cancellations worldwide, tips on pushing back against confidentiality clauses and NDAs, guidance on filing Freedom of Information requests to surface more licensing terms, and insights into how libraries have successfully navigated the Big Deal cancellation process.

To better facilitate community building, SPARC recruited a Visiting Program Officer (VPO) for Negotiations from the Johns Hopkins University Welch Medical Library. The VPO plays an integral role in building and supporting working groups that connect a wide range of institutions, working collaboratively to create public negotiations resources. This essay focuses on the nuts and bolts of SPARC's community building efforts, and on how this collaboration from a disparate pool of libraries has crystallized into a true community of practice.

Early Days

Collaboration means avoiding assumptions about what libraries need without engaging the community first. In the early days of SPARC's Journal Negotiation Community of Practice, we hosted various information gathering calls with the community to discuss negotiations topics, recruit library volunteers to join us in co-creating this work, share their wisdom and experiences, and answer questions like:

- What steps should libraries take in their collective advocacy and subscription data sharing to mitigate antitrust implications?

- Why did libraries choose to walk away from their Big Deals with publishers in the past?
- How can we form working groups to build upon SPARC's existing public journal negotiation resources like the Big Deal Cancellation Tracker and the Big Deal Knowledge Base?

In the beginning, we were uncertain what role SPARC might play in library advocacy related to journal negotiations, so we decided to go directly to libraries to learn what would be most helpful in advocating for fair and sustainable pricing, or in making the tough decision to walk away from a publisher altogether. We called on longtime SPARC allies to help us better understand the ecosystem, forming a small short-term advisory group to ensure our ideas for future programming would be useful to the community. The advisory committee discussion led to the creation of four working group charters, with the aim of recruiting libraries to volunteer time and effort into developing publicly available resources that might assist libraries in their negotiations with vendors.

Journal Negotiation Working Groups

Led by those managing negotiations and cancellations within libraries, the four working groups have been catalytic in operationalizing the journal negotiation community of practice. Each group includes librarians and library staff from institutions across North America. Each group began with two librarian co-leads coordinating efforts to collaboratively develop and disseminate resources that can address key negotiation areas. These areas include strategies for engaging and communicating with campus stakeholders before, during, and after a negotiation process; the impact cancellation might have on Interlibrary Loan and other library workflows; data and tools that should and could be used to

make an informed cancellation decision; and re-investment opportunities to advance open values.

The four groups are:

- Campus Partnerships and Planning Working Group
- Data Analysis Working Group
- Journal Cancellation Impact Working Group
- Journal Cancellation Reinvestment Working Group

The resources that these groups are working on will be made publicly available on a SPARC microsite dedicated to negotiations topics, highlighting the efforts each volunteer has made to this work.

New Negotiations Programming in Light of COVID-19

With support from SPARC member librarians, including working group members and program panelists, this work has required an iterative ability to launch new programming tackling new challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Without the information libraries have provided to us on the impact of COVID-19—both on their library budgets and on their strategic priorities to address potential cuts—we would not have been able to spin up needed webcasts and discussion groups to address quick budget cuts, financial exigency clauses, and more.

Academic librarians face a period of serious financial hardship while simultaneously navigating the shift to a system for sharing scholarship that is open by default. The decisions librarians make in response to the budgetary impact of COVID-19 will have important consequences

for the future of research infrastructure. The input librarians have given to us has been invaluable.

Negotiations work is also more relevant than ever as librarians grapple with unplanned cuts and increasing uncertainty. The priorities of our community of practice have grown and shifted to focus on programming that might quickly address emerging negotiation strategies and areas of focus. Below are examples of programs that have been informed by the data provided by librarians about COVID-19's impact and our conversations with librarians about their needs and concerns.

Sharing Experiences of Journal Cancellations on a Rapid Timeline

Jaclyn McLean (University of Saskatchewan) moderated a discussion with Megan Heady (West Virginia University) and Kristin Henrich (University of Idaho). Each institution shared their experience of a rapid cancellation. They explored similarities and differences between timelines, successes and setbacks, and lessons learned after making the decision to cancel subscriptions quickly.

Tools for Negotiation: Using Unsub to Assess Subscription Value

Katharine Macy (IUPUI), Nathan Mealey (Wesleyan University) and Mark McBride (SUNY) joined Our Research's Heather Piwowar and Jason Priem, diving into their tool, Unsub, and its capabilities in assisting libraries with their negotiations and cancellation decisions. The webcast featured the perspective of both an institution that has used Unsub to unbundle and one that is actively using the tool to decide whether cancellations make sense for them.

Recalibrating Publisher Expectations: Learning from RLUK's Push for a 25% Price Reduction

We explored a broad push in the UK to recalibrate expectations with publishers and seek a 25% price reduction in subscription contracts. David Prosser (Executive Director, Research Libraries UK) and Stella Butler (University Librarian at Leeds University and Treasurer of RLUK) discussed the work done by RLUK, SCONUL, and Jisc leading up to their public statement about impending subscription cancellations if publishers do not agree to significant discounts. This session identified several current challenges UK libraries are facing seeking this approach and drew comparisons to the North American context.

Small Discussion Groups

We have hosted internal discussion groups focused on how librarians are using or considering the use of financial exigency clauses as well as how and why prioritizing reinvestment in open initiatives is more important now than ever. We've also gathered for informal vendor-specific discussion groups. These private discussions allow librarians to share information, ask questions of other librarians, and discuss institutional strategies going forward that might mitigate budgetary cuts.

The Future

We plan to continue growing both our resources and programming tailored to different types of institutions. We aim to better understand and

serve the unique needs of specific institutions by continuing to host small group and one-on-one calls that identify where our current efforts could be supplemented – or where we could provide better negotiations support. We always welcome programming and resource suggestions from the community.

We also seek to address the continued need for more publicly accessible vendor contracts and pricing transparency within the community. When the community provides access to these data points, it will help to resolve long-standing pricing inequities. We hope to partner with institutions to put out a call for more contracts and pricing points in the near future.

The SPARC Journal Negotiation Community of Practice relies on the library community's willingness to volunteer information, to contribute negotiation success and failure stories with one another, and step up to do work outside of their normal duties. Coordinating these efforts has been a highlight for us, as we have grown this community over the last two years. We deeply appreciate all of the work done by each member of the community of practice and by the working group co-leads to organize the community's effort. Collaboration has been central to this work from the beginning and will continue to be integral to its success.