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Response from Duke University to the Request for Information on Maximizing Research Funds by Limiting Allowable Publishing Costs

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The Duke University Community supports the core principles underlying the NIH's proposed policy changes, particularly the commitment to ensuring immediate, equitable access to high-quality, publicly funded research. However, the current implementation strategies place a disproportionate financial burden on individual authors, many of whom are already navigating constrained research budgets. While researchers are being asked to shoulder the costs of open access, the publishing industry — whose profit margins are buoyed by taxpayer-funded science — remains largely unaccountable and faces no meaningful incentives to reform its pricing practices. Without addressing this imbalance along with others outlined below, this policy risks undermining its own goals by greatly restricting author choice, exacerbating inequities in publishing, and ultimately limiting the reach and impact of federally funded research.

Methodological concerns in assessing average article processing costs

The NIH's analysis of the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) provides a useful baseline for understanding average article processing charges (APCs) but the

methodology lacks critical nuance because the DOAJ does not include hybrid journals, which often have higher APCs. The data is therefore skewed towards lower-cost APCs and overlooks the disproportionate costs associated with publishing open access in high-impact hybrid health sciences journals — venues that are often prioritized by NIH researchers and scientific reviewers. As an example, this analysis does not include the nearly $13,000 gold open access charge for *Nature* journals, even though this APC had been previously highlighted by NIH's initial July 8th announcement. Without accounting for these journals, the current dataset underrepresents the true cost burden borne by researchers aiming to disseminate their work in high readership and high impact outlets. A more refined approach to APC data is essential to inform effective policy decisions.

Unintended consequences from policy revisions

The recent revision to the NIH Public Access Policy, effective July 1, 2025, which eliminates embargo periods for journal publications, represents a well-intended effort to accelerate public access to federally funded research. We fully support the principle of immediate and open dissemination of high-quality scientific findings; however, publishers have responded to this policy change by charging new fees and/or requiring gold open access in order to publish NIH-funded research. This has effectively removed the cost-effective pathway for NIH-funded researchers to publish in their preferred journals. In the first two months of the policy's implementation, Duke authors have already faced significant challenges to publication, including an unplanned $13,000 APC from a *Nature* journal that is required by the publisher for policy compliance. In numerous other cases, Duke authors have been unable to publish their findings in the standard journal for their discipline without new publisher fees. Authors are scrambling to pay and sometimes use personal funding, a major barrier for early career faculty and trainees. Alternatively, authors must rescind manuscripts prior to publication, slowing down the dissemination of research findings or rely on pre-prints, which raises further concerns about the dissemination of data and results without the benefit of the peer-review process. This problem will only increase as institutional discretionary funds are depleted on a small number of high-cost publications.

Recommendation

The cumulative effect of these well-intended policies significantly constrains the dissemination of science and is likely to result in fewer peer-reviewed publications as authors are trapped between compliance with the NIH Public Access Policy and restrictive journal deposit practices. We fear that implementation of this policy on any level will hinder the access and use of science paid for by the American taxpayer unless publishers are also required to comply with the NIH Public Access Policy at either no charge or at a minimal charge that can be fully included in grants with no additional publisher costs charged to the author.

We do not believe that any of the options presented for comment will solve the problems we are seeing in NIH Public Access Policy implementation. Among the five options presented in this RFI, Option 4 is the most viable as it offers researchers a degree of flexibility. In conclusion, while we strongly support the principle of immediate and open

dissemination of NIH-funded research findings, the financial burden of publication should not fall solely on individual researchers and their institutions. Publishers must share responsibility and cost. The NIH has made it clear that compliance should not require payment of an open access fee; thus, publishers should be incentivized to allow researchers to comply with the current Public Access Policy. This would preserve authors' choice of journal and eliminate the need to cover high-cost APCs from grant funds.