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Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Request for Information (RFI) on Maximizing Research Funds by Limiting Allowable Publishing Costs. Washington University in St. Louis shares NIH's goal of maximizing federal research funds and ensuring the public dissemination of NIH-supported, peer-reviewed research results. Since 2011, the Faculty of WashU has been committed to making its scholarship freely and easily available to the world community. In 2023 and 2024, NIH awards to WashU resulted in nearly 6,000 peer-reviewed journal articles, 95% of which are now publicly accessible through PubMed Central. During this same period, nearly 1,000 WashU-authored preprints with NIH support were indexed in PubMed, reflecting our faculty's commitment to open and accelerated access to publicly funded research.

This RFI is timely as it brings attention to a topic that has placed new demands on NIH-supported authors at WashU since the implementation of the 2024 NIH Public Access Policy. Since July 1, new NIH requirements and subsequent changes to publisher policies, practices, and agreement terms have, in a growing number of cases, limited author options to longstanding free compliance pathways and introduced new pressures on authors to pay Article Processing Charges (APCs) to ensure immediate access to NIH-supported research.

Proposed Policy Options

Unfortunately, the proposed policy options in the RFI do not address the problems or the complexities now facing NIH-supported WashU authors. The analyses in the RFI do not reflect 1) differences in publishing costs authors typically find between fully open access journals and hybrid journals or across disciplines, 2) publishing practices and trends beyond R01 awards, 3) the variable ways in which institutions are already working to limit publishing costs to authors, or 4) the green open access pathways of submission to PubMed Central long supported by NIH to ensure public access at no cost to the author. Instead, in reinforcing an expectation of gold open access with this RFI, the proposed options are likely to shift publishing costs rather than reduce them and introduce adverse, unintended consequences for authors, libraries, and other stakeholders.

Available Evidence

To address annual growth in publishing costs, Becker Medical Library and WashU Libraries have been working with publishers to negotiate waivers and discounts APCs for WashU authors to maximize research funds and support compliance with the NIH Public Access Policy. These types of "transformative agreements," their role in supporting authors and in potentially reinforcing the same trends they were intended to alleviate, as well as their potential to negatively impact the diversity of the publishing ecosystem and favor well-resourced institutions and large publishers are discussed in Section 5 of the Report to the U.S. Congress on Financing Mechanisms for Open Access Publishing of Federally Funded Research (November 2023). How further changes to NIH policy may impact the Libraries' ability to negotiate such arrangements with publishers in a cost effective and sustainable way remains an open question, though generally we expect any caps on publishing costs by NIH would reduce our negotiating power and lead to our researchers paying more in APCs.

Peer Review Compensation & Publishing Best Practices

We are also concerned that identifying specific practices to "reward" through increased publishing costs may not have the intended impact of maximizing research funds and instead lead to a new pricing floor for authors to face, rather than a ceiling.

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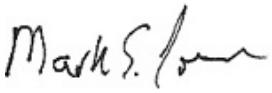
More vital than rewarding specific practices, is a need to incentivize transparent publishing practices and costs, allowing authors to select publication venues more readily and ensure appropriate use of federal funds. Such efforts are already being modeled by select open access journals and scholarly societies that have adopted pricing transparency frameworks.

Other Comments

In releasing the 2024 NIH Public Access Policy, NIH acknowledged that it was unclear how and to what extent publishing costs would be impacted by requiring access to the results of publicly funded research without embargo. At that time, NIH committed to considering "appropriate methods to monitor costs for potential impacts on relevant communities once the Policy has been implemented and any downstream effects are more readily apparent" (NOT-OD-25-047). To date, our experience has been that these downstream effects have been significant, leaving authors unclear as to what options they have for ensuring immediate public access to the results of NIH-supported research and, in some cases, facing significant pressure to pay an APC.

Considering the additional complexities associated with the accelerated implementation of the 2024 NIH Public Access Policy and the potential adverse effects of further change, Washington University in St. Louis advocates for a delay in policy changes relating to publishing costs to allow time for these impacts to be better understood. This delay would also facilitate crucial collaboration with institutions, libraries, publishers, and societies to thoroughly comprehend current costs and potential impacts and explore alternative options for sharing publicly funded research results, such as preprints. It would also allow for the monitoring of the 2024 NIH Policy's effects on APCs and the utilization of NIH funds for publication costs over a period of 6 to 12 months. Furthermore, we urge NIH to release clearer guidance and educational materials for authors on the government use license and support for no-cost public access compliance mechanisms, ensuring alternative pathways to APCs are available.

Sincerely,



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