

Harvard University Faculty of Arts and Sciences

In recent years, pockets of concern over scholarly communication and issues of open access have brewed across the Harvard University campus. The library was feeling a squeeze with super-inflationary journal prices. Individual faculty members were caught between journal rules and a desire to maximize access to their research, forcing many to begin to negotiate with publishers and cross their fingers that each author addendum would be accepted.

Steven Hyman stepped into the picture as the new provost in 2001. Coming from the National Institutes of Health, Hyman was in the thick of the mandate to make research done with public funds available to the taxpayers. He arrived at Harvard with the view that there needed to be ways to make primary data more widely available.

“Even Harvard, as well financed as it is, was facing enormous financial pressure. That, combined with my concern for access led me to put together a faculty committee to examine these issues,” says Hyman, who left the goal of the committee open ended.

In 2005, ten people from across the campus were named to the Provost’s Committee on Scholarly Publishing. Stuart Shieber, Welch Professor of Computer Science and Director of the Center for Research on Computation and Society, served as chair.

Shieber would become the entrepreneurial spirit that shepherded the passage of the groundbreaking open access policy through the Faculty of Arts and Sciences by a unanimous vote in February 2008. Later in the spring, the Harvard Law School adopted a similar policy. In May, Shieber was named the first director of Harvard’s new Office of Scholarly Communication.

The road leading to the innovative events of this spring was a long and sometimes arduous one. Reflecting on the process, those involved say the strategy of introducing open access policies one school at a time in a bottom-up fashion was the right move. And patience proved to be a virtue. Giving faculty a chance to be heard and not rushing the process led to success with the FAS and has created momentum that will likely spread to other schools at Harvard in the coming months.

Early discussions

When the committee first met, Shieber says there was a low-grade awareness of open access issues on campus but many faculty members did not want to deal with it. Among the committee members, there was a sense that something needed to be done and hope that open access would be embraced.

“The very existence of the committee by the provost indicated the university’s desire to move in this direction,” says Sidney Verba, Harvard University Librarian at the time. Having committee members from different parts of the university and allowing time for ideas to “percolate” helped the group sort through the range of issues and concern.

“At first, it was pretty wide ranging where we would go,” says Isaac Kohane, The Lawrence J. Henderson Professor of Pediatrics, Associate Professor of Medicine and Director of the Countway Library of Medicine Department. “The whole committee was of one mind of having access opened up.”

In early 2007, the committee issued a report with several major recommendations, including establishing a policy promoting open access among the faculty and setting up an office to promote best scholarly communication practices.

A commitment to the concept

Underlying the effort to advance open access was a unified commitment among the committee members to promoting a free flow of information.

“Scholarly communication is redundancy. There is no scholarship without communication,” says Verba. “When I write something, it’s not to make money, I write so somebody will read it. I just want to get it out there and easily found.”

Hyman agreed it was the right thing to do. “Given that the University has as its core mission teaching and research and universities in the United States are based on the freedom on information, surely it’s a good thing to make the fruits of our scholarly work as broadly available as possible, including to those in the developing world,” he says.

When ideas are freer, individuals who you never suspected do make contributions, noted Kohane. “Our goal is to move forward our knowledge and to cure diseases in the fastest way,” he says. “To put a financial filter on the last step seems to get in the way of important goals.”

Committee member Gary King, David Florence Professor of Government and Director of the Institute for Quantitative Social Science, says if the University’s purpose is to create, disseminate and preserve knowledge it’s best to try to reach the most people. “When I write a paper, I put it on my Web site and it might get 5 million hits. If it’s really good and I send it to a leading journal in my field that prints 16,000 copies and I’m supposed to take it off my Web site. In what universe does that make sense?” he says.

For years, King sent a note with his research papers alerting the journal to the fact that he would be posting the work on his Web site.

However, Michael Carroll, professor of law at Villanova University who consulted with Harvard on the open access initiatives, says a better process was needed. “The author addendum route leaves faculty out there on their own fighting one by one,” he says. “It’s better for them to get together and express their values collectively.”

Agreeing on a strategy

At Harvard, the University is extremely decentralized. Schools are run independently and individual faculties have a lot of autonomy. Because of this culture, Shieber says the committee thought it best to guide the concept through one school at a time. “The feeling was that you can vote all the policies you want, but if they are to mean anything, you really need faculty to buy in and be on board,” he says. They anticipated it would be hard enough to get one group of faculty to support an open access policy, let alone the whole university. And going department by department would lose some collective impact.

“There are universities where the president says something and the faculty do it,” says Verba. “At Harvard, the president says something and everyone screams and goes in different directions.” The work products of the individual faculty members are seen as having sacred value, he says.

Hyman knew the dynamics of campus, as well. “If we created a top-down dictum, the faculty would appropriately rebel,” he says. Going faculty by faculty permitted open discussion and would likely increase compliance.

The Faculty of Arts and Sciences, a 1,000-member body that was engaged in many of these issues, seemed like a natural place to start, says Shieber. Everyone agreed it had to be a grassroots initiative. So as early as 2006, the committee started the long process of talking with FAS, getting feedback and revising the wording of the policy.

The options of opting in or out

The proposed legislation before FAS would give the University a worldwide license to make each faculty member's scholarly articles available free in an open access repository and would allow it to exercise the copyright in the articles as long as the articles are not sold for profit.

Rather than merely encouraging faculty to make their work freely available, the policy made open access automatic unless an individual "opted out" for a particular article.

"There was a long debate about the principles of opting in or opting out," recalls Verba. "If you make people positively opt out, people won't. If you make them opt in, you'll get nothing." Some faculty felt it was inappropriate to tell them what to do, so the policy was worded so that it was easy to opt out.

"You have to work your way through with the faculty," says Verba. "Clearly, we all agreed that if some journal would say it would not publish an article if it was put up free on a Harvard Web site and if it was important for getting tenure, we agreed that would override anything."

Compliance with the new policy is uncertain and it may take some hand holding through the new process, says Kohane. But most committee members think only a small percentage of articles will be opted out.

Expectations of process

No one knew exactly what to expect going into the process with FAS.

Verba says there was a good feeling among the group, but there was a mixed outlook about the potential response. "We used to debate how easy it would be," recalls Verba. While King and Shieber were the optimists, Verba describes himself as a pessimist – perhaps a good combination. There was energy to champion the idea, but also awareness of the challenge of the process.

"Guarded optimism with a certain degree of fear and trembling," is how Robert Darnton described approaching FAS with the proposed open access policy. Darnton, Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor and Director of the Harvard University Library, came to Harvard in July 2007. The FAS was not known as an easy body to deal with, says Darnton.

"A group of independent-minded professors can find a flaw in anything," he says. "We spent a lot of time dealing with potential objections and endless email objections with counter arguments."

Approaching the faculty

So, how do you get the word out to a busy group of academics about a new idea? Meetings, meetings, and more meetings. Shieber and other committee members met with FAS in small groups and at large gatherings.

"The most important thing is for faculty to really understand the facts," says Hyman. "In general, faculty wants to see their work widely disseminated. Faculty wants to see their libraries solvent and they also want to preserve the best features of journals."

Shieber initially encountered support of the concept, but concern over the details.

"I don't think I ever met a single person who thought the underlying motivation was not a good idea – to broaden access to our collective research output," he says. "A lot of people had worries about whether this was the right way to achieve those goals and if there would be unintended consequences." The discussion got heated at times, but people were relatively collegial, says Shieber.

In addition to smaller meetings, there was an open forum on the issue and the committee met with the Faculty Council of the FAS four times and the full Faculty once before the final vote of the full Faculty in February 2008.

Reaction and concerns

Since FAS would be breaking new ground, the common concern raised about the resolution was regarding the impact. Would the open access policy damage small journals – especially in the humanities?

“While we don’t have a crystal ball, the goal was not to damage journals,” says Hyman. “In this world of too much information, it’s critical to rely on journal editorial boards to decide what to read.” The issue was discussed and there was talk of how the University might help subsidize struggling journals, particularly in the humanities.

A typical scenario that was raised: A junior faculty member gets an article accepted in a prestigious journal, but the publisher refuses to print it with the addendum for open access attached. Will Harvard hold their tenure hostage? “That’s a legitimate worry,” says Shieber. “Worries of that sort were mitigated by the breadth of the waiver process that we put in place.” It is at the complete discretion of the author to opt out. The language evolved over time to satisfy the constituencies.

The objections from all corners were numerous. Some were concerned that if they would make data available, they would be scooped. “Empirically, that’s not true. If you don’t make it available, you’ll be ignored,” King countered.

For some faculty, there is just a general mistrust and misunderstanding around giving the university copyright, says Carroll. Others don’t perceive a problem with access for them personally, so they don’t worry about it for others.

Shieber was sensitive to the arguments raised, says Carroll. “I was hopeful because of Stuart’s talent. He had a clear understanding of the process and the importance of getting the process right,” Carroll says.

Moving the proposal through FAS required a big push and entrepreneurship – something Shieber embodied according to his fellow committee members.

“Whenever there is impending change that can’t be predicted, there is worry,” says Shieber. “But that needn’t paralyze you.” Faculty needed to realize that while the proposal had risks, so did doing nothing. There was no status quo to keep, he says.

The vote and momentum

The proposed legislation was introduced to the full FAS faculty first in October of 2007. “I didn’t have a good feel for a consensus,” says Shieber. “It’s hard when you are in the middle of the process to get a sense.”

On February 12, the FAS passed the open access resolution unanimously. “The degree of support was well beyond what I imagined,” says Shieber.

Darnton says he was also “astonished” by the vote of the faculty. The thorough airing of questions helped move the policy along and primed other sectors of the university to follow suit, he says.

On May 7, the Harvard Law School faculty unanimously voted to make each faculty member’s scholarly articles available online for free, making it the first law school to commit to a mandatory open access policy.

Then on May 22, Shieber was named director of the University’s new Office for Scholarly Communication (OSC). “I hope this office will be a nerve center for all intellectual activity at

Harvard,” says Darnton. The first mission of the office will be to help FAS put works in the institutional repository. It is also hoped the digital copies of dissertations will be deposited so information can be shared. Eventually, texts from lectures and conferences may be digitized.

Darnton says he feels a momentum building across campus and there have been preliminary discussions with other schools about adopting an open access policy. “We are really trying to get unanimity across all of the University,” he says.

Kohane says the medical school may be ready to take on the issue in the fall. Starting small with FAS was the “right order of battle” rather than approaching the huge faculty of the medical school and hospitals. With the NIH mandate to make publicly funded research openly available after a 12-month embargo, the medical school is well on its way to embracing open access but a complimentary policy is needed, says Kohane. “The public good and the personal good will become apparent,” he predicts.

In discussing open access, Kohane found himself facing a very impassioned subset of his colleagues who were skeptical of the proposed policy because of the impact it might have on academic societies. He anticipates small, vocal opposition, but in the end the political constituency will emerge and fully adopt an open access policy.

The ripple effect

“It always takes more work to be first,” says Carroll. “The trail has now been broken and it’s a lot easier for others to follow.”

Since many of the legal issues have been vetted, it is indeed safer for other universities to adopt similar policies, says King. It requires an administration, however, to spend money on the issue. The provost’s office at Harvard established and staffed the committee and funded the new Office of Scholarly Communication.

“People think Harvard can do this kind of thing because Harvard is so rich,” says Shieber. “The irony is that the reason people here got involved was the financial unsustainability – even at Harvard – of the current scholarly publishing regime, which has led to a steady erosion of access as we and other institutions must cancel subscriptions. The goal of this and future policies we will develop is not to save money. The goal is to broaden access.”

But for other universities eyeing Harvard’s success, the question lingers whether there is something about the dynamic and prestige of Harvard that led to open access being embraced on campus.

“Harvard is no more unified or less opinionated than any other academic center,” says Kohane. “I don’t believe the hurdles are any more significant at other universities. Others should think: If they did it at Harvard, we can do it too.”

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