Breakout session: **Working with Societies**
3:25 session

Facilitator: **Daniel Greenstein**, Associate Vice Provost and University Librarian, California Digital Library

Session description: Societies hold a central role in scholarly publishing – the publishers they select, the prices, and the access and archiving policies they support are lynchpins in the economy and distribution of scholarly information. How can societies balance fiscal concerns and widespread access to the literature? Hear from colleagues who have brought these issues to their societies.

➢ *The following are informal notes taken during the breakout session. They are not intended to serve as a verbatim transcript of the proceedings.*

Dan Greenstein set the scene by noting that, in his discussions, it has been brought home to him that not all societies are alike. Some examples of the range of differences include:

- ACS (American Chemical Society) and AAAS (American Association for the Advancement of Science) – publishing efforts are essentially profit-making, and the publishing group is told each year how much they will have to return to the society;

- NAS (National Academy of Sciences) – goal is to make as much freely available as possible, without going broke;

- APS (American Physical Society) – really exploring what added value APS publishing supplies, given that most of the actual content first appears on ArXiv;

- “bunch” of small societies – without their journal, hard to know why the society exists.

Dan noted the need to have a nuanced approach to societies, given these differences. For example, we probably need to treat ACS and AAAS as commercial. He also noted that UC could identify society-involved faculty.

Discussion then ranged over a wide variety of topics, most related to identification of various society publishing models/situations, the role of the journal within the society, and how UC could work with societies to address issues of concern. The rest of these notes consist of the points made by various faculty:

- if a society exists only to publish a journal, then the value of the society really needs to be questioned.
- The case of societies publishing their journals via commercial publishers is difficult; we need to provide viable alternative models to them.
- How to identify societies to approach? One faculty member did not think it would be a tough sell: societies want confidence that an alternative model would work and assurance that institutions would support a new model.
- The American Society of Plant Biologists was noted as one that was dependent on its journal revenue.
- Opinion given that most would agree on the goals of publishing the journal, supporting the society, and providing open access.
- how to determine which societies to target to change or transition their costs?
- One idea was that UC should announce that they will not negotiate with commercial publishers…. Give them warning to that effect (say, 3 years). UC underestimates its power.
- Others thought that the faculty would lynch the libraries if they drastically cut subscriptions.
- Effecting change would take transitional money.
Some discussion was given over to the idea of groups such as CDL, PLOS, and UC Press combining to create their own platform. At what scale is it important to own one’s own platform? If one owned the infrastructure, one could have different business models.

A faculty member involved with PLOS noted that the costs were not in the publication of individual papers; if he had the UC acquisitions budget, he could publish all UC output.

Another faculty member asked what was the desired outcome? Was it cost savings? One could construct editorial boards and create shadow journals. But societies are different animals and journals are the heart of them.

Even at a tenth of the price, we still won’t solve the long term issues. Why don’t people create prestige in another journal? ... could be done.

If we were to write to editorial board members, what would we say? What would attract them to an open access model?

If UC required work to be openly available, what would it take? Most societies would like work freely available.

A society’s journal is often the only real member benefit; this approach would threaten that.

Another faculty member countered with the example of ASM (American Society for Microbiology?); that membership does not include any journal subscriptions.

We could be moving to a micropayment situation – but that works against open access. What value-added services can societies/publishers provide?

Have heard that the journal as an entity is going away, but that we’re really looking at the article.

Discovery tools are important, with the next generation going to Google.

Other tools: articles that lead to “other articles you should be reading.”

If an institution no longer subscribes, what about the archive? Will students still have access?

Some disciplines don’t have an archive, but maybe societies should do this.

Need societies to address this question: how to assist their users with what value-added services?

Could we provide talking points for faculty who are on society publishing boards? Can we encourage talk of “what is the value added”?

Rather than a scattershot approach, can we identify just a few societies and try to have a serious conversation surrounding these issues? Engage them and offer experience. Pick these societies by factors such as: some UC linkage on the board, society not encumbered (ie, still own their own journal), some financial stress (so the time is ripe), institutional readiness. [I think Cell Biology Education was mentioned as a possibility in this context.]

It was noted that JBC took a big hit (lost subscriptions) with its move online. It is just now recovering.

notes by Camille Wanat
March 31, 2005