An Open Letter to the Higher Education Community

The United States Congress will have the opportunity to consider the Federal Research Public Access Act (FRPAA). FRPAA would require Federal agencies whose extramural research budgets exceed $100 million to develop policies ensuring open, public access to the research supported by their grants or conducted by their employees. This Bill embodies core ideals shared by higher education, research institutions and their partners everywhere. The Bill builds upon the success of the first U.S. policy for public access to publicly funded research – implemented in 2008 through the National Institutes of Health – and mirrors the intent of campus-based policies for research access that are being adopted by a growing number of public and private institutions across the nation.

We believe that this legislation represents a watershed and provides an opportunity for the entire U.S. higher education and research community to draw upon their traditional partnerships and collaboratively realize the unquestionably good intentions of the Bill's framers – broadening access to publicly funded research in order to accelerate the advancement of knowledge and maximize the related public good. By ensuring broad and diverse access to taxpayer-funded research the Bill also supports the intuitive and democratic principle that, with reasonable exceptions for issues of national security, the public ought to have access to the results of activities it funds.

The broad dissemination of the results of scholarly inquiry and discourse is essential for higher education to fulfill its long-standing commitment to the advancement and conveyance of knowledge. Indeed, it is mission critical. For the land-grant and publicly funded institutions among us, it addresses the complementary commitment to public service and public access that is included in our charters. In keeping with this mission, we agree with FRPAA's basic premise that enabling the broadest possible access to new ideas resulting from government-funded research promotes progress, economic growth, and public welfare. Furthermore, we know that, when combined with public policy such as FRPAA proposes, the Internet and digital technology are powerful tools for removing access barriers and enabling new and creative uses of the results of research.

Collectively, our universities engage in billions of dollars of funded research. On average, approximately 50% of our research funding originates with the federal government. That public investment – estimated at over $60.5 billion for the research covered by FRPAA – is complemented by our own institutional investments in research units, laboratories, libraries, and the faculty and staff whose expertise permeates them.

FRPAA has the potential to enable the maximum downstream use of those investments. Many of us are already working on programs and policies to promote greater access to the wealth of research produced by our scholars; we are adopting policies for open access to the research outputs of our institutions; we are building open access digital repositories to collect research, developing advanced publishing channels, and working with our scholarly publishing partners to pursue the broadest possible distribution of scholarship at lowest possible costs. FRPAA will complement these efforts and be a powerful tool in ensuring their success.

Each month the evidence mounts that open access to research through digital distribution increases the use of that research and the visibility of its creators. Widespread public dissemination levels the economic playing field for researchers outside of well-funded universities and research centers and creates more opportunities for innovation. Ease of access and discovery also encourages use by scholars outside traditional disciplinary communities, thus encouraging imaginative and productive scholarly convergence.

Open and public access policies can also match the missions of scholarly societies and publishers who

review, edit, and distribute research to serve the advancement of knowledge. Sharing the fruits of research and scholarship inevitably leads to the creation of more research and scholarship, thus highlighting the need for publishing professionals to manage the selection and review of the highest quality research, both publicly and privately funded.

Open and public access to publications in no way negates the need for well-managed and effective peer review or the need for formal publishing. It does, however, challenge us all to think about how best to align the intellectual and economic models for scholarly publishing with the needs of contemporary scholarship and the benefits, including low marginal costs of distribution, of network technology. That challenge is one that many scholarly societies and commercial publishers are already successfully engaging through a variety of business model experiments and partnerships. We believe that FRPAA productively calls for further engagement.

As scholars and university administrators, we are acutely aware that the present system of scholarly communication does not always serve the best interests of our institutions or the general public. Scholarly publishers, academic libraries, university leaders, and scholars themselves must engage in an ongoing dialogue about the means of scholarly production and distribution. This dialogue must acknowledge both our competing interests and our common goals. The passage of FRPAA will be an important step in catalyzing that dialogue, but it is not the last one that we will need to take.

FRPAA is good for education and good for research. It is good for the American public, and it promotes broad, democratic access to knowledge. While it challenges the academy and scholarly publishers to think and act creatively, it need not threaten nor undermine a successful balance of our interests. If passed, we will work with researchers, publishers, and federal agencies to ensure its successful implementation. We endorse FRPAA's aims and urge the academic community, individually and collectively, to voice support for its passage.

Sincerely,

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