Harvard Faculty Votes to Make Open Access Its Default Mode

Harvard University has jumped into the contentious debate on open-access publishing with a plan to make research papers freely accessible online. The 12 February vote by its 730-member arts and sciences faculty marks the first time that a major U.S. university has directly challenged the authority of academic journals to control access to research results. “This is a large and very important step for scholars throughout the country,” said Harvard computer scientist Stuart Schieber, who championed the plan. But the decision does not apply to the rest of the university, including its medical, public health, and business schools, and publishers say they doubt it will significantly affect their business.

The resolution authorizes Harvard to place a faculty member’s work in a repository that will be available to all at no cost. The researcher would retain the copyright, as in the past, but the university would have a license to release it. Papers would be posted on the Internet upon receipt or following a requested delay. Any author may choose not to participate but would need a waiver from the dean in order to opt out of the system. “What’s new is that this is not imposed by the university or by funders,” says John Wilbanks, vice president of Science Commons, a Cambridge, Massachusetts, organization supporting open access. “This is the faculty stepping up and saying it has a stake.”

The vote comes 1 month after the U.S. National Institutes of Health required all grantees to place peer-reviewed papers in the agency’s free archive, PubMed Central, within a year of publication. The Harvard decision, by contrast, “is not mandatory,” notes Patricia Schroeder, president of the Association of American Publishers in Washington, D.C. “I don’t think anyone is quaking in their boots.” Alan Leshner, chief executive officer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (which publishes Science), says that the new policy won’t affect publishing criteria, although it could pose “a bureaucratic problem for faculty members.”

Schieber sees the new archive as a way to combat rising subscription costs and give authors greater control over their own published work. Provost Steven Hyman, who supports the change, sees it as the university’s “first step in the creation of an open-access environment for current research.” Other private organizations—including the Howard Hughes Medical Institute in Chevy Chase, Maryland, and the Wellcome Trust in London—have taken similar steps (Science, 7 July 2006, p. 29).

Publishers maintain that the cost of peer review, printing, and distribution require them to charge subscription fees. And they note that small nonprofit organizations, as well as large corporations, profit from the scholarly publishing system and depend on journal subscriptions to stay in business.

Scheider says it is too early to measure the impact of the new policy and warns that “publishers may not be quite as excited to take articles from Harvard.” Shieber agrees that the experiment is just beginning but adds that “journals will always try to get the best papers.”

—ANDREW LAWLER

This is the university’s “first step in the creation of an open-access environment.”
—STEVEN HYMAN, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Candidates Invited to Debate

The first-ever U.S. presidential science debate will take place 18 April in Philadelphia—if any of the four major candidates still in the race agree to come. The organizers, which include Nobelists, university presidents, the U.S. National Academies, and AAAS (the publisher of Science), hope the event (www.science争论2008.org) will highlight the role that science plays in a range of national policy issues, from health care and energy independence to education and climate change. The campaigns have yet to respond to the invitations, which went out last week, but Barack Obama is giving it “serious consideration” says an adviser.

—ELI KINTSCH

Kernel of Truth

Corn growers are about to have their decade-long dream of a deciphered maize genome come true. Just in time for the 50th annual Maize Genetics meeting in Washington, D.C., next week, Richard Wilson of Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, and his colleagues have pieced together a rough draft of corn’s 2.3 billion bases, almost a year ahead of schedule. Corn jump-started the National Science Foundation’s (NSF’s) Plant Genome Initiative, abetted by Senator Christopher “Kit” Bond (R–MO), who formerly chaired the panel that oversees NSF’s budget. Already, researchers are experimenting with using the genome to improve crop yields and harness corn’s potential as a biofuel, says conference organizer Thomas Bruntnell of Cornell University.

—ELIZABETH PENNISI

Censorship Rules Slow to Come

In the wake of several cases of apparent scientific censorship by U.S. government officials, Congress last summer ordered President George W. Bush to adopt government-wide rules ensuring that federal scientists are free to disseminate their research results without “suppression or distortion.” Last week, presidential science adviser John Marburger said at a hearing of the House Science and Technology Committee that a draft document will soon be circulated among the relevant agencies. There will be no opportunity for public comment, Marburger acknowledged under questioning. The White House is running late—the policy was supposed to be in place by 9 February. “Better late than never” was the reaction of committee chairman, Representative Bart Gordon (D–TN). “This has never been a priority for them.”

—JEFFREY MERVIS