

To: The A&M Campus Community

From: David H. Carlson
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I have spoken to many A&M faculty groups over the past several months regarding our participation in the Texas Library Coalition for United Action (TLCUA). [The Coalition](#) includes a total of 43 institutions across the state and represents the largest, voluntary coalition of institutions of higher education in Texas ever established. It was formed specifically to negotiate with the for-profit publisher Elsevier for reduced costs and improved conditions of publishing, especially ownership by faculty of their scholarly work. I am a member of the Coalition's Steering Committee and Negotiations Team.

With the new year, I wanted to provide the campus with an update on our negotiations. The most immediate issue is ongoing access to the current content of Elsevier-published journals.

- **Ongoing Online Access**

The Texas A&M Libraries' contract with Elsevier expired on December 31, 2020. We are not alone; about half the members of the Coalition share this expiration date. Last month, as it became clear that we would not reach agreement by 12/31/20, Elsevier asked that we sign an interim agreement to extend our online access. We felt strongly that signing such an agreement in the absence of agreement on a final contract would critically weaken our position strategically moving forward and we refused.

After more discussion, Elsevier agreed to accept an informal expression of commitment from the Coalition that we were making progress in our discussions and our commitment to keep negotiating in January (and beyond, if necessary). We had no concerns about such a statement as it accurately reflected our views, did not bind us contractually, and expressed our intent to continue negotiations, a willingness to which we have been long committed. As a result, Elsevier agreed to continue online access beyond December 31, 2020 for all Coalition members with expiring contracts, including Texas A&M, of course. This agreement is for at least the month of January. This is welcome news.

I mentioned that about half the members of the Coalition have contracts that expired on 12/31/20. That means about half of the members of the Coalition have contracts with Elsevier that will expire **next** year, 12/31/2021, so their access will continue through 2021 regardless. In a recent survey of Coalition members, those with later contracts expressed full support for those libraries that may lose access in 2021. They were firm in their commitment to prioritize our requests for Elsevier content through InterLibrary Loan and other processes.¹ This will ensure prompt delivery of Elsevier articles, as we may request, if it happens that we lose access to Elsevier current content in the future. We are grateful to have such partners and the solidarity demonstrates the strength of our Coalition.

¹ Among these libraries are all campuses of the University of Texas system including UT Austin.

- **Overview of Negotiations Issues**

TLCUA believes that an important element of our strength is that we represent an investment in Elsevier journals of over \$25 million annually. We hoped our collective commitment would be an opportunity for engagement with Elsevier as partners and work towards improvements in scholarly communications. I regret to write that, in my opinion, we saw little evidence of this in our initial discussions. However, in December, 2020, we discerned a positive change in tone and approach. We appreciated this change and saw it as evidence of the first real signs of progress and engagement. Of course, there were (are) still many issues to work out -- cost is a major one.

Academic Libraries and higher education have enabled excessive and unsustainable increases from Elsevier over the past several years: we believe it is time for a reset and a meaningful reduction. The need for cost reduction is particularly acute due to the economic impact of COVID. Every member of TLCUA is reporting some level of budget reductions including reductions in faculty and staff through various combinations of layoffs, furloughs, and hiring freezes.

The early proposals we received from Elsevier contained minimal cost reductions and even these modest efforts were coupled with increases in later years. In December, this changed and we saw meaningful cost reductions in the range of thirty to forty percent. However, the losses to us for these reductions were daunting. These losses include:

- Loss of future access to the content of all subscribed titles over the course of the new contract.
- Substantial loss of access to a large number of journals.
- Continuation of cost modeling based on decades-old, legacy print subscriptions.
- No changes or improvement in faculty ownership of content.

My personal characterization of the proposals is that we would give up ninety percent of our access, rights, and benefits while gaining a thirty to forty percent cost reduction.

It is very hard to summarize many hours of meetings but I hope the above gives you a sense of our issues and position. Please let me know if there are questions: davidhcarlson@tamu.edu.

- **The Future**

I can only speculate on how things will progress in January. Obviously, I hope that we make progress and reach agreement. However, as a Coalition we are committed to meaningful cost reductions coupled with productive change in scholarly communication. To achieve these goals, we are willing to lose access to current content if necessary. We are realistic as well; we recognize that we may have to give up some combination of access, rights, and benefits in order to gain these changes but we hope we can work with Elsevier as partners for productive change and these changes will promote a more productive, sustainable, and modern system of scholarly communication that meets the demands and opportunities of global communications, collaborative research, and the open science environment.

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