Resolution regarding the University Library's Policies on Serials Acquisitions, with Special Reference to Negotiations with Elsevier

Submitted by the Faculty Library Advisory Board for consideration at the December 17, 2003 meeting of the University Faculty Senate

BACKGROUND

A Crisis in the Cost of Journals in the Sciences and Social Sciences
For many years, increases in the prices of library materials have exceeded increases in library acquisitions budgets, at Cornell and abroad. One significant reason is the growing commercialization of scholarly publishing, especially in the sciences and social sciences and especially where journals are concerned. Statistics from the Association of Research Libraries (http://www.arl.org/stats/arlstat/graphs/2001/2001t2.html) show that over the fifteen years from 1986 to 2001 the prices of serials generally increased by 215%, library expenditures on serials went up by 210%, and the number of serials titles purchased by large academic research libraries decreased by 5%. The Consumer Price Index during the same period increased by only 62%.

At Cornell, Ithaca campus library budgets for materials increased by 149% during approximately the same period, but the number of serials titles purchased increased by only 5%—at a time when the number of serials published increased by approximately 138%. The contract colleges subscribe to 14% fewer serials than they did fifteen years ago, even though their combined library acquisitions budgets have increased by 117% during that period.

Commercial publishers charge more—sometimes many times more—for their materials than scholarly societies or university presses do. The Dutch company Elsevier, which publishes mainly science journals, is the best example. Over the last decade Elsevier's price increases have often been over 10% and occasionally over 20% on a year to year basis. (They have recently announced a policy of not raising prices by more than 10% in a given year.) In 2003 Cornell subscribed to 930 Elsevier titles at a cost of approximately $1.7 million. Those 930 titles represent fewer than 2% of the total number of serials titles to which Cornell subscribes; the $1.7 million comprises something over 20% of the library's total serials expenditures, including those of the Medical School. Elsevier's proposed price increase of 6.5% for 2004 would have required an increase in the library's serials expenditures of approximately $100,000. By contrast, the library's ***total*** materials budget, including materials for the Medical School, has in fact ***decreased*** by 1.4%. It is clear that increases of the magnitude that Elsevier regularly expects have become quite literally unbearable. The long-term trends of which these particular increases are a part are therefore also unsustainable.

The Cornell library's relationship with Elsevier has given definition and urgency to problems the library has been facing for some time and that extend beyond Elsevier to include other commercial publishers.

Elsevier's pricing practices

One way the library can accommodate increases in serials prices that exceed increases in the library's budget is by canceling some titles. Elsevier's pricing practices, however, make this straightforward solution especially costly. In the past, Cornell has contracted with Elsevier for a package of journals and electronic services. The contract has been priced as a "bundle," that is, in such a way that, if the library cancels any of the Elsevier journals it currently subscribes to, the pricing of the other individual journals the library chooses to keep increases substantially. (The actual process is somewhat more complicated than this, but this is the end result.) Because the prices of the journals that are retained greatly increase when others are cancelled, the only way to achieve any real savings is to cancel a great many journals.

In 2003 the library was able to maintain its subscriptions to Elsevier journals only because of one-time assistance from an extra-budgetary source. Given that the library cannot bear Elsevier's price increases for 2004, it has decided that it must withdraw from the bundled pricing plan that has characterized past contracts and begin canceling Elsevier journal titles. The library, in consultation with affected faculty, has identified several hundred Elsevier journals for cancellation at the end of 2003.

There are two clear benefits to this course of action: it enables the library to retain the most important Elsevier titles without drastically impacting serials collections and the library's ability to acquire non-Elsevier journals and non-serials materials, and it frees the library, in 2004 and in the future, from contractual obligations that have in effect compromised its ability to make case-by-case judgments about the value to the collection of particular Elsevier journals.

Understandably, there is growing dissatisfaction at universities in the United States with Elsevier's prices and pricing practices and increasing militancy among university librarians and faculty with regard to modes of response. Cornell's announced intention to withdraw from the standard contractual arrangements with Elsevier for 2004 has received substantial attention in the press. Cornell is clearly perceived as assuming a leadership role in these matters. Moreover, the faculty at some other major universities have endorsed or are considering endorsing resolutions designed to address, in varying ways, this same set of issues.

(For more information, see the web page the library has set up to explain these issues: http://www.library.cornell.edu/scholarlycomm/problem.html)

BE IT RESOLVED THAT:

(1) The University Faculty Senate supports the library's efforts to maintain and enhance the outstanding quality of Cornell's library collections for teaching and research**.** Moreover, recognizing the special challenges presented by current economic, market, and budgetary conditions, the University Faculty Senate supports the library's efforts to bring serials costs under control while at the same time maintaining the collection's quality.

(2) Recognizing that given present and future budget constraints, the library requires autonomy and flexibility to manage its materials acquisitions decisions effectively, the University Faculty Senate endorses the library's decision to withdraw from Elsevier's bundled pricing plan and undertake selective cancellation of Elsevier journals as deemed appropriate by the library in consultation with the faculty.

(3) Recognizing that current trends regarding serials costs are unsustainable and that the current business models and marketing strategies of commercial publishers bear significant responsibility for those trends, the University Faculty Senate encourages the library to take an aggressive approach in negotiating new contractual models and pricing structures with Elsevier and other commercial publishers designed to bring serials costs in line with realistic long-term library budget projections.

(4) Recognizing that the cost of Elsevier journals in particular is radically out of proportion with the importance of those journals to the library's serials collection (measured both in terms of the proportion of the total collection they represent and in terms of their use by and value to faculty and students), the University Faculty Senate encourages the library to seek in the near term, in consultation with the faculty, to reduce its expenditures on Elsevier journals to no more than 15% of its total annual serials acquisitions expenditures (from in excess of 20% in 2003). Moreover, the University Faculty Senate encourages the library to work toward long-term pricing structures with Elsevier and other publishers based on reasonable measures of a subscription's importance to the Cornell collection.

(5) Recognizing that the increasing control by large commercial publishers over the publication and distribution of the faculty's scholarship and research threatens to undermine core academic values promoting broad and rapid dissemination of new knowledge and unrestricted access to the results of scholarship and research, the University Faculty Senate encourages the library and the faculty vigorously to explore and support alternatives to commercial venues for scholarly communication.