

White House petitioned to make research free to access

Other science agencies should follow NIH policy, say campaigners.

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More than 17,000 people have signed an online petition urging US President Barack Obama to require all scientific journal articles resulting from US taxpayer-funded research to be made freely available online. The signatures, obtained within a week of the petition's launch after an active social media campaign, put it over two-thirds of the way towards the threshold that will require an official response from the White House.

It comes as the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) — one of the largest biomedical institutions in the United States — becomes the latest institution to require its researchers to make their articles freely available in an open-access repository. However, they can opt out if it brings them into conflict with publishers. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge and various Harvard University schools are among those with similar policies in place.

The petition, on the White House website, was launched by Access2Research, a group of four open-access advocates who were frustrated by the lack of progress on the issue and so are trying a new tack. The petition urges the president to “act now to implement open access policies for all federal agencies that fund scientific research”.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland, is the only US government agency that requires researchers to deposit their articles in the agency's PubMed Central online archive within 12 months of publication, a policy that followed a bill passed by Congress in 2007. It is estimated that about 90,000 papers are deposited each year, with half a million people accessing the database of 2.4 million papers each day.

Getting the ball rolling

“We know the NIH policy works to provide public access and there have been no data presented that it hurts publishers' revenues, so we are asking for that policy to be extended,” says John Wilbanks, a senior fellow at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation in Kansas City, Missouri, and one of the four people spearheading the petition.

The proposed extension would see open-access policies cover all 12 federal-science agencies, including the Department of Energy, the National Science Foundation, NASA, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Agriculture. The petition does not stipulate a time period within which articles should be deposited or a particular repository, to give agencies flexibility, Wilbanks says.

The agencies together receive about US\$60 billion in federal research dollars each year, with about half going to the NIH, so the number of papers available annually could double under the proposal, says Heather Joseph, another petition leader and executive director of the pro-open access Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, based in Washington DC.

Assuming the petition tops 25,000 signatures before 19 June, there must be an official response from the administration. “It at least puts the issue in front of the president's staff for consideration. The response could be as weak as a simple acknowledgement, or as strong as a policy statement or directive”, such as an executive order telling agencies to expand the NIH policy, Joseph adds.

The timing of the petition is no accident. A bipartisan bill — the Federal Research Public Access Act (FRPAA) 2012 — that advocates extending the NIH policy to other federal agencies, and shortening the time frame in which papers must be deposited from 12 months to 6, is making its way through Congress. The White House is also currently reviewing its open-access policies.

“We want the White House to state its position because it could get the ball rolling with agencies, and we want FRPAA because it is much harder to overturn,” says Joseph.

No one-size-fits-all

But the petition has received a cool response from both traditional publishers and some open-access campaigners.

"I love this is happening, but it is a compromise," says Michael Eisen, an evolutionary biologist at the University of California, Berkeley, and a co-founder of open-access publisher the Public Library of Science. Eisen adds that implementation of public access policies like the NIH's at other federal agencies would mean delayed rather than immediate access along with a curtailed ability for data mining.

Publishers have been "working hard to advance the public-access issue", says Andi Sporkin, a spokeswoman for the Association of American Publishers, headquartered in Washington DC. "But we oppose government mandates on research publications and believe it is unworkable to make the NIH policy serve as a one-size-fits-all rule."

Meanwhile, UCSF will become the first University of California campus in the system to mandate deposition, although the goal is to pass a similar policy for all ten of its campuses. "UCSF was just ready to go because many of our faculty are used to complying with the NIH policy," says Richard Schneider, an associate professor at the university who led the policy. He adds that the UCSF policy is rare in requiring deposition immediately on publication. Publishers that do not modify their publication contracts to accommodate the policy run the risk of being named, he says.

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