Public Access to Federally-Supported Research and Development Data and Publications: A Planning Meeting

Project Summary

Traditionally, scholars have communicated primarily through sharing data and ideas at conventions and through peer-reviewed publications. Their information has been relatively inaccessible to those outside a given field. In recent years, much emphasis has been placed on providing scientific findings to the public *gratis* and with easy access online.

There are considerable benefits for the research community as well as the general public from embracing public access models. However, non-profit professional societies and organizations, and for-profit publishers, rely for daily operations upon revenues obtained from subscriptions to scholarly publications. These revenue issues affect everyone, and pro- and con- arguments come up whenever "open access" and "public access" (which are not necessarily synonymous) to scholarly works are discussed. The US government has taken a particular interest in public access when the support for scientific studies comes from federal resources (for example, the recent introduction of the Fair Access to Science and Technology Research act to the 113th U.S. Congress).

More can be done to provide greater access to scientific information funded by U.S. federal dollars. But, the "best" way to accomplish this within the context of U.S. federal agencies is not yet clear. There are a number of fundamental issues, and several layers of complexity to be considered. Articulating models that fit various governmental agencies' needs and capacities, with minimum harm to all stakeholders, including investigators, research universities, industry, professional societies, for-profit publishers, and the general public, will require debate and careful scrutiny of a variety of models.

This proposed planning meeting would cast a wide net to draw in representatives of all of affected stakeholders and allow them to provide input. Additionally, experts would be asked to initiate the meeting with focused presentations that will ask questions that will elicit all concerns while avoiding polarization and acrimony between diametrically opposed positions. The meeting will be webcast, which means that stakeholders from around the world could make comments as the event unfolds and, after the meeting is over, the video can be posted for easy access and convenience.

Intellectual Merit. Encouraging productive, positive discourse on this critically important topic could pave the way to a process for designing a model of public access that is useful to government agencies without inadvertently harming either the quality of scientific endeavor or the interests of stakeholders in the scientific process. New research and new collaborations would be promoted if information is open to all stakeholders in a systematic way. Currently, the nation is not deriving the full benefit from the dollars that it invests in research, not only because many stakeholders may not be able to access the results or the process by which those results were obtained, but also because information flows that ought to be two-way are one-way only, or blocked altogether. These stumbling blocks are not only intellectually challenging to tackle and remove, but outcomes of their removal may likely be much better public-private partnerships, and a more thorough utilization of and appreciation for the intellectual products of scholars.

Broader Impact. Inclusive and wide-reaching dialogue among various stakeholders in the development of public access model(s) that fit various U.S. governmental agencies' needs and capacities, while at the same time involving researchers, organizations and the larger public, would promote greater trust both in research and in government, as well as make publicly funded data and research results available to the private sector for innovation and technology developments that could lead to economic and societal benefits. Researchers in less-developed countries would benefit as models of access are found that would help them avoid prohibitive costs of participating in the global science arena.