June 13, 2012

We the undersigned, member universities of the Coalition of Open Access Policy Institutions (COAPI) or their affiliated libraries, write to register our strong support for the Federal Research Public Access Act (FRPAA, H.R. 4004 and S. 2096). COAPI brings together North American universities and research institutes with established open-access policies and those in the process of developing such policies. These open-access policies codify our commitment to provide the broadest possible access to the fruits of research carried out at our institutions, echoing the common mission of all universities and research institutions to create, disseminate, and preserve knowledge.

We were therefore gratified to see the bipartisan, bicameral reintroduction of FRPAA on February 9. By virtue of this legislation, all major US funding agencies would establish policies providing broad public access to their funded research through free online availability of the peer-reviewed articles that researchers develop through federal grants.

In essence, FRPAA would extend the highly successful public access policy of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), which ensures that the public has access to the published results of NIH-funded research. Because of this policy, the NIH now provides free online access to 2.4 million articles downloaded a million times per day by half a million users. University researchers account for 25% of these users, guaranteeing that they can build upon the broad range of research that the taxpayers have funded. Companies account for another 17%, showing that the policy benefits small businesses and corporations, who need access to scientific advances to spur innovation. Finally, the general public accounts for 40% of the users, some quarter of a million people per day, demonstrating that these articles are of tremendous interest to the taxpayers who fund the research in the first place and who deserve access to the results that they have underwritten.

By requiring other funding agencies to develop policies allowing public access to research, FRPAA would amplify the benefits of the NIH policy, providing even more benefits to researchers, business, and the public. These benefits work synergistically with our own institutional open-access policies by making more uniform the availability of research results and providing greater transparency of government-funded research.

The bill allows for up to a 6-month embargo to protect the proprietary interest of publishers that do not themselves provide open access to articles. This 6-month embargo limit has become standard among funders worldwide covering a broad swath of scholarly fields, including the European Research Council, the Austrian Research Fund (FWF), the Swedish Research Council, the Irish Research Council for Science, Engineering & Technology, and the UK Joint Information Systems Committee. Indeed, among the many biomedical funders that have instituted public access policies — including the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Department of Health (UK), Howard Hughes Medical Institute, and the Wellcome Trust — NIH’s 12-month embargo is the rare exception to a 6-month cap for public access.
Like our own open-access policies, public access policies of the sort envisioned by FRPAA are consistent with copyright and with a flourishing scholarly publishing industry. Moreover, a comprehensive 2010 study estimates that the overall economic benefits of FRPAA to the United States would be eight times the costs, following from the increased return to research and development by universities and business engendered by the increased availability of research results.

As 27 university presidents and provosts concluded in an open letter regarding FRPAA:

FRPAA is good for education and good for research. It is good for the American public, and it promotes broad, democratic access to knowledge. While it challenges the academy and scholarly publishers to think and act creatively, it need not threaten nor undermine a successful balance of our interests. If passed, we will work with researchers, publishers, and federal agencies to ensure its successful implementation. We endorse FRPAA’s aims and urge the academic community, individually and collectively, to voice support for its passage.

These presidents and provosts have been joined by 120 higher education leaders, as well as the Association of American Universities and the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities in their strong support for FRPAA.

We have committed to making our research results available to the public openly, freely, and transparently. The Federal government should as well.

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