



Six Things VCU Faculty and Researchers Should Know About the University of California System Decision to End the Elsevier Big Deal

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In March 2019 the University of California system (the UC) made a [remarkable announcement](#): they are not renewing their “Big Deal” subscription with Elsevier journals. *Here are six things VCU researchers need to know about the UC’s decision.*

1. Big Deals are journal bundles sold by a few major publishers. Big Deal pricing broke negotiations between UC and Elsevier.

Like big cable TV bundles, journal Big Deals were first sold to libraries decades ago as a way of getting access to more content for less money. But over the last two decades, costs for journals have far outpaced both inflation and library budgets, and that explosive growth has crowded out other resources. Mergers and acquisitions have resulted in a few oligopolies who dominate elite scholarly publishing (Elsevier, SpringerNature, Wiley et al.). Library collections investments now go disproportionately to this handful of massive firms, with Elsevier in the lead. Most press coverage has emphasized the UC’s demands around open access, but it’s clear from their public statements that what really broke the negotiations was their insistence on containing the runaway cost of the Big Deal.

2. Big Deal prices are artificially high, and their value is decreasing.

Vendor [profit margins are astronomical](#) - 35% and up for the main Big Deal purveyors. Elsevier’s profit margins exceed those of both Apple and Google. Vendor profits at this level reflect monopoly power grounded in copyright and prestige, not vendor-added value. [A landmark study comparing prices](#) charged by for-profit vs. non-profit vendors found for-profits charge substantially more, even adjusted for citation rates and other proxies for “quality.” Big Deals are [providing less value](#) today, charging more and more for the same fraction of literature we use and hiding costs behind mountains of unread and rarely-read content. [Data we’ve recently published](#) shows how much of our Big Deal content is consulted less than once a month, and the startling number of titles that are never read at all.

3. Universities are paying three times for journal literature, only to see faculty work locked behind paywalls.

UC was concerned about cost, but they also walked away because Elsevier would not accept a deal that was an attempt to escape the dominant publishing paradigm, under which universities pay at least three times for journal articles, only for that knowledge to be locked away and monetized.

1. Universities **pay faculty who conduct research** and publish as part of their employment, a major subsidy to vendors, who do not pay their authors for the articles they publish.
2. Universities **pay faculty to edit and peer review** publications, another subsidy to vendors.
3. Universities **pay vendors for access** to the final articles, which were created, edited, and curated by our own faculty.

Faculty are harmed by the paywall system as well: paywalled research has [reduced reach and impact](#), and faculty can’t share their own work online without fear of [publisher takedowns](#).

4. The prestige economy is broken.

The primary reason faculty give away their valuable copyrights and time to for-profit vendors is that the academy has vested particular journal titles with prestige by making publication in those outlets an important credential required for promotion and tenure. More than any other factor, promotion and tenure processes that outsource evaluation to journals ensure a steady flow of free content to Big Deal vendors. It doesn't have to be this way. Over 1,000 institutions and nearly 14,000 individuals have signed the [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment](#), which offers an alternative vision for evaluating research that disrupts the cycle of prestige that keeps research flowing into vendors' hands. The National Academies of Science is also [investigating](#) ways to create better alignment between incentives and open practices. Individual scholars have also proposed compelling alternatives to the status quo. Two founders of the [Center for Open Science](#) developed proposals along these lines: "Scientific Utopia" ([Part I](#), [Part II](#)).

5. UC's decision is the latest and largest in a trend of recent Big Deal breakups.

The [SPARC Big Deal Cancellation Tracker](#) shows that UC is just the largest example of a trend. Domestically, [Florida State University](#) is a recent high-profile example of an institution rebelling against the Big Deal. While they didn't end subscriptions from Elsevier, they did cancel their Big Deal with them, cut their spending in half, and used the savings (more than \$1 million) to acquire backlog of material that faculty had specifically requested in recent years. In other countries, where negotiations often take place at the national level, walkaways are even more common. [Germany](#) and [Sweden](#) both walked away from Elsevier last summer. A consortium of 250 research institutions in [France cancelled their Big Deal](#) with Springer last year and repurposed that money to invest in open access. More cancellations and break-ups are sure to come.

6. Better communication is key to confronting such bad deals.

Researchers don't pay directly for journal access, so they don't necessarily know its cost, the financial models that support it, or the tradeoffs and sacrifices involved in acquiring it. Libraries don't always know enough about how resources are used, which ones are most valued, and (most importantly) which trade-offs would be acceptable to researchers. The Library has begun these conversations with Deans, the Provost's office, and the Faculty Senate, and we look forward to talking to more members of the University community as we move forward with our own rethinking of Big Deals. [We've also started disclosing](#) some of the data we have on the cost and use of our collections. Watch these pages for more such disclosures in coming months.

You can still legally find and access journal articles if VCU Libraries cancels a journal subscription or a Big Deal package.

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