

## OPEN ACCESS MANDATES AND THEIR EFFECTS ON SMALL UNIVERSITY PRESSES

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**Abstract:** Open access mandates from research funders and universities have reshaped scholarly communication over the past two decades. While much analysis has focused on their effects on large commercial publishers, subscription-based journals, and major research universities, the impact on small university presses remains underexplored. These presses, often operating with lean staffing and narrow financial margins, occupy a distinctive niche in academic publishing. They produce specialized monographs, regional journals, and edited collections that serve niche scholarly communities but rarely generate substantial revenue. This article examines how open access mandates, particularly those requiring open access publication for funded research and those encouraging open access monograph publishing, have affected the operational models, financial sustainability, and strategic priorities of small university presses. Drawing on case evidence from North America and Europe, the article argues that while open access mandates have created genuine opportunities for increased readership and discoverability, they have also imposed significant transitional costs. These costs include the need to develop new business models such as library partnership funding, article processing charges that small presses struggle to collect, and the labor-intensive work of retroactively digitizing backlist titles. The article concludes with recommendations for policymakers and university administrators to design mandate implementations that do not inadvertently undermine the very presses that often publish the highest-quality, most rigorously peer-reviewed specialist scholarship.

**Keywords:** open access mandates, small university presses, scholarly communication, monograph publishing, article processing charges, library partnership models

### Introduction

The open access movement has achieved what seemed impossible two decades ago. Major research funders including the European Commission, the Wellcome Trust, and the US National Institutes of Health now require that the results of funded research be made freely available to readers immediately or after a reasonable embargo period. Universities from Harvard to the University of California have passed open access policies, and national initiatives such as Plan S have pushed European science toward full immediate open access. These mandates have transformed the landscape of journal publishing, accelerating the decline of subscription-based models and giving rise to article processing charges, transformative agreements, and institutional repositories.

Yet the transformation has been uneven. Large commercial publishers with diversified revenue streams and global reach have adapted by launching open access options, often at price points that smaller publishers cannot easily match. Society publishers have formed consortia to negotiate transformative agreements. But small university presses, typically defined as presses with annual revenues under five million dollars and fewer than fifteen full-time staff, occupy a

more precarious position. They are neither small enough to be exempt from mandates nor large enough to absorb the costs of compliance without significant strain. Moreover, their publishing portfolios differ systematically from those of commercial publishers. Small university presses emphasize monographs, which are harder to convert to open access than journal articles because they lack a steady flow of author-side funding. They also publish regional history, literary criticism, and area studies scholarship that rarely attracts the grant funding that could cover open access fees.

This article investigates the effects of open access mandates on these small presses, asking both a descriptive question and a normative one. Descriptively, how have open access mandates changed the financial structures, editorial strategies, and technological infrastructures of small university presses? Normatively, what can funders and university administrators do to prevent well-intentioned open access policies from inadvertently damaging the very publishing venues that sustain humanities and interpretive social science scholarship? The argument proceeds in three parts. First, I trace the specific mechanisms through which open access mandates reach small presses, distinguishing between mandates for journal articles and the more recent but rapidly spreading mandates for monographs. Second, I analyze the operational consequences, focusing on revenue models, staffing pressures, and the challenge of managing versioning and repository deposit. Third, I explore emerging coping strategies and propose policy adjustments that would preserve the benefits of open access while protecting the institutional diversity of scholarly publishing.

#### How Mandates Reach Small University Presses

To understand the effects of open access mandates, one must first understand the pathways through which mandates exert pressure on small presses. The most direct pathway involves journal articles authored by researchers at institutions with open access policies. When a faculty member at a mandate-adopting university submits an article to a journal published by a small university press, the press faces a choice. It can waive any open access fee and allow the author to deposit the final peer-reviewed manuscript in the institutional repository under a green open access model. Alternatively, it can attempt to charge an article processing charge to make the version of record immediately open access on the press's own website. Neither option is straightforward. The green open access approach creates a versioning problem, because repositories often host manuscripts that lack the press's final copyediting and typesetting, yet readers cannot easily distinguish these from the published version. The gold open access approach requires the press to collect fees, but small presses typically lack the administrative infrastructure to invoice authors or their grants, and many humanities authors have no grant funding to draw upon.

A second pathway involves funder mandates that apply to entire books rather than individual articles. The most significant development in recent years has been the extension of open access requirements to monographs. Plan S, through its cOAlition S group, has explicitly stated that scholarly books resulting from funded research must be made open access within six months of publication. Similar policies have been adopted by the European Research Council and by national funders in the Netherlands, Austria, and Finland. In North America, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has funded multiple initiatives to test open access monograph models, signaling expectations that its grantees will publish openly. For small university presses,

monograph open access is far more disruptive than journal open access. A typical small press publishes between fifteen and forty monographs per year, each requiring several thousand dollars in production costs including peer review coordination, copyediting, design, and typesetting. Under subscription or print sale models, the press recoups these costs through library sales and individual purchases. Under an open access model, the press must find upfront funding for each monograph, either from the author's home institution, from a grant, or from a library consortium.

A third, less visible pathway is indirect market pressure. As more content becomes freely available online, institutional budgets for print and electronic subscriptions have flatlined or declined. Librarians report that they are increasingly reluctant to approve new subscriptions to small press journals that remain behind paywalls, especially when comparable open access content exists elsewhere. Even libraries sympathetic to small presses face hard choices. This market shift means that small presses feel mandate effects even when their own journals are not the direct target of any policy. They experience declining subscription revenue without receiving any compensatory open access income.

#### Financial Consequences and the Cost of Transition

The most tangible effect of open access mandates on small university presses has been financial strain, manifesting in three specific areas. The first area is revenue erosion from journal subscriptions. Prior to the open access movement, many small university presses operated a cross-subsidy model in which a few high-subscription journals covered the losses of many low-subscription journals and monographs. A press might publish one flagship history journal with four hundred library subscribers, generating thirty thousand dollars annually, and use those profits to support a poetry journal with only eighty subscribers and a monograph series on medieval liturgy with even fewer. Open access mandates have undercut this model. Libraries facing mandates to prioritize open access content have canceled print and electronic subscriptions to small press journals that lack an open access option. Even when libraries retain subscriptions, the perceived value has declined because the same content may be available green open access through repositories. Small presses have responded by converting some journals to fully open access, but this conversion typically eliminates subscription revenue entirely while creating new costs for article processing charge management.

The second area of financial strain is the problem of upfront monograph funding. Under traditional publishing, a small press incurs production costs and then recovers them over a sales period of three to five years. Under open access, the press must secure funding before publication. The most common solution has been the open access monograph processing charge, typically set between six thousand and fifteen thousand dollars per book. For a small press publishing twenty monographs annually, this would require total upfront funding of between one hundred twenty thousand and three hundred thousand dollars per year, an amount that exceeds the entire operating budget of many small presses. Few presses have successfully collected such fees at scale, because humanities authors rarely control grant funds of that magnitude. Even when authors can access discretionary accounts at their universities, the process of invoicing and tracking payments consumes staff time that small presses cannot easily spare.

The third area of financial strain is the unbudgeted cost of repository compliance. Open access mandates generally require not only that content be free to read but also that it be deposited in an appropriate repository with sufficient metadata to ensure discoverability. For a

small press publishing a handful of journals, this requirement is manageable. But for a press with a backlist of several thousand monographs and dozens of journal volumes spanning decades, retroactive compliance is a staggering task. Each older monograph must be checked for rights clearance. Illustrations, photographs, and other third-party content may not be licensed for open access distribution. Authors who signed contracts before the open access era may need to be contacted and reconsented. Metadata must be normalized across different platforms. Small presses report that the labor required for retroactive open access conversion equals many months of a single staff member's time, an investment they cannot recoup through any new revenue stream.

#### Staffing, Skills, and the Hidden Workload

Beyond direct financial effects, open access mandates have reshaped the daily work of small university press employees, often in ways that go unrecognized in institutional budgets. The most significant shift has been the emergence of new technical competencies as mandatory rather than optional. Fifteen years ago, a small press acquisitions editor needed expertise in peer review management, contract negotiation, and manuscript development. Today, that same editor must understand Creative Commons licensing variants, metadata schema such as JATS and ONIX, versioning policies for repositories versus publishers' websites, and the intricacies of funder compliance reporting. Editors report spending substantial portions of their time walking authors through the process of posting accepted manuscripts to institutional repositories, answering questions about whether a particular repository version violates the press's embargos, and troubleshooting discovery issues when repositories fail to expose metadata to search engines.

A second hidden workload involves the negotiation of transformative agreements. Large publishers have entire departments dedicated to negotiating read-and-publish deals with library consortia. Small presses have, at most, a single business manager who may also handle subscriptions, invoicing, and royalty accounting. When a library consortium approaches a small press with a proposed transformative agreement, the press must quickly evaluate whether the offered per-article payment covers its costs, whether the agreement's terms align with the press's mission, and whether the press has the technical infrastructure to distinguish between reading access and publishing access. Many small presses have declined such agreements not because they oppose open access but because they lack the capacity to administer them.

A third hidden workload is author education and support. Open access mandates place new responsibilities on authors, who must understand their funder's requirements, choose compliant publication venues, and manage deposit workflows. Small presses have found that their authors, especially those in humanities disciplines where open access has historically been less common, require extensive hand-holding. A press that publishes a monograph arising from a Mellon-funded research project may need to guide the author through five distinct compliance steps, from selecting a Creative Commons license to providing high-resolution files for repository deposit. Press staff describe this work as essential but invisible. It does not produce a publishable output or a revenue line, yet failure to perform it would leave the author noncompliant with their funding terms.

#### Coping Strategies and Emerging Business Models

Despite these challenges, small university presses have proven resourceful. Several coping strategies have emerged that may point toward sustainable open access futures. The most

promising strategy is the library partnership model, in which a small press partners with a consortium of academic libraries to share open access costs. Under this model, libraries contribute an annual membership fee that collectively covers the press's operating budget. In return, all books and journals published by the press are made open access at no charge to authors. The University of Michigan Press's Fund to Mission model and Luminos, the open access monograph program of the University of California Press, offer early templates. These models work best when the partnering libraries have a direct interest in sustaining the press's subject areas, such as when state university libraries support a press that publishes regional history of that same state. The limitation is scalability. A small press in a rural state with few research libraries may struggle to attract enough library members to cover its costs.

A second strategy is selective open access conversion. Rather than converting all publications to open access simultaneously, small presses identify specific series or formats where open access makes the most sense. Short-form works such as lecture series, white papers, and digital supplements can be made open access at low cost, building goodwill and readership without threatening the press's financial stability. Flagship journals with strong subscription bases can be converted gradually, raising article processing charges slowly while building an author support fund for scholars without grant money. Monographs that receive subvention funding from authors' home departments can be designated open access from the outset, while those without such funding remain under traditional sales models. This hybrid approach respects the diversity of funding situations across disciplines and institutions.

A third strategy involves advocacy for differentiated mandate implementation. Small presses have begun organizing through professional associations such as the Association of University Presses to request that open access mandates include explicit protections for presses below a certain revenue or publication volume threshold. Some funders have responded positively, allowing longer embargo periods for monograph publications or accepting green open access deposit of pre-typeset manuscripts as sufficient compliance without requiring gold open access. Other presses have successfully argued that compliance costs should be covered by institutional overhead rather than passed entirely to the press. For example, a university that mandates open access for its faculty's journal articles might simultaneously provide centralized repository deposit services so that each small press does not have to build its own deposit infrastructure.

#### Policy Recommendations and Conclusions

Open access mandates are here to stay, and their extension from journal articles to monographs will likely accelerate. The question is not whether small university presses must adapt but whether the adaptation will be managed or chaotic. I offer three recommendations for policymakers and university administrators. First, funders should create dedicated transition funds for small presses. These funds would cover the costs of retroactive rights clearance, metadata remediation, and staff training, drawing on a small percentage of existing research budgets. The expense is modest relative to total research spending, but the absence of such funds has already forced several small presses to reduce their monograph lists by half. Second, universities should treat repository deposit as a core infrastructure service rather than devolving responsibility to presses. A centralized repository team that handles versioning, metadata creation, and compliance checking would free small presses to focus on editorial quality and peer

review. Third, mandates should distinguish between commercial and mission-driven publishing. A policy that is appropriate for a multinational for-profit publisher with thirty percent margins may be destructive for a university press that exists to serve scholarship, not to generate surplus. Mandates could incorporate sliding-scale compliance options, allowing presses below a revenue threshold to satisfy open access requirements through green open access for a longer embargo period without incurring article processing charges.

Small university presses are not obstacles to open access. On the contrary, their commitment to rigorous peer review, their specialization in niche but important fields, and their non-commercial governance structures make them ideal vehicles for a scholarly communication system that prioritizes quality over quantity and access over profit. The challenge is to design open access mandates that achieve their laudable goal of universal access without extinguishing the very presses that produce much of the best specialized scholarship. With thoughtful policy adjustments and adequate transitional support, small university presses can not only survive the open access transition but emerge from it with greater readership, deeper institutional integration, and renewed clarity of mission. Without such support, the scholarly community risks a future in which open access content is abundant but the range of voices, disciplines, and methodologies is narrower than before. That would be a pyrrhic victory for open access, and one that the movement's founders would surely regret.

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