



Virginia academic research libraries are re-evaluating Big Deal journal packages based on equity, accessibility, and cost.

Executive Summary

This fall, the Virginia Research Libraries (VRL) group is entering negotiations with Elsevier, the largest academic publishing company in the world. The group's members have a contract with Elsevier through December 31, 2021, but the cost of the final year of the contract (over \$10 million, collectively) is unacceptable to most VRL members in light of budget changes unleashed by the COVID crisis. Accordingly, the group will approach Elsevier to negotiate a new price for the final year of the current contract, or else an entirely new arrangement to

commence January 1, 2021. If Elsevier is unwilling to negotiate, an early termination provision in the contract makes it possible for institutions subject to funding cuts to end the deal and force the issue. Reducing our spend with Elsevier will likely reduce the amount of content we can access via subscription, but the VRL group has worked together for nearly five years to prepare for this moment. We can assure our campuses that they will continue to have access to world-class resources with the speed and convenience they need for their research.

Who is involved?

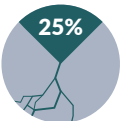
Virginia's public academic research libraries at **University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, Virginia Commonwealth University, George Mason University, Old Dominion University, James Madison University, and William & Mary** will soon be in contract negotiations with Elsevier, the largest STEM scholarly publisher. In preparation, the group is discussing solutions to the unsustainable cost of Elsevier's journals and creating equitable options to make published research accessible to all who need it.

- Since 2001, the libraries have negotiated Elsevier Big Deals as a group.
- The group has worked to build consensus and capacity for a new approach.

Why does this matter?

Virginia's public universities are facing budget reductions due to the COVID-19 crisis, resulting in substantial cuts to libraries' collections budgets.

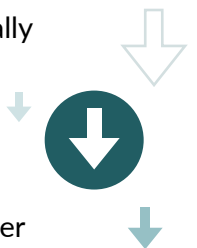
- Over the last decade, the group's total spend on Elsevier journals has increased 60% and is set to top \$10 million in 2021.



- The Elsevier Big Deal journal package is the libraries' most expensive single item and consumes up to 25% of Virginia research libraries' budgets.
- This cost is unsustainable, even in financially stable budget years.

THE BIG DEAL'S VALUE IS IN DECLINE.

- Like cable TV packages, Big Deals bundle a core set of heavily used journals with a larger set of journals that are rarely or never used. The percentage of bundled journals that researchers cite has steadily decreased.
- Research papers available in Big Deal journals are easily (and legally) available without a subscription. For all but the highest-use journals, costly subscriptions no longer provide good value.





What will happen in negotiations?

The current contract runs through December 31, 2021, but the group will seek to **renegotiate its terms** this year to secure a new deal starting January 1, 2021.

- The most likely outcome is **reduced spending in exchange for reduced subscription access**.
- If Elsevier resists, the group is **exploring invocation of the early termination right** in our current agreement as a means to drive discussion forward.

How will faculty and students access journal articles if the contract is reduced or terminated?

Virginia academic research libraries are **committed to providing access** to scholarly resources and will continue to do so.

- **Lawful alternatives** such as interlibrary loan and on-demand article purchase provide timely access to articles in cancelled journals with substantial cost savings.
- Many articles are freely available in legal open access versions. **Browser plug-ins** like Open Access Button and Unpaywall, search engines like Google Scholar, and plug-ins for our library discovery systems all help make these easy to find.
- Alternative access to research continues to grow as more scholars and universities **embrace open access and reject Big Deals**.



What can university leaders do to help?

The primary barrier to adopting sustainable models is the incentive structure, such as promotion/tenure policies and grant funding, that rewards publication in for-profit venues.

Help your universities **support better models** that already exist and are aligned with scholarly values, free to authors and readers, peer-reviewed, and sustainably supported by academic institutions and research funders.

- Speak to faculty about the **benefits of openly publishing research**. Openly published research is cited [20 percent more on average](#) than research behind publisher paywalls. If research is disseminated more publicly, researchers have more opportunity to collaborate to advance discovery and make a global impact.
- **Encourage long-term promotion and tenure reform** at the department, university, and field-level to align incentives with sustainable and open publishing practices. Efforts like [SFDORA](#) and the [Leiden Manifesto](#) provide helpful guidance.
- **Adopt open access policies** that grant a prior license to the university, giving leverage to authors who want to retain their rights and share their research outside of journal paywalls.

