

Take Back Our University:

MUNFA's Take on Library Holdings at Memorial

The Executive Committee of MUNFA sees the continued erosion of Memorial University Library holdings as a significant threat to the University's core mission and to MUN's position as a flagship public institution.

Memorial's libraries were long viewed as one of the University's strongest assets, a jewel in the crown that contributed significantly to our national reputation as a serious research institution. The last round of journal subscription cuts, in which half of Sage journals were lost, includes major titles that are central to disciplinary scholarship.

This is a clear failure of the University to meet its Collective Agreement commitment to provide the support services that MUNFA members need to carry out their University work as teachers and researchers. The "solution" – document delivery from other libraries with a delay of two working days – will only intensify the shadow work burden that faculty and librarians already face, diverting time from the real work of a University.

Beyond MUNFA members, our students need ready access to a wide range of scholarly publications to thrive academically. In particular, it beggars belief that MUN's administration is urging departments to increase the size and number of their graduate programs at the very time they are cutting core journals.

MUNFA recognizes the budgetary challenges caused by the provincial government's devastating cuts to Memorial's operating grant.

We also know that academic publishers of scholarly journals are the robber barons of our age. Their business model involves using the taxpayer-funded labour of academics – as researchers, peer reviewers and editors – to create a product that they then sell back to the very institutions that bankrolled that work, at annual operating profits of 30 percent or more. Or worse: the publishers rent the work back. For in many cases, subscription fees don't buy a perpetual license to online journals paid for in the past, but are only as good as the length of the contract.

The current model of journal publications is not only unsustainable. It also amounts to the enclosure of a common good: research that is largely funded by a public who now face a paywall if they want to read it.

So what is to be done?

MUNFA reiterates that the University must move immediately to give absolute spending priority to the core activities of teaching and research. In such tight times, we need a complete moratorium on frivolous spending that only serves to further corporatize the University: headhunting fees, vanity corporate branding exercises, and administrative bloat.

The situation facing the Libraries – and by extension, all of us – shows, again, why we need Academic Staff Member representation on the Board of Regents. Those who understand the University's mission first hand need to be at the table helping direct spending in ways that support it. The current approach, in which responsibility for austerity budgeting is devolved onto units that are unable to cope with them – the Library in this case – is a classic tactic of neoliberal governance that makes a sham of the principle of collegiality.

Over the longer term, we call on Memorial's administration to exercise leadership by working with other universities to push back against the iniquitous model of publication that currently afflicts us. That means action on several fronts:

First, universities must collectively negotiate a better deal for university libraries everywhere. They should also join MUNFA and other faculty unions in lobbying government to take on these corporate publishers.

Second, Memorial and other universities must materially support truly open-access publication: journals run and published by academics with institutional support from the academy. In the currently dominant model, open-access publication is restricted to those who can cough up thousands of dollars to pay the publishers' ransom and perpetuates existing hierarchies, further marginalizing those least able to fight back: contingently-employed academics, independent researchers, and graduate students.

Finally, University administrators must reassure academics who try to resist the dominant model by publishing in such scholar-run journals that what matters most for promotion and tenure is good ideas, quality of research and true peer review.

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