



Published on *Inside Higher Ed*  
(<https://www.insidehighered.com>)



[Home](#) > University of California cancels deal with Elsevier after months of negotiations

## University of California cancels deal with Elsevier after months of negotiations

Submitted by Lindsay McKenzie on March 1, 2019 - 3:00am

The University of California System has canceled its multimillion-dollar subscription contract with Elsevier, an academic publisher.

Other institutions have canceled their “[big deal](#)”<sup>[1]</sup> journal subscription contracts with major publishers before. But none in the U.S. have the financial and scholarly clout of the UC system -- which accounts for nearly 10 percent of the nation's publishing output.

The cancellation, announced Thursday, is a blow to Elsevier, which is facing increasing pressure to change its largely subscription-based business model. Last year, hundreds of institutions in Germany and Sweden refused to sign a deal with Elsevier unless it agreed to fundamentally change the way it charges institutions to access and publish research.

UC has been pushing for a so-called [read-and-publish](#)”<sup>[2]</sup> deal with the company, which would offset the cost of open access publishing against the cost of access to subscription content. Lead negotiators for the system argue that this kind of deal will help publishers accelerate open-access publishing and eventually eliminate paywalls. Under such a deal, all UC research published in Elsevier journals would be immediately available to the public.

After more than six months of negotiations, it became clear that Elsevier was not willing to meet the UC’s demands, said Jeff Mackie-Mason and Ivy Anderson, the system’s lead negotiators.

Elsevier made an offer that would combine the costs of accessing paywalled content and publishing open access articles. But the offer came with a hefty

price tag, the negotiators said, which the system was not willing to pay.

UC wanted to integrate its fees *and* reduce its costs. Elsevier wanted to charge publishing fees on top of subscription fees, said Ivy Anderson. “That predicate made it impossible to reach an agreement,” she said. The UC system was paying the company more than \$10 million <sup>[3]</sup> a year for journal access.

In a written statement from Tom Reller, spokesman for the company, Elsevier emphasized the importance of letting authors choose how they want to publish. He said more than 85 percent of authors from the UC system currently choose to publish paywalled research. Authors have plenty of options if they want articles to be available to the public for free, he said.

The publisher said it proposed a “unique model” to UC, which included a “clear path allowing every researcher to choose to publish for free or open access and provides a scaled path to reduce the costs for each campus library.”

“It’s disappointing that the California Digital Library (CDL) has broken off negotiations unilaterally,” the statement said. “But we hope we can bridge this divide with them soon.”

UC's negotiators said the door is open should Elsevier decide to come back with another offer. But they aren’t holding their breath. The system said many other U.S. institutions have shown interest in read-and-publish deals.



**Jon Tennant**

@Protohedgehog

Thank you to [@UofCalifornia](#) for terminating your Elsevier contracts. This sends out a huge message that [#openaccess](#) is critical for democratic access to science, and that people matter more than profits [universityofcalifornia.edu/press-room/uc-...](https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/press-room/uc-...)  
[#democratiseknowledge](#) [@eduint](#)

193 3:08 PM - Feb 28, 2019

[83 people are talking about this](#)

Open-access advocates praised the system on social media for taking a stand. UC faculty members also backed the decision. The system's Faculty Senate, for example, said in a written statement <sup>[10]</sup> that taxpayer-funded research should be as “freely and widely available as possible.”

Janet Napolitano, UC's president, said she fully supported efforts by students and faculty and staff members to take down paywalls. “This issue does not just impact UC, but also countless scholars, researchers and scientists around the globe -- and we stand with them in their push for full unfettered access.”

Rick Anderson, associate dean for collections and scholarly communication at the University of Utah, said he was “not shocked” by the system’s decision. “I always wondered if there was going to be a realistic middle ground between what the two parties wanted.”

Rick Anderson, who is an unpaid member of Elsevier’s North American Library Advisory Board, said UC’s cancellation is significant, as it is a very large Elsevier customer. But he is unsure whether the decision will really hurt Elsevier in the long term. “From a political perspective, it certainly undermines any public impression that Elsevier’s big deal is a must-have product for a research institution,” he said.

It remains to be seen, however, how faculty and students will be impacted by the decision, said Rick Anderson. “Will there be an outcry? If not, then the impact on Elsevier’s public image could be significant: it will mean that tens of thousands of academics lost access to the current content of their journals and said, ‘Meh,’” he said, adding, “If there is an outcry, the question will be whether it ends up being significant enough that the system reverses course. I would be surprised if that happened.”

For a company that generates billions of dollars in revenue, the loss of \$10 million per year will not be catastrophic financially. If UC decides to subscribe to some Elsevier journals on an individual basis, or frequently pays for one-time access to journal articles, the system may end up paying a substantial amount to the publisher, at worse value than their old big deal, said Rick Anderson. “I’m sure this development will represent a net loss for the

company, but I don't know how big it will be."

UC's academics and students will not lose access to all Elsevier research, stressed Mackie-Mason. The system has perpetual access to many journals' archives up to the end of 2018. Researchers have multiple options if they want to access new Elsevier-published research, he said. Approximately 15 percent of Elsevier journal articles already are open access, and many articles are available as preprints for free. Otherwise, researchers can email authors for copies, request them from interlibrary-loan systems (which can take a day to process) or pay a one-time purchase fee. At the time of going to press, Elsevier had not yet revoked the UC system's journal access.

Not being able to instantly access research may be irritating for some academics, acknowledged Mackie-Mason. "It will cause some friction, but it's not going to be devastating," he said. UC researchers are aware of what the challenges will be, he said, but they have been broadly supportive. "We've been communicating for months, and we've consulted widely, deeply and often."

Barbara Fister, a librarian at Gustavus Adolphus College (who also blogs for *Inside Higher Ed*) said she was impressed that an American university was able to "take a principled stand" and gain support for the move among its faculty members.

"Elsevier is a major publisher, so students and researchers at UC institutions will feel the impact," said Fister. "It's courageous of them to take this step, knowing that it will be harder to access research in those journals."

### Books and Publishing <sup>[11]</sup>

**Source URL:** <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/03/01/university-california-cancels-deal-elsevier-after-months-negotiations>

### **Links**

[1] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/05/08/more-institutions-consider-ending-their-big-deals-publishers>

[2] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/12/13/university-california-challenges-elsevier-over-access-scholarly-research>

[3] <http://faculty.econ.ucsb.edu/~tedb/Journals/BigDeals/UCalifornia/ElsevierSD2014-2018.pdf>

- [4] [https://twitter.com/UofCalifornia?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/UofCalifornia?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)
- [5] [https://twitter.com/hashtag/openaccess?src=hash&ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/hashtag/openaccess?src=hash&ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)
- [6] <https://t.co/y2p6KRSdEJ>
- [7] [https://twitter.com/hashtag/democratiseknowledge?src=hash&ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/hashtag/democratiseknowledge?src=hash&ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)
- [8] [https://twitter.com/eduint?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/eduint?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)
- [9] [https://twitter.com/Protohedgehog/status/1101197508112461824?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/Protohedgehog/status/1101197508112461824?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)
- [10] [http://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/\\_files/reports/academic-council-statement-elsevier-feb28.pdf](http://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/_files/reports/academic-council-statement-elsevier-feb28.pdf)
- [11] <https://www.insidehighered.com/books>