The Road to Double-Anonymous Peer Review

Delving into the mechanics of DAPR, Beaty explained that the first step is made by the authors at submission when they elect to choose DAPR. Expectations must be clearly communicated to authors in the journal instructions and submission site (e.g., uploading of correct title page). Once a manuscript is submitted and flagged as DARP, editorial staff must ensure that the necessary coding changes are made and that all double anonymous parameters are met—within the manuscript files themselves and in all system-generated correspondence to editors and reviewers.

Beaty stressed an important point here in that an editorial office must remember to maintain overall stability in the eyes of editors, reviewers, and authors during this transition process. Readers and participants in the review process must be reassured that the quality and mission of the journal(s) have not waivered. Specifically, the editorial staff must maintain a steady brand presence and a consistent look and feel across all communications for their suite of publications.

What Does Success Look Like?

How do you measure success in reports back to your editorial boards? Editorial staff must show a steady growth in DAPR selection by authors and demonstrate that diversity goals are being met across all categories—gender, ethnicity, geographic location, and early career. Beaty mentioned that data can be collected via custom reports from the submission software and also from surveys, which can provide more “holistic” feedback. The editorial team must also demonstrate that the implementation of DAPR did not negatively impact the peer-review process for the journal(s). For example, there can be no delayed time to decision. Retention of reviewers is actually another indication of a successful transition. It is the perception of the reviewers, Beaty remarked, that is the most changed by the implementation of DAPR, and retaining a steady pool of reviewers for your DAPR journal(s) is an overall sign of success.

Delving Into the Details

From Beaty’s efforts to visualize and initiate the DAPR process for Circulation: Heart Failure, the webinar pivoted to Christina Nelson of The Journal of Bone & Joint Surgery, Inc., who has been implementing DAPR for 5 of their 6 journals for years. Nelson reiterated many of the goals of DAPR—to reduce bias toward authors, encourage honesty, and protect journals against author accusations of biased reviews (Figure).

Nelson’s significant experience with DAPR also put her in a great position to share all the detailed steps required
of staff to successfully anonymize submissions. “Giveaways”
that must be redacted from manuscripts include CTR
and institutional review board numbers, single institution
databases, and graphics that include institution names,
foreign languages, or even zip codes on the image files are
all examples of information that may need to be redacted
before the manuscript can be sent out for peer review. This
redacting information must be retained behind the scenes,
however, as it must be put back into the paper at acceptance.
Nelson remarked that there are many “judgement calls”
that must be made in the anonymization process, and that
editorial staff must be properly trained. Practiced staff can
review and redact a manuscript within 5 to 10 minutes after
working through the learning curve.

Benefits Versus Efforts
Anna Jester of eJournalPress followed up on Nelson’s points
regarding the many safeguards that must be implemented to
ensure fully anonymized submissions for those authors who
elect DAPR. In addition to the manuscript files themselves,
all editorial software interfaces—including reviewer forms,
submission questions, letter templates, and all system-generated
notification emails—linked to a DAPR manuscript all must be
configured to journal preferences to guarantee anonymity.
Jester stressed that staff must invest the time up front to walk
through the entire peer-review process on the journal test site,
checking that all screens, letter templates, notifications, and
configurations are anonymized per journal preferences before
launch to avoid unintended consequences. In addition, it is
always recommended to reiterate the DAPR process (“and why
you believe in it”) to authors and reviewers alike via on-screen
messaging and reviewer and author instructions.

The anonymity of reviewers is another factor to consider.
Should peer reviewers of a given paper be anonymous to
each other? Jester suggested the publication of a general
list of reviewers to recognize their contributions without the
possibility of readers being able to link specific reviewers
to particular manuscripts. This type of reviewer anonymity
is especially important in specialties with relatively small
reviewer pools.

Jester also addressed the potential need for staff to collect
diversity, equity, and inclusion demographics when authors
elect to identify (e.g., ethnicity, gender, career stage, etc.).
There are challenges in pulling together this information in
a meaningful way to measure success of the DAPR efforts in
board reports, marketing, and other communications. Jester
also recommended asking your legal team to weigh in prior
to collecting demographic information via your peer-review
platform.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the following
references were provided for publications staff to share with
their editorial boards to assist in determining whether DAPR
would be the right fit for their journal(s):
1. https://elifesciences.org/articles/32014
2. https://www.pnas.org/content/114/48/12708
3. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00192-019-
04187-2
5. https://www.nationalacademies.org/trb/blog/trb-
executive-director-message

Lastly, Jester encouraged all attendees to get involved with
the Council of Science Editors community, which provides
great resources and great networking opportunities for all!