

From Cost Center to Grant Partner: Unlocking Library Services as Allowable Direct Costs

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The federal cost recovery environment is quickly changing. Proposals such as the 15% indirect cost cap, revisions to the Uniform Guidance, and emerging frameworks such as the Financial Accountability in Research (FAIR) are increasing expectations for institutions to document the true cost of research in new ways. This shift is prompting campuses to re-examine how research support services are defined, costed, and categorized, particularly when work is clearly project-specific and requires additional effort beyond baseline services. Research libraries provide a range of services across the research lifecycle, but many campuses have not established the governance, partnerships, and costing methods needed to make consistent, defensible determinations about cost treatments, including when costs may be appropriate to budget as direct.

The Library as Research Infrastructure

Libraries support sponsored projects from proposal development through project execution to dissemination and compliance, not only access to collections. Before a proposal is submitted, library specialists may contribute to systematic reviews and data management planning. During active research, they may provide metadata creation, GIS and spatial analysis, statistical software training, and data management and wrangling services. At dissemination and closeout, they support data curation, repository selection and management, alternative publishing models, open access compliance, and persistent identifier services (e.g., DOI assignment). When these activities are explicitly requested for a

specific project, provide a direct benefit, and represent incremental effort beyond baseline services, they may be appropriate to treat as direct costs under Uniform Guidance. The question is whether your institution has built the partnerships, governance, and documentation practices to make those determinations reliably.

The Regulatory Foundation: Why This Matters Now

Under 2 CFR Part 200, a cost may be charged directly to a sponsored award when it is allowable, allocable to the project, reasonable, and consistently treated under institutional policy. General library collections, broadly available to the institution, typically belong in the F&A base. But specialized, project-specific library services do not automatically fall under F&A when they represent incremental effort undertaken to meet the needs of a particular project. For example, when a research librarian spends 20% of their time on a single grant by cleaning and tagging 20 years of longitudinal data for public access compliance, that effort is allocable to the project and may be appropriate to budget as a direct cost.

Federal mandates are expanding the universe of chargeable services. The Office of Science and Technology Policy's (OSTP) public access policies, NSF data management requirements, and funder data sharing mandates are creating real, project-specific demand for library expertise that didn't exist a decade ago. As these requirements expand, PIs and research administrators need clearer pathways to identify which services are baseline institutional support and which are incremental, project-driven work that should be reflected in project budgets.



The FAIR model underscores this emphasis on transparent categorization of research support costs. Its proposed budget structure includes Research Information and Data Services (RIDS) as a distinct Essential Research Performance Facility, separate from the 15% General Research Operations cap. Institutions that have defined services, governance, and documentation practices for RIDS-related work will be better prepared to represent these costs clearly, whether they are treated as a direct cost in specific cases or supported through other institutional cost-recovery approaches.

How Institutions Operationalize Project-Specific Library Services

A recent [exploratory survey](#) (2025) of 32 institutions found that approximately one in four libraries (25%) are either currently charging or considering charging for at least one specialized, research-facing service, with activity most concentrated in medical and health sciences libraries (Craiglow et al., 2025). The examples below illustrate different approaches and the operational decisions they require.

Georgia Institute of Technology demonstrates a partnership model that begins with shared infrastructure and workflow integration. The library and research administration jointly fund an enterprise Pivot license for institution-wide access to funding opportunities and embed library expertise in pre-award activities such as Data Management Plan (DMP) guidance and pre-submission review. Post-award, the library supports data deposit and preservation through the institutional repository, including persistent identifier services and documentation aligned to funder data sharing expectations.

Johns Hopkins University built a long-running research data services program and has used more than one funding mechanism over time. Earlier approaches included a structured cost-recovery model for data archiving activities, e.g., curation, repository deposit, persistent identifiers, and preservation functions. More recently, services have shifted towards a defined service baseline with additional capacity, i.e. above a storage threshold, handled through a direct chargeback model supported by services definitions and documentation.

Washington University in St. Louis offers tiered services at hourly rates for data management, wrangling, visualization, curation, and GIS services including spatial analysis and map creation. A tiered menu can help investigators estimate costs at proposal stage and gives the institution a consistent way to describe scope, deliverables, and effort.

Texas A&M University uses hourly-rate models for systematic review and evidence synthesis consultation and training through its Center for Systematic Review and Research Syntheses. In some cases, these services are available to external clients as well, generating revenue beyond the institution's own grant portfolio.

Across these models, a common starting point is not “charging” as an end in itself, but a joint conversation between library leadership and research administration about: (1) which services are baseline versus project-specific; (2) how effort and deliverables will be documented; and (3) what mechanism fits institutional policy and risk tolerance.

The Research Administrator's Role

Research administrators can be the connective tissue that enables consistent, defensible decisions about when library support remains baseline institutional service and when it becomes project-specific work that should be reflected in a proposal budget. Libraries have deep expertise, PIs have needs, and proposals are where scope, deliverables, and cost treatment are defined. What's often missing is a structured way to connect these elements early enough to document them appropriately.

Practically, this means:

- Raising the topic of library services during pre-award consultations with PIs, particularly for data-intensive or compliance-heavy projects.
- Including library professionals in grant proposal development conversations, especially around data management plans and open access publishing requirements.
- Partnering with finance and library leadership to develop institution-specific documentation templates and cost allocation policies that will hold up under audit.
- Leveraging library bibliometric and publication network analysis capabilities for impact reporting and strategic planning, services that are increasingly valued by sponsors and institutions alike.
- Coordinating on ORCID integration and researcher profile management as part of the effort reporting and compliance infrastructure.

Research administrators who build these relationships also gain something less obvious: a partner in PI education. Library specialists are often well-positioned to reach faculty early in the research process. A joint training or consultation model brings both offices into the room when early decisions, especially about data management and dissemination, are still being made.

Getting Started

The first step doesn't require a policy change or a new service agreement. It requires a meeting. Schedule time with your library's head of research services or data services and ask one question: *What services are you already providing to grant-funded projects?*

The answer will likely be longer than expected. From there, the path forward for identifying candidate services, establishing charge structures, and building PI-facing documentation is a collaborative process. The institutions that have moved furthest have done so through sustained partnership between research administration, library leadership, and the finance office. ■

Reference

Craiglow, H., Vitale, C.H., & McGeary, T. (2025). *Guest Post — Funding Research Services: How Libraries are Exploring Cost Recovery Models*. The Scholarly Kitchen. <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2025/12/08/guest-post-funding-research-services-how-libraries-are-exploring-cost-recovery-models/>



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