

Expanding the Circle: Governance, Sponsorship, and Representation in a Community-Based Digital Preservation Consortium

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Abstract

Digital preservation infrastructure remains unevenly accessible, with participation often constrained by institutional size, funding, and technical capacity. This paper presents a case study of the Academic Preservation Trust (APTrust), a community-governed digital preservation consortium, and examines how its Associate Member model functions as an incremental mechanism for broadening participation. Through sponsorship-based membership and shared governance, APTrust enables a wider range of organizations to engage in preservation activities without requiring full institutional equivalence. Drawing on early implementation experience, member census data, and the APTrust Associate Member Toolkit, this paper analyzes both the benefits and limitations of this approach, with particular attention to governance design, organizational readiness, and the distribution of risk and responsibility across member institutions.

Introduction

Digital preservation requires sustained investment in technical, financial, and organizational resources. For many institutions, particularly smaller libraries, archives, and community-based organizations, the cost of entry presents a significant barrier to participation, and even for some larger institutions [1]. These costs extend beyond storage to include software licensing, ongoing maintenance, and the staff expertise required to operate or manage preservation systems effectively. Commercial digital preservation services can further compound these challenges through pricing models that scale poorly for smaller organizations or that require long-term contractual commitments.

As a result, participation in trusted digital preservation infrastructure remains unevenly distributed, and the ability to preserve digital content over the long term is often correlated with institutional size and financial capacity. This imbalance has direct implications for the composition of the preserved digital record. Smaller institutions, community archives, and organizations serving underrepresented communities may lack access to the same preservation infrastructure as large research universities; not because their collections are less significant, but because the economics of preservation have historically favored scale.

Preservation consortia can mitigate some of these barriers through shared infrastructure and collective cost-sharing. Yet traditional membership models often require substantial annual fees or technical commitments, placing them out of reach for many organizations. This creates a persistent tension between sustainability and inclusivity: expanding access risks undermining long-term financial viability, while strict cost-recovery models risk reinforcing the very exclusions they might otherwise address. Resolving this tension requires attention not only to technical architecture, but to the governance and business models that

determine who can participate, under what conditions, and with what degree of agency.

This paper presents a case study of Academic Preservation Trust (APTrust) and examines how its Associate Member model functions as a governance-based mechanism to broaden participation without compromising the consortium's sustainability. Drawing on early implementation experience, member census data, and the APTrust Associate Member Toolkit, the paper analyzes both the benefits and limitations of this approach, with attention to governance design, organizational readiness, and the distribution of risk and responsibility across member institutions.

APTrust Background

Academic Preservation Trust (APTrust) was founded in 2011 following a convening hosted by the University of Virginia Library, which brought together representatives from six universities to address the growing challenge of preserving born-digital and digitized academic content. Eleven founding institutions committed to a shared preservation repository built on open-source technologies and governed through collective decision-making. Today, APTrust has grown to 21 Sustaining Members, primarily research libraries at universities across the United States [2], and preserves over 738 TB of unique content, more than 1 PB including replicated copies, across geographically distributed storage.

APTrust operates as a nonprofit consortium hosted at the University of Virginia Library and governed by a Governing Board composed of member representative leaders, supported by an Advisory Committee. This governance structure emphasizes transparency and shared decision-making, giving member institutions direct influence over policy, pricing, and strategic direction [3]. Sustaining Members pay an annual fee, receive a 10 TB allowance of preservation storage, and actively participate in consortium governance. In 2018, APTrust introduced a second membership tier, Associate Members, allowing Sustaining Members to extend preservation access to organizations that cannot commit to full membership, either financially or in terms of staffing capacity [10]. Associate Members' storage usage is tracked and billed through their sponsoring Sustaining Member, and Sustaining Members serve as the first level of support for their Associates.

The APTrust Associate Member Model

APTrust introduced Associate Membership as a mechanism for Sustaining Members to extend preservation access to organizations that cannot commit to full membership. The model is deliberately bottom-up: rather than APTrust recruiting or brokering relationships with smaller organizations directly, Sustaining Members sponsor Associates from within their existing networks. This design reflects a practical governance judgment. Sustaining Members, typically university libraries with deep regional and disciplinary ties, are far better positioned than APTrust to identify, cultivate, and sustain

relationships with potential Associate organizations. Attempting to establish those relationships centrally would risk displacing the local trust and contextual knowledge that make these partnerships viable.

As a result, Associate relationships emerge organically from preexisting connections. A Sustaining Member might sponsor another unit within its own institution, a university press, a research center, or a campus archive, or extend membership to an external partner such as a community archive, a regional library system, or an organization with which it maintains a reciprocal service agreement. The common thread is that the relationship precedes the membership, not the other way around.

Once a Sustaining Member decides to sponsor an Associate, it manages all terms of the relationship. APTrust does not prescribe a single financial or operational model; instead, the Associate Member Toolkit describes five financial approaches that Sustaining Members may adopt or adapt [4]. Table 1 summarizes these models and their primary use cases.

Table 1. APTrust Associate Member Financial Models

Model	Description	Best suited for
Gratis	Sustaining Member absorbs all costs.	Long-standing or mission-driven partnerships where cost recovery is not a priority.
Reciprocity	Exchange of goods or services in lieu of payment.	Institutions with complementary services to offer, such as hosting, training, or digitization.
Cost Recovery	Storage and membership costs passed through to the Associate.	Associates with independent budgets and defined deposit volumes.
Flat Fee	Fixed partial cost recovery; simpler to administer.	Associates with bounded deposit commitments.
Revenue Generation	Associate pays a market rate; potential for net revenue.	Large institutional units or private-sector partners with data management needs.

Beyond financial terms, Sustaining Members may also define the scope of depositable content, storage class, deposit volume limits, duration of the agreement, and disposition of content if the relationship ends. Roles and responsibilities for depositing, monitoring, and managing content are similarly negotiated between the parties. The Toolkit provides a structured checklist, a model Memorandum of Understanding, and an example storage report to support this process [4]. Each Sustaining Member follows its own institutional processes for legal review of the MOU, which may or

may not involve formal general counsel review, since the relevant legal considerations vary by organization and context.

Operationally, new Associates begin in APTrust's demonstration environment, where they can test deposits and workflows before transitioning to production. Sustaining Members provide initial training and first-level support, escalating technical issues to APTrust staff as needed. Associate staff are welcome to participate in APTrust interest, working, and user groups, though governance participation remains limited to Sustaining Members.

Implementation Experience

Early implementation of the Associate Member model has produced meaningful results, though the path from relationship formation to active preservation has proven longer and more iterative than initially anticipated. As of May 2026, APTrust has five Associate Members actively depositing content in production, with additional institutions testing deposits in the demonstration environment. Not all Associate Members choose to be publicly listed, so the publicly visible membership roster understates total participation [2].

Toolkit Development and Uptake

Prior to the release of the Associate Member Toolkit in May 2025, adoption of the model was slow. Sustaining Members expressed interest in sponsoring Associates but reported uncertainty about financial risk, operational effort, and relationship management responsibilities. In response, APTrust developed the Toolkit to reduce that uncertainty by making expectations, responsibilities, and available financial models explicit [4]. Four new Associate relationships began forming in the period following the Toolkit's release, suggesting that clear, governance-aligned documentation can meaningfully lower practical barriers to participation, a finding consistent with the paper's broader argument that documentation and policy function as active tools for shaping preservation practice, not merely as administrative byproducts.

APTrust's 2026 member census, conducted in April 2026, further illustrates both the appetite for and the obstacles to Associate Membership. Of the twelve institutions whose responses were included in the public aggregate data, nine Sustaining Members reported that they had established or were actively establishing Associate relationships. Barriers cited included difficulty identifying viable candidates and uncertainty about infrastructure requirements, obstacles the Toolkit was explicitly designed to address [5].

Organizational Readiness

One of the more instructive findings from early implementation is the length of time that typically elapses between the formation of an Associate relationship and the Associate's first deposits into production. This lead time typically ranges from 1 to 2 years and initially appeared to signal a problem with the model. On reflection, however, it reflects something more fundamental: organizational readiness is a prerequisite for effective preservation, regardless of membership tier. Sustaining Members themselves often experience comparable delays before making consistent deposits. The underlying challenge is not technical but organizational, establishing local workflows, building shared understanding among stakeholders, and developing the institutional confidence to commit content to a preservation system.

APTrust has addressed this directly through its Preservation Readiness Guide [6], which provides structured guidance for institutions working to develop or mature their digital preservation

programs. The census data reinforces the relevance of this resource: workflow development and staffing capacity were among the most commonly cited resource needs across respondents, and the majority of responding institutions operated with one FTE or fewer dedicated to digital preservation [5]. In this context, shared community infrastructure is not merely a cost-sharing mechanism; it is a means of extending preservation capacity to programs that could not sustain equivalent infrastructure on their own.

Success Cases

Two current Associate Member relationships illustrate the range of organizations and collections the model can serve.

The Hoda Z. Nassour and Herbert R. Nassour Jr., MD, Archive of Lebanese Diaspora is a collecting unit housed within the Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies at North Carolina State University. Critically, this archive is not part of the NCSU Libraries; without NCSU's APTrust membership, it would have had no viable path to trusted digital preservation infrastructure. The Associate Member model provides access to that infrastructure through an existing institutional relationship, without requiring the archive to negotiate or fund a standalone preservation arrangement [7].

Fulcrum, the open-source publishing platform developed and operated by the University of Michigan, presents a different use case. As a publishing infrastructure unit, Fulcrum generates content: faculty monographs, multimedia scholarship, and associated digital objects that require long-term preservation. Michigan's APTrust membership enables Fulcrum to access preservation services for that content through an intra-institutional Associate relationship, positioning the university library as the organizational lead for digital preservation across a broader range of institutional activities [8].

Both Associates are organizations that fall outside the traditional scope of library-to-library preservation partnerships, and both gained access to trusted preservation infrastructure through existing relationships. Table 2 situates these cases within the broader typology of Associate Member use cases described in the Toolkit.

Table 2. APTrust Associate Member Use Case Types

Use Case	Description	Representative Example
Institutional Collaboration	Other units within a university with digital preservation needs, such as presses, research centers, or administrative units.	Fulcrum, University of Michigan
Strategic Partnership	Organizations with preexisting reciprocal relationships, such as shared service agreements or collaborative programs.	Campus units with joint digitization or publishing programs
Community and Other Archives	Regional, local, or culturally specific archives that lack independent access	Nassour Archive of Lebanese Diaspora, NCSU

Use Case	Description	Representative Example
	to preservation infrastructure.	
Faculty Research and Data	Research projects or data programs requiring long-term preservation to meet grant requirements or institutional policy.	Domain-specific research repositories

Discussion and Limitations

The APTrust Associate Member model illustrates how governance structures can function as preservation infrastructure, shaping not only who can participate in digital preservation systems but how risk, responsibility, and cost are distributed among participating institutions. By delegating relationship formation and terms-setting to Sustaining Members rather than centralizing these functions at the consortium level, the model leverages existing institutional relationships and local contextual knowledge while maintaining a shared, policy-governed preservation environment. The Toolkit and Readiness Guide extend this governance logic into documentation, making explicit the expectations, financial options, and operational processes that enable Sustaining Members to act with confidence.

At the same time, the model carries structural limitations that warrant candid acknowledgment. Sponsorship remains a prerequisite for participation, which means that access to preservation infrastructure continues to depend on an organization's proximity to a well-resourced Sustaining Member. An institution without an existing relationship with an APTrust member has no direct path to participation, regardless of its preservation needs or the significance of its collections. The model redistributes barriers rather than eliminating them.

Power dynamics within individual Associate relationships also merit attention. Although the Toolkit encourages Sustaining Members to negotiate terms transparently and plan explicitly for termination, Associate Members remain dependent on their sponsors in ways that are difficult to fully mitigate through documentation alone. An Associate whose Sustaining Member withdraws from APTrust must navigate content disposition under circumstances beyond its control. Governance participation remains limited to Sustaining Members, meaning Associate institutions have no formal voice in the policy decisions that shape their preservation environment.

The organizational readiness gap identified in early implementation points to a further limitation. The 1–2-year lead time before Associates begin depositing in production reflects real constraints in staffing, workflow development, and institutional capacity that the model does not resolve; it accommodates them. For organizations with limited digital preservation staff, even a well-supported onboarding process requires time and internal commitment that may be difficult to sustain alongside other priorities.

These limitations do not invalidate the model, but they clarify its scope. The Associate Member model is an incremental mechanism for broadening participation within an existing community-governed consortium, not a comprehensive solution to inequities in access to digital preservation. Its value lies precisely in

what it does not require: a new membership category, a centralized matching program, or a departure from APTrust's existing governance and financial structures. Progress is achieved through deliberate flexibility rather than structural transformation.

Conclusions

The APTrust Associate Member model demonstrates that community-governed consortia can pursue incremental progress toward broader access to preservation without undermining long-term sustainability. By treating governance as an enabling mechanism rather than a neutral administrative layer, APTrust has created conditions under which Sustaining Members can extend preservation services to a wider range of organizations through locally negotiated, flexible arrangements. The Toolkit and Readiness Guide reinforce this approach by making expectations and processes explicit, reducing the uncertainty that had previously constrained adoption.

The cases of the Nassour Archive of the Lebanese Diaspora and Fulcrum illustrate what this progress looks like in practice: organizations that fall outside the traditional scope of library preservation partnerships gaining access to trusted infrastructure through existing relationships. These outcomes did not require APTrust to expand its membership criteria, establish new funding mechanisms, or restructure its governance. They required documentation, flexibility, and deliberate attention to the conditions under which Sustaining Members are willing and able to act.

For other preservation consortia considering analogous models, the primary lessons are practical ones. Relationship formation cannot be centralized effectively; the consortium is rarely the right actor to initiate partnerships with smaller or under-resourced organizations. Organizational readiness constraints are real and should be anticipated rather than treated as implementation failures. And efforts to broaden representation should focus not only on lowering technical or financial barriers but also on designing governance structures that acknowledge uneven capacity, support experimentation, plan for organizational transitions, and make constraints explicit [9]. Governance documentation, toolkits, checklists, and model agreements are not ancillary to preservation work but are themselves a form of infrastructure that shapes participation and representation over time.

Expanding access to digital preservation is ultimately a collective governance challenge. The Associate Member model does not resolve the tension between sustainability and inclusion so much as it demonstrates that the tension can be managed thoughtfully, with transparency about tradeoffs and realistic expectations about pace. That may be the most transferable lesson of all.

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Author Biography

Nathan Tallman is Executive Director of the Academic Preservation Trust (APTrust), a community-governed digital preservation consortium for libraries and archives. He works at the intersection of digital preservation, governance, and sustainability, with a focus on expanding preservation infrastructure through collaborative, consortial models. His background includes academic libraries, community leadership, and digital preservation program development.