



CUNY Academic Commons Annual Report 2017-2018

Introduction from the Director

The CUNY Academic Commons has come a long way since the site was first created in 2009 under the aegis of the CUNY Committee on Academic Technology. Originally built to foster cross-campus connections, the site has become a vibrant home to a wide range of projects that demonstrate the breadth and range of scholarship, teaching, and service across the university.

2017-2018 was a year of significant growth for the Commons, especially in the area of teaching. Only a few years after the Commons opened its doors to undergraduate students, thus enabling it to be used by faculty members for their courses, faculty from many campuses and multiple disciplines have begun to use the affordances of the Commons for their classes. Across the Commons, one can see the intellectual life of the CUNY system in lived out in real time.

In concert with the growth of teaching sites on the Commons, campuses such as Lehman College and Borough of Manhattan Community College have begun to partner with the Commons in support of teaching with Open Educational Resources (OERs). The OER initiative at CUNY, funded by New York State and led by the CUNY Office of Library Services, is helping to the Commons become a more effective site for teaching and learning.

Even as teaching has become a significant locus of our work, researchers have continued to use the Commons to share their

projects. This year, John Jay College faculty members Ned Benton and Judy-Lynne Peters launched the impressive [New York Slavery Records Index](#), which presents a database of more than 37,000 records related to enslaved persons in New York State. The project received widespread news coverage, including the [New York Post](#) and [NBC News](#). And, separately, the CUNY Office of Institutional Research began using the Commons to help share its work with the public.

The Commons continues to grow and become increasingly integrated into the life of the university. Offering opportunities to every campus, every faculty member, and every student, it is a quintessential CUNY resource, made by and for the system it serves. We look forward to another year of growth in 2018-2019.

Matthew K. Gold
Director, CUNY Academic Commons
Associate Professor of English and Digital Humanities, The
Graduate Center, CUNY

The Commons By the Numbers

The Commons is a vibrant academic community with 10,297 members, 2,103 sites, and 925 groups as of July 2018. With the addition of features that make it easier to run classes on the Commons, and along with continued outreach efforts, these numbers have grown considerably since last year.

The sites driving the most traffic to parts of the Commons are the Commons homepage, “My Commons”, and the “New York Slavery Records Index.” Logged in users are directed to “My Commons” (a recent enhancement) while the Commons homepage serves non-logged in users. “New York Slavery Records Index” has been publicized on radio and on online and print journalism.

The Commons at Work

Teaching

The number of courses taught using Commons sites or groups increased dramatically this year, in part as a result of a Commons team outreach and support. Instructors used the Commons as forums, Learning Management Systems (LMS), and Open Educational Resources (OER). In at least one example, instructors of multiple sections of “ENGL 152: American Literature” courses at Queens College used the Commons to bring together students from different sections to discuss shared texts and assignments. This example offers a glimpse at how the Commons offers opportunity for collaboration between faculty and students.

Through a partnership with the Graduate Center Teaching and Learning Center (GC TLC), eleven instructors were offered fellowships to develop Open Educational Resources (OER) on the Commons as part of their Spring 2018 courses. These instructors represented seven CUNY campuses (BMCC, Brooklyn, Bronx CC, Hunter, GC, York, KCC) and nine departments (Art, English, Human Geography, Art, Math, Music, Political Science, Queer Studies, Sociology).

Of particular note is the Free Queer Syllabus Project. Graduate students enrolled in the course created open syllabi for Queer Studies courses to be taught around the CUNY system. The project illustrates how coursework can lead to OERs that support teaching across CUNY campuses.

TLC and CAC Fellow Laurie Hurson helped support the OER faculty fellows, whose use of the Commons will help the team develop new features for the Commons in the coming year.

Research

In January 2018, the [New York Slavery Records Index](#) was launched on the CUNY Academic Commons. The database contains more than 37,000 records related to enslaved persons in New York State. The records were assembled by faculty in students at John Jay College and The Macaulay Honors Program. The Index received national media attention from *The Albany Times-Union*, *The New York Daily News*, WNBC New York, and WNYC New York.

As a result of the digitization of these records, students and faculty have produced several reports on the history of slavery in New York State and the involvement of John Jay's family in both the slave trade and the abolition of slavery in New York State.

The Index served as a test case for future database hosting. Based on the success of the site launch, Dr. Ned Benton (John Jay), Co-Director of the NY Slavery Records Index, hopes to use the Commons to host a database of the New York State fire records, a substantially larger dataset.

An [in-depth interview with Dr. Benton](#) about the Index was published on the InCommon blog in April 2018.

Service

The CUNY-wide Office of Institutional Research and the Assessment Council migrated their sites to the Commons this year (see [The Commons in Action](#), below). These migrations were facilitated by the Commons Team. These sites make critical reports and datasets available for public use as well as bring together research and assessment entities across CUNY campuses.

The CUNY Office of Institutional Research site uses domain mapping, illustrating how the Commons can be used by CUNY entities seeking unique digital identities.

The Commons team has also been partnering with CUNY TV to extend its online presence throughout CUNY and beyond. Two sites for new digital series -- [The Short Docs Web Series](#) and [Twilight Talks](#) -- have been launched with the support and advice of the Commons team, and additional projects are being planned.

The Commons In Development

During the 2017-2018 academic year, the CUNY Academic Commons instituted several shifts in policy and focus that resulted in an increased emphasis on the use of the Commons for the teaching of undergraduate courses. The efforts of the Commons development team have reflected this new focus.

New features introduced in our Fall 2017 and Spring 2018 releases demonstrate the increased commitment to undergraduate teaching. Based on feedback from teaching faculty using the Commons, including participants in the CAC Teaching Fellows program, we spent significant resources rethinking and rebuilding our “onboarding”

tools: the mechanisms whereby new users are invited to, and join, the Commons and its sites and groups. In Fall 2017, we streamlined the process of site registration, reducing the information collected at the time of signup, making it easier to upload an avatar, and providing better inline help to ensure that new users are ushered into their Commons experience with a minimum amount of hassle. In Spring 2018, we designed and built a new invitation system to replace the disparate legacy systems previously in place; the new system provides a single interface for inviting new users to the Commons or to individual groups and sites, with a special emphasis on making it easy to invite large numbers of users at once – a critical beginning-of-semester task for those teaching on the Commons.

Academic year 2017-2018 has also been a time of renewed emphasis on security and accessibility. Over the past year, we have migrated nearly all parts of the Commons to HTTPS-only connections, and we're working with the Graduate Center IT department to be 100% SSL during the upcoming academic year. We've improved the internal privacy settings of the Commons, so that files uploaded by users – such as class readings or student assignments – are protected in more comprehensive ways. And we have launched an internal initiative aiming to improve our compliance with data-protection regulations like GDPR as well as the WCAG web accessibility standards.

Much of our development work during 2017-2018 year was made possible in part through partnerships with sister organizations who received funding through CUNY's NYS OER Scale Up Initiative. Our work on user onboarding and invitations has taken place in collaboration with the Graduate Center library as well as the library at Lehman College. These and other OER-linked partnerships promise to power much of our work in the upcoming year, as we look toward making the Commons the natural home for CUNY faculty and scholars in search of a platform for the development and distribution of open educational resources.

The Commons development team is also heavily invested in the implementation of an NEH Digital Humanities Implementation grant, focused on combining our [Commons In A Box](#) project with the [OpenLab project from City Tech](#). The grant was awarded in August 2016, and work started in earnest during the 2017-2018 academic year. During this period, members of the Commons and OpenLab team have collaborated to build a robust, flexible system for open teaching and learning spaces. A beta version of this software will be made available to the public in late summer 2018.

The Commons in Action

“CUNY’s Office of Institutional Research and Assessment had been using a non-CUNY website for knowledge sharing with other Central Office and CUNY college staff. When that website suddenly announced that they were shutting down, we scrambled to find a website that would meet our needs and that would allow us to easily transfer over all of the information stored on the previous website. After a fantastic presentation by Matt Gold, we decided to move forward with the CUNY Academic Commons. The CUNY Academic Commons vastly exceeded our expectations and needs. It is also flexible enough to grow with us as our needs change. The incredibly competent CUNY Academic Commons staff worked with us to make sure that all of our needs were met. As a result of the CUNY Academic Commons staff’s work, we saved many weeks of time and were able to launch our new website over a month ahead of schedule. The CUNY Academic Commons is an asset to the entire CUNY system.”

— Michael Shields, Senior Enrollment Management Research Analyst
Office of Institutional Research and Assessment

“The CUNY Academic Commons improves teaching, learning and scholarship. Not only does it facilitate the exchange of knowledge – such as the 37,000 NY slavery records – but it also supports faculty members in the delivery of academic programs and services. At John Jay, CUNY Commons is the platform for our MPA program newsletter, our textbook loan program, and our course resource pages.”

— Ned Benton, Professor, Department of Public Management at John Jay
College of Criminal Justice

The Commons Team

Director: Matthew K. Gold

Lead Developer: Boone B. Gorges

Director of Community Projects: Luke Waltzer

Director of Research Initiatives: Lisa Rhody

Director of User Experience: Chris Stein

Director of Special Projects: Michael Smith

Project Manager: Stephen Real

Developers: Raymond Hoh

User Experience Specialist: Erik Trainer

Community Facilitators: Paul Hebert , Scott Voth, Marilyn Weber

Hosting and Systems Administration: Office of Information Technology, Graduate Center, CUNY

The CUNY Academic Commons is a project of the CUNY Committee on Academic Technology, which contains two representatives from each CUNY Campus and which is chaired by George Otte, University Director of Academic Technology.

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