CUNY Academic Commons Annual Report 2018-2019

Introduction from the Director

What a year it has been for the CUNY Academic Commons! Driven by intense interest across the CUNY system in using the Commons as a teaching platform—undergraduate teaching on the platform only began to be allowed in 2018—**our membership nearly doubled**, rising to almost 17,000 members. From its use at City College, where students created ePortfolios, to the Borough of Manhattan Community College, which supported a range of work around Open Educational Resources (OER), the Commons in 2019 has achieved the role envisioned for it a decade ago at its 2009 founding: to provide a generative platform that could showcase the intellectual life of the entire university.

As we near our tenth anniversary, there is much to be proud of: not just the many new members of the site, but also the many different ways they are using it in the classroom and beyond — to connect to each other; to publish their research; to build resources that can be shared across the system; to foster communities of interest around scholarly endeavors and cross-campus concerns. The Commons, which has been funded from its beginning by the CUNY Central Office of Academic Affairs, and which is hosted by the consortially based Graduate School and University Center, is an achievement whose scope and scale helps us glimpse the collective intellectual and creative power of CUNY. Where else can a Lehman College student, taking "[Postcolonial Identities: Literatures of Migration](#)," peek over and see what an "[Elementary Spanish](#)" course looks like at Hunter College, or what is going on in a History course on "[The American Nation](#)" at Bronx Community College? And where else could that student see not just course titles and brief descriptions of classes, but the actual work of students enrolled in those courses? Where else could one find, in the same space, dynamic [scholarly journals](#) such as *[The Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy](#)*, *[European Stages](#)*, *[The Journal of American Drama and Theatre](#)*, and the new *[Journal of Teaching Disability Studies](#)*? And all next to lively groups interested in topics such as [online learning](#), [the digital humanities](#), [gaming](#), and [librarianship](#). The Commons knits together all of this work, making visible the intellectual fabric of the City University of New York as a whole.

The Commons serves such a wide range of uses—a space to connect and a space to publish and share—because it is built in conversation with its users. One constant of the Commons since its beginning is that it is always in motion, always improving. The team behind the Commons is led by CUNY faculty and staff, buttressed by uncommonly gifted developers, and supported by a community team that looks after the Commons membership with care and attention. Among the several steps that the team has taken over the past year to respond to increased usage was a new interface for creating spaces on the Commons, one that leads users through a process to help them figure out what they want to build.

"*What will you build?*" That has been a Commons catchphrase since the beginning. The Commons is that kind of generative space — a space for building connections, building knowledge, building relationships. It is also about building community, and by extension building the CUNY community. On an open platform like the Commons, CUNY students, faculty, and staff can express themselves and share their work, helping us realize the power and promise of public education, and the potential of CUNY itself.

In the report below, you'll learn more about how people across the CUNY system are using the Commons in innovative ways. I hope you will be inspired by their stories to create your own spaces; I look forward to seeing what you will build.

Matthew K. Gold
Director, The CUNY Academic Commons
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The Commons by the Numbers
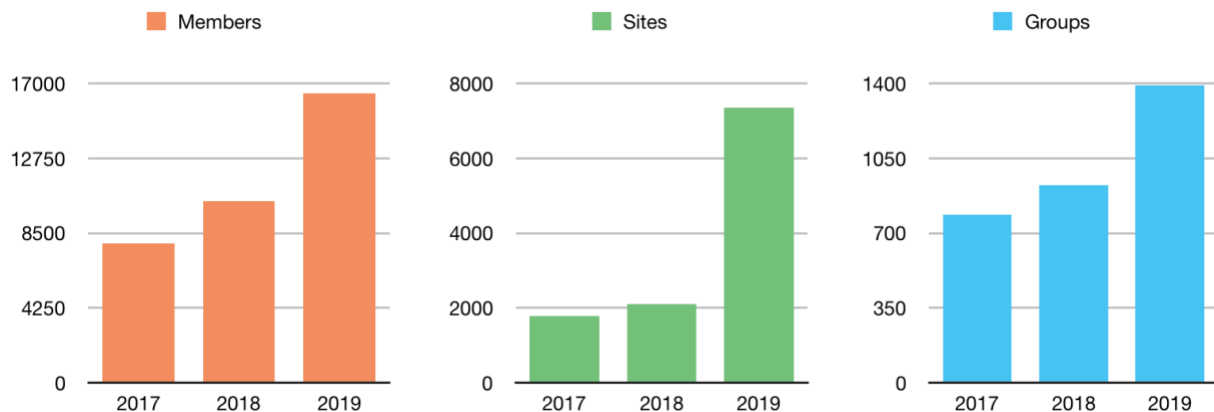
Driven by faculty and students using the Commons as a teaching platform, the Commons saw dramatic growth over the past year. Membership has more than doubled since 2017, rising nearly 60% over the past year alone. The number of sites increased more than threefold over the same span, and groups increased by 50%.

In November 2018, we began openly allowing undergraduate teaching on the Commons and we released a new feature set to encourage such usage. We had 47 course sites from across the CUNY system by February 2019 and have now reached 132. We expect growth to continue at a rapid pace as more instructors discover the power of teaching on the Commons.

Overall traffic has also grown by multiples over the past three years. At the end of the past two semesters, during December 2018 and May 2019, the Commons saw total monthly pageviews

crest 500,000 for the first time. The three most visited sites on the Commons over the past year were The Graduate Center's Political Science website, the *Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy*, and the New Labor Forum, indicating the range of disciplinary work that the Commons makes available to the community.

The Commons at Work

Teaching

The Commons was created by CUNY faculty, staff, and students for CUNY faculty, staff, and students. The Commons Team is constantly striving to make The CUNY Academic Commons a more robust and active platform for teaching. In the past year alone, our two full-time Open Educational Technologists have worked with over 300 faculty members through conference presentations, consultations, and training sessions to introduce the CUNY Academic Commons as an open teaching platform. Hosting a course on the CUNY Academic Commons presents opportunities for instructors to increase the openness of their teaching, employ experiential learning strategies, and integrate open educational resources (OER) into their curricula.

The diverse and impactful activity on the Commons speaks for itself—as do the people at the forefront of a few of our most successful sites and groups. Here are a few quotes we've gathered from Commons users.

> "Teaching on the Commons, and requiring students to introduce themselves in the first week of class on the Commons really helped set the tone for the rest of the semester. . . . It allowed students to get to know each other and, throughout the course, to feel comfortable challenging each other's ideas and arguments. . . . They loved it. They were intimidated by public writing, but got the hang of it once they tried and discovered that they could set up more sites of their own on the Commons and felt they'd discovered a valuable new tool."
> — Professor Claire Cahen, Environmental Psychology, The Graduate Center
>
> "I was doing most of this in a self-hosted environment before, but the Commons makes the onboarding process much simpler. The groups function adds features I didn't have and had to triage using closed software (Dropbox, GDrive). I appreciate that, when I evangelize to colleagues about OERs and open education more broadly, the Commons makes the leap to working this way seem much more manageable… [Useful Commons features included] Content delivery (syllabus, assignment directions, texts), delivery of Open Educational Resources, social annotation, shared texts, student writing and interaction (blogging, commenting, assignment delivery), multimedia (videos, images, digital tools), and integration of other digital tools (maps, timelines, etc)."
> — Professor Jeff Allred, English, Hunter College
>
> "I feel much more aware of things going on in other CUNY classrooms and connected to my fellow CUNY peoples! I have gained so many new colleagues and friends! The

Commons creates community and learning simultaneously. It is a repository of information, myriads of value!"

— Professor Ryan Seslow, Intro to Graphic Design, York College / BMCC

Research

The CUNY Astro network, which hosts its primary site on the Commons, is one of a broad range of research communities that has built Commons sites and groups to organize and display their work. This team of astronomers and physics faculty are working to improve diversity in their field and marshal resources for future exploration. Their Commons site lists various CUNY programs and research opportunities, provides news updates, features involved faculty members, and helps organize their AstroCom program funded by the National Science Foundation to encourage minority and women undergraduates to become astronomy and physics majors.

CUNY Astro and AstroCom have received significant news coverage in recent months, including a Pix11 TV news story that prominently featured their Commons site (see screenshot at right). Here's how Charles Liu, museum research professional at the College of Staten Island, summed up the mission that the Commons helps enable in an interview with CUNY News:

The students in this CUNY physics program might reflect the "melting pot" of New York City, but not physics classrooms across the nation.

"We have big dreams. . . . The goal from the beginning has been to meld curriculum and research, make it the best in the world and extend it to populations that have been traditionally underrepresented in the sciences. CUNY has been the perfect place for us to do that."
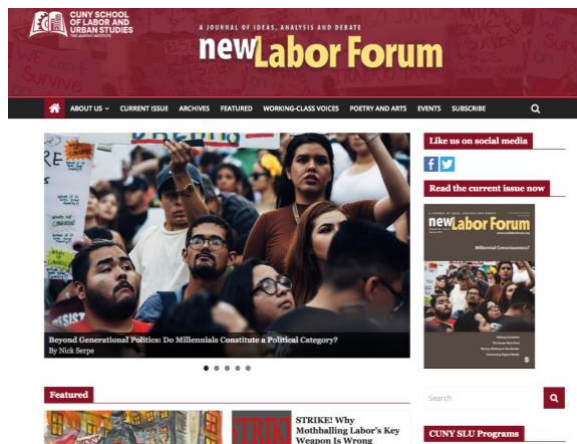
Institutional

Various groups throughout CUNY use the Commons to share information about their community and foster communication and collaboration.
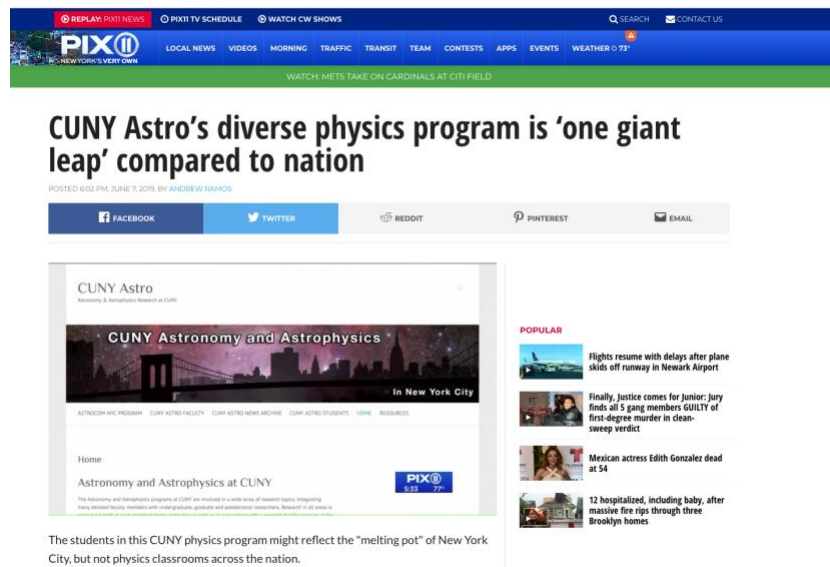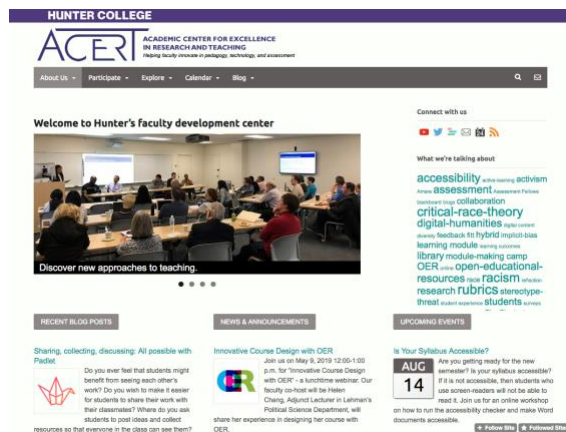
Hunter's [Academic Center for Excellence in Research and Teaching (ACERT)](#) site provides information about ACERT's faculty development activities for Hunter's academic community. The site offers a calendar of events, pedagogy and technology resources, and calls to participate in ACERT seminars and programming. It also hosts an extensive blog with teaching hacks, student reflections, tool tips, and more.

The Murphy Institute, part of the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies, hosts their national journal, [New Labor Forum](#), on the CUNY Commons. The journal provides a publication space for labor advocates and allies to share research, engage in debate, and present new ideas. The journal's site provides access to featured articles, journal archives, and hosts sections for working class voices, poetry and arts, and a calendar of events.
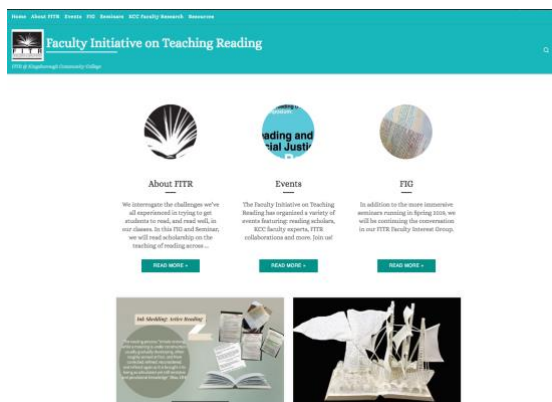
At Kingsborough Community College, the [Faculty Initiative on Teaching Reading](#) uses a Commons site to bring together faculty interest groups and seminars, share news about upcoming events, and provide resources for teaching reading. On the site they showcase faculty research and publications and curate resources for pedagogical strategies for teaching reading.
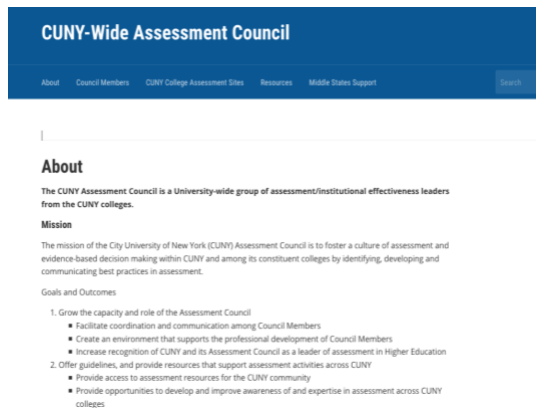
The [CUNY-Wide Assessment Council](#) is a group of assessment and institutional effectiveness leaders who aim to foster a culture of assessment and evidence-based decision making by developing and communicating best practices in assessment. The site lists the council members, participating CUNY campuses, and contact information to learn more about the group's work. The site also hosts assessment resources for academic programs, general education, middle states support and more.

The Commons in Development

The Commons team spent the 2018-2019 academic year expanding and improving the ways users can create new content and collaborations on the Commons. This built on the prior year's efforts to streamline the onboarding of members with improved registration and invitation features. Now that members have been flowing more efficiently to the Commons, we set out to give them better tools to grow and enjoy our community. The year's development projects, inspired in part by feedback from faculty, also reinforced our commitment to enabling undergraduate teaching. Our development work around OER have been significantly aided by generous support from the CUNY Office of Library Services, which has fostered OER efforts across the university.

Fall 2018

This release made it easier for users to create new sites for specific purposes by introducing Site Templates and Plugin Packages, two features that bundle functionality that's proved helpful for some of the most popular Commons use cases. Sites created using the Teaching Template are pre-configured for those who teach courses using the Commons, the Academic Portfolio Template allows clean presentation of scholarly work,

and the Default Template allows users to launch a basic WordPress blog.
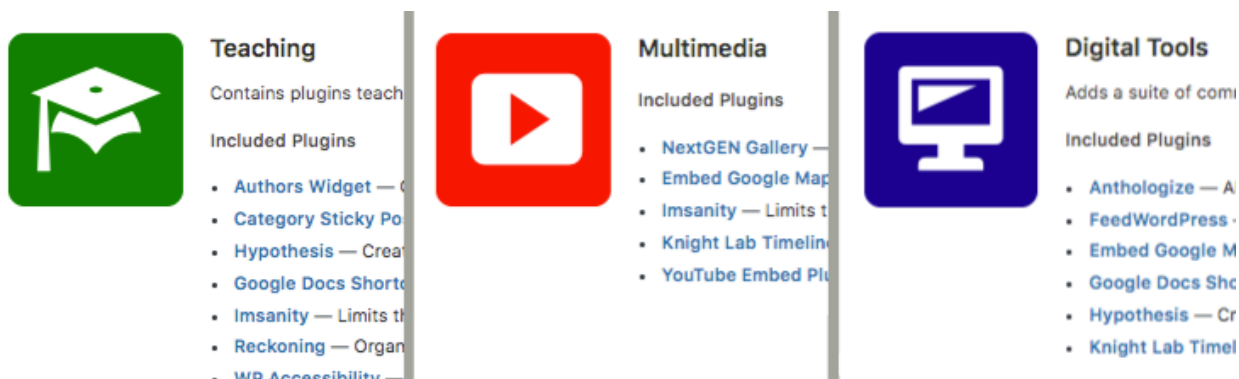

Plugin Packages bundle pre-selected plugins for Teaching, Multimedia and Digital Tools depending on the user's needs. New code allows each package to be activated with one click. Three new widgets, available on every site across the Commons, facilitate open licensing, branding by campus, and integration with CUNY's OneSearch library system. Lastly, a course indexing system makes more visible the teaching that is happening on the Commons.

Spring 2019

This release introduced a Creation Portal to serve as a one-stop launch point for our three types of spaces — Groups, Sites, and connected Group + Sites. The portal helps members choose the best option for their needs and maximize each tool's powerful feature set. The entire process is now much simpler, more consistent, and better documented (for group creation, we cut the number of steps in the process by more than half).
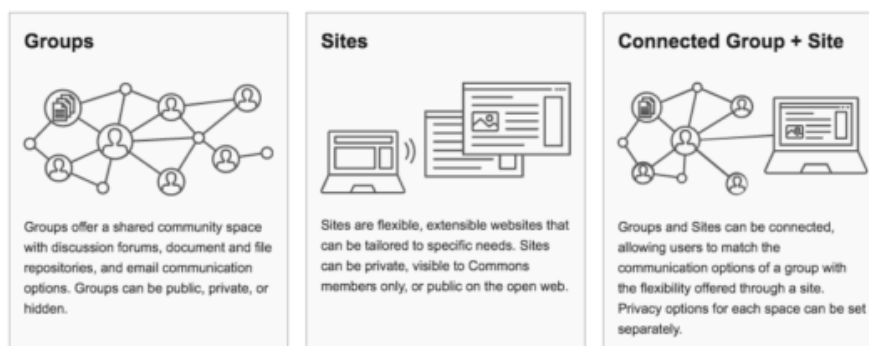
A new metadata schema increases discoverability of activity across the Commons as well. With all of these improvements, new members can more quickly develop projects on the Commons and more readily find and follow work on the Commons relevant to their interests.

The Commons in the World

Since its founding, a central part of the mission of the CUNY Academic Commons has been to impact the methods and technology for teaching and scholarship beyond the boundaries of both CUNY and the Commons website itself. Our work this year showcases our ongoing commitment to this broader impact in a number of important ways.

We're continuing our stewardship of Commons In A Box (CBOX), free open source software based on WordPress that enables organizations everywhere to create dynamic online community spaces. CBOX Classic, developed in 2012 under a grant funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, is modeled on the Commons and geared toward communities of all kinds. CBOX OpenLab, released in October 2018, is built specifically for teaching and learning. CBOX OpenLab was the culmination of a two-year project, "Learning in the Public Square: An Open Platform for Humanities Education," funded in 2016 by a $324,502 Digital Humanities Implementation Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Office of Digital Humanities.

The CBOX OpenLab project came about through a partnership with the OpenLab at New York City College of Technology, CUNY (City Tech). This pioneering inter-campus collaboration also includes the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), whose pilot CBOX program makes progress toward a future where free software platforms like the Commons can be used more easily through the CUNY system and beyond.

We've also been proud of the continued growth of MLA Commons, a scholarly communication platform built with CBOX Classic by the Modern Language Association of America (MLA) and launched in 2013. The success of the MLA Commons project gave birth to the Humanities Commons, a broader meta-network for humanities professionals to discover new materials and connections, including as part of the Commons Open Repository Exchange (CORE) for preserving and amplifying research.

The Commons Team

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Director of User Experience: Chris Stein
Director of Special Projects: Michael Smith
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