The CUNY Academic Commons

Fostering Connection and Collaboration Across the CUNY System

2015 Annual Report

CUNY ACADEMIC COMMONS | COMMONS IN A BOX

About the CUNY Academic Commons

The CUNY Academic Commons is an academic social networking platform designed to facilitate connections and collaboration across the 24-campus City University of New York system. Built, maintained, and managed by CUNY faculty, staff, and graduate students for the CUNY community, the Commons has helped over 6,030 members integrate technology into the university's academic missions of teaching, research, and service. Used widely as a shared space for individuals, campus committees, and academic departments, the site contains a collection of tools that help groups of colleagues collaborate and communicate with one another.

An Open Network for All of CUNY

The Commons is open to all faculty, administrators, staff, and graduate students across the CUNY system. It is used by members from every campus in the system and is designed to support and extend cross-campus work.

With nearly 3 million site visits, nearly 2 million unique visitors, and over 7 million page views since the site began in 2009, the Commons has been growing quickly. In 2014 alone, the CAC had nearly 1 million site visits, nearly 700,000 unique visitors, and over 2 million page views.

Cutting-Edge, Widely-Used Code

The CUNY Academic Commons software development team actively develops new features for the Commons and regularly releases its code to the public; plugins developed by the Commons team have been downloaded hundreds of thousands of times, and larger software projects to which the Commons contributes code have been downloaded over 2 million times. The Commons In A Box platform, developed by the CUNY Academic Commons team, allows other institutions to create sites modeled on CUNY Academic Commons. Having won an award in 2013 for the Best Digital Humanities Tool, it is used by a variety of

high-profile organizations including the Modern Language Association, The State University of New York, The Johns Hopkins University Press, and Arizona State University.

New Developments in 2015

The CUNY Academic Commons team continues to strive for an innovative approach to community development, with an increasing focus on building major features requested by our users. During the 2014-15 academic year, the Commons prepared two major feature releases.

Version 1.7, released in October 2014, introduced My Commons, a new tool that allows site members to keep up-to-date on the Commons activity that matters most to them: that created by their friends, in their groups, and on their favorite Commons sites. This release also featured a number of improvements to the way group members communicate and work, including an overhauled forum system and the ability to download group files in bulk.

Version 1.8, released in May 2015, focused on the new Events Calendar feature. The Events Calendar is the Commons team's answer to a longstanding user request for event management and publicity within the CUNY Academic Commons. Using the Calendar, members can create one-time or recurring events and easily publicize them to their friends and fellow group members.

In March 2015, the Commons team announced the fruits of a yearlong collaborative grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation: the DiRT client plugin for WordPress. This tool allows members of the Commons - or any WordPress/BuddyPress-powered site with the plugin enabled - to browse and declare their interest in tools from the Digital Research Tools Directory (DiRT), developed at Berkeley with support from Mellon. In addition to its use on the CUNY Academic Commons, the plugin is also being leveraged on a number of popular sites devoted to local digital humanities communities.

Grant Applications

The CUNY Academic Commons continues to look for opportunities to fund initiatives, increase Commons functionality, and find innovative collaborations. In the past year we have been awarded and applied for several grants.

We have applied for and won an NEH Digital Humanities Start-Up grant as part of our Social Paper project, which aims to create a social network that allows graduate students to share seminar papers, enabling students to collaborate and facilitate conversations across the disciplines.

In collaboration with CUNY's New York City College of Technology (City Tech) we applied for a NEH Digital Implementation Grant to fund a project creating a new version of CBOX, one which will support teaching and learning in similar ways to City Tech's OpenLab platform.

In partnership with the Modern Language Association we are also part of the team that was awarded a planning grant from the Mellon Foundation to create Humanities Commons, a federated network of sites that will link the MLA with other humanities organizations to further collaborative interdisciplinary research.

A similar partnership was formed, in this case with SUNY Geneseo, to apply for and win a NEH Challenge Grant to support the Digital Thoreau project, a resource and a community dedicated to promoting the deliberate reading of Thoreau's works in new ways.

In collaboration with the CUNY Office of Library Services, we have applied for a planning grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to fund initial work on a CUNY-wide Institutional Repository that would be connected to the CUNY Academic Commons.

Commons Members Usage

(As of June 28, 2015, compared with 1 year ago)

Members

6524 (↑ 22%)

Groups

878 (↑ 35%)

Sites

2121 (↑ 45%)

How Is CUNY Using the CUNY Academic Commons?

Departmental use: The PhD Program in History at the Graduate Center has had phenomenal success using the Commons since 2012. Some of the benefits are:

- The ability for users to subscribe to the departmental blog and receive email updates, or to view the site on demand. This has allowed the program to communicate unofficial business (ranging from adjunct openings to History events around the city to apartment listings to a reminder of the anniversary of the end of Prohibition) without cluttering inboxes of its stakeholders. The blog has replaced several listservs (still in use by many programs) which were unwieldy for the administrators to manage, and did not allow for graphics.

- Extending a voice beyond CUNY through Google and other search tools. For example, any historian in the world who googled James Kloppenberg in October 2014 would have discovered an article on his latest work in the program's blog as the 6th hit! The private sector might often pay for this is the kind exposure, which is helping the overall Graduate Center effort to gain notice and has raised the History Program's international profile, which has likely contributed to a stronger applicant pool.

- Within CUNY, because the Commons is now being used as a sharing site for CUNY administration committees, professors, and other administrators who are on various planning committees are now frequent visitors. Many of them are likely to notice the History Blog on the front page increasing the visibility to individuals who control funding decisions.

Course use: Professors Stephen Brier and Anthony Picciano use the Commons in both its blog and group formats to organize the coursework and public discussion. A Graduate Center faculty member with an interest in the topic (The History of CUNY) was able to join the group two years after the course ended. This archival resource will enable community members who may otherwise not be aware of common interests to easily find it. Students in find that using the Commons as a platform for course collaboration is both easy to learn and enjoyable.

Community Building: Commons members use the Commons to foster community both inside and outside of the buildings in which they work. In one instance, two members of the Commons team started a group called CUNY Pie six years ago. Its mission? “To address the paucity of professorial pizza punditry, CUNY Pie has assembled a crack team of pizza-loving academics to make periodic pilgrimages to pizza joints both great and small, and to report back on their findings.” This kind of use of the Commons allows the type of connection that enhance both student and employee experience and recognize that the CUNY community is more that just work and scholarship.

Publication Use: The Commons is used as a publication platform for a wide variety of academic journals, including Journal of American Drama and Theatre (JADT), European Stages, and Theory, Research and Action in Urban Education

(TRAUE). The Commons team works closely with publishers to find suitable WordPress themes and plugins, coordinate domain mapping, and troubleshoot issues.

Our open access publishing platform's built-in social layer advertises new journal issues and blog posts, provides a discussion platform to encourage conversation, and social media links. Editors use groups on the Commons to collaborate on new issues and share reflections on manuscripts.

An exciting example is the Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy (ISSN 2166-6245), now in its seventh issue. The Commons is proud to host this publication and support its mission "to promote open scholarly discourse around critical and creative uses of digital technology in teaching, learning, and research." Besides its two issues per year, the journal publishes assignments, reviews, tool tips, and an "Assignment Fails" section which investigates how good ideas can sometimes go wrong, and offers possible remedies. Each week, a member of the JITP Editorial Collective assembles and shares news items, ongoing discussions, and upcoming events of interest.

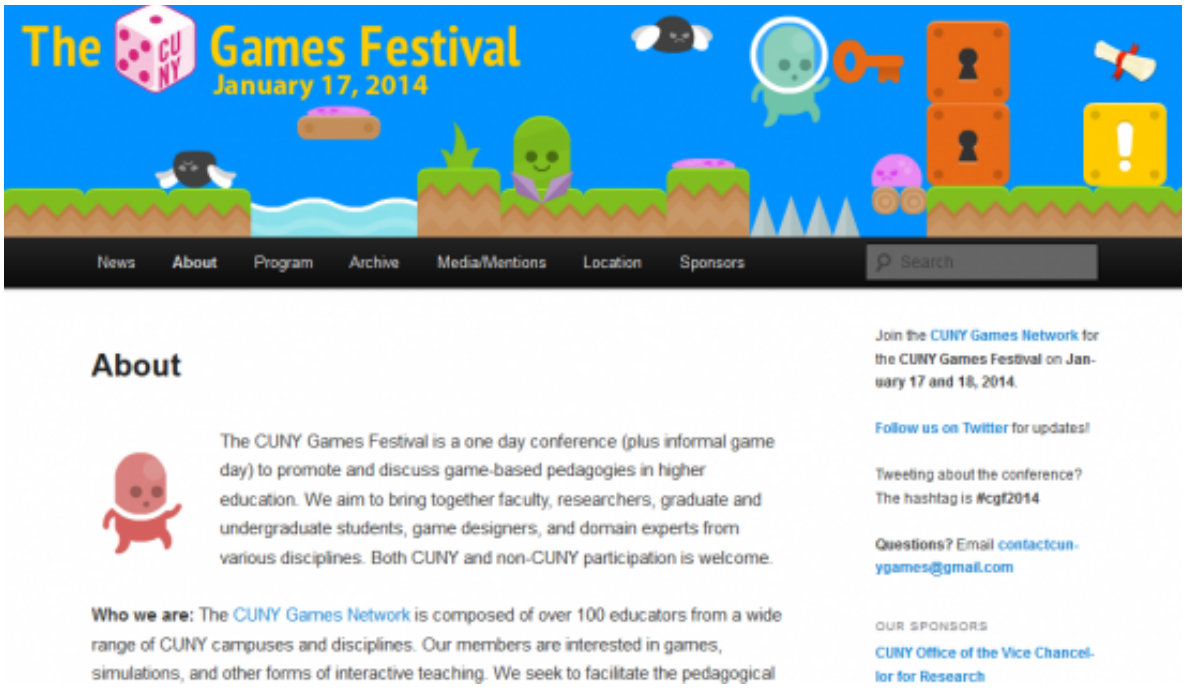
Conference use: The Commons offers great tools to help with publicity, organization, and registration before a conference.

- **Bronx Ed Tech Showcase**

  Lehman, Hostos and Bronx Community College use the Commons to host their annual Bronx EdTech Showcase. The site gathers proposals via online forms, posts agendas, showcases presentations, provides directions, and archives past conferences.

- **The CUNY Games Festival**

Another great example of how the Commons can be used to host a conference, The CUNY Games Festival used its site to publish its program, recognize sponsors, archive presentations, link to live streaming, provide directions, food and lodging information, and a blog for reflections and wrap-ups. The Commons homepage had a slider promoting the festival, with links to the site and registration page.



Commons Site Traffic

The chart below uses Google Analytics data to show how usage of the Academic Commons has grown over its first five full years.

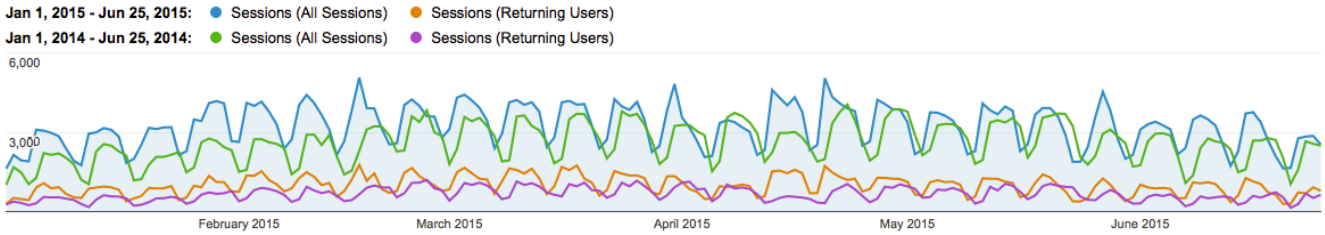
Year	Sessions	% Change	Users	% Change	Pageviews	% Change
2010	197,433	-	129,594	-	668,562	-
2011	357,763	*44.81%*	243,429	*46.76%*	996,782	*32.93%*
2012	598,325	*40.21%*	405,962	*40.04%*	1,549,440	*35.67%*
2013	757,317	*20.99%*	524,719	*22.63%*	1,769,251	*12.42%*
2014	959,431	*21.07%*	694,316	*24.43%*	2,027,622	*12.74%*
Totals	**2,870,269**		**1,998,020**		**7,011,657**	

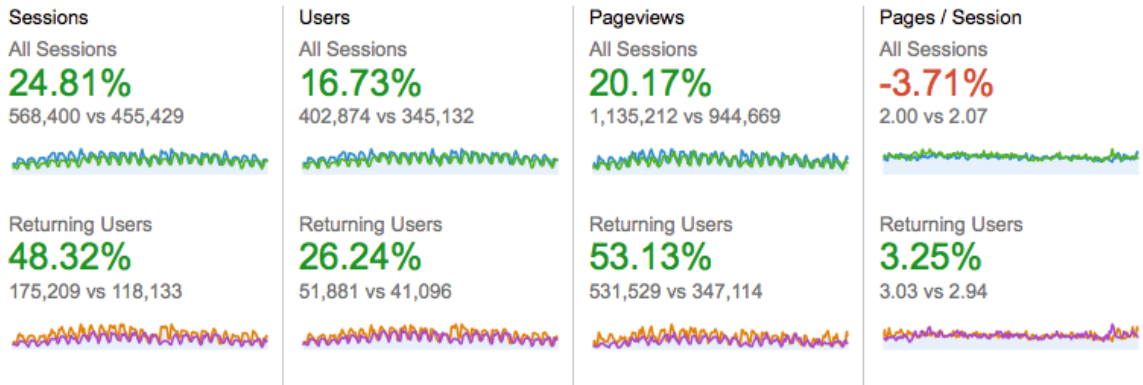
After the explosive growth in usage during the first two years of the Commons' existence, our user base and site usage have settled into a consistent and steady growth of about 20-25% in both Users and Sessions, a trend that appears to be continuing into 2015.

We see this same trend when looking at figures for 'returning users' as our users rely on the tools and resources provided and engage with the site.

Year	Returning User Sessions	% Change	Returning Users	% Change	Returning User Pageviews	% Change
2010	67,743	-	16,691	-	290,215	-
2011	117,718	*42.45%*	31,252	*46.59%*	419,347	*30.79%*
2012	192,506	*38.85%*	55,453	*43.64%*	651,515	*35.64%*
2013	234,880	*18.04%*	71,252	*22.17%*	715,412	*8.93%*
2014	272,460	*13.79%*	81,865	*12.96%*	864,307	*17.23%*
Totals	**885,307**		**256,513**		**2,940,796**	

Additionally if we look at the statistics for 2015 year-to-date and compare that with the same span in 2014, as seen in the carts below, we see that our growth remains consistently strong. The only place we see any reduction in growth is pages per session. A reduction in this number can however indicate a greater familiarity with the site, as users have to visit fewer pages to find what they are looking for.





Mobile Use

The majority of our users (85.89% in 2014; 87.07% in 2013) access the Academic Commons via desktop or laptop computers. 9.6% of users accessed the Commons via mobile device in 2014 (compared with 8.17% in 2014). Tablets made up 4.52% of sessions in 2014 and 4.75% in 2013.

Of our mobile and tablet users, the majority (41.9%) use the Apple iPhone to access the site, with the Apple iPad (27.03%) close behind. The next highest ranked devices are the Barnes and Noble Nook tablet at 1.10% and the Samsung Galaxy S III at .80%.

Social Media Metrics

Twitter Followers:

@cunycommons (CUNY Academic Commons):

2,600 -> 3,373 – up 23% from last year

@cbox (Commons In A Box):

543 -> 615 – up 12% from last year

Facebook Fans:

193 -> 224 – up 14% from last year

Google+ Followers:

105 -> 119 – up 12% from last year

Free Software Contributions

The Commons development team continues to focus on building tools that are useful not only to users of the CUNY Academic Commons, but to a broader audience of sites built on similar free software foundations. WordPress plugins authored by the CUNY Academic Commons have been downloaded nearly 400,000 times to date, and are in use on thousands of active sites. Chief among these plugins is Commons In A Box, the community framework based on the CUNY Academic Commons, which powers over 700 Commons-like networks. Commons In A Box continues to be actively developed by the CUNY Academic Commons team, with a number of minor releases during the 2014-15 academic year, and work begun on the next major release, version 1.1.

Members of the Commons team are increasingly active and prominent in the larger communities surrounding the WordPress and BuddyPress communities. In 2014, Commons lead developer Boone Gorges became a member of the WordPress core team - the group of 15-20 individuals who maintain the WordPress software that powers over 20% of all web sites. Recent improvements in WordPress - specifically, some of the metadata and taxonomy query improvements featured in WordPress 4.1 - grew in part out of work done on the DiRT project and other Commons initiatives. Gorges, along with Commons team member Raymond Hoh, continue to be intimately involved with the development of the BuddyPress platform (which powers the Commons, in addition to tens of thousands of similar networks); a number of new features in recent releases have their origins in features built for the Commons - such as the powerful activity queries originally developed for My Commons.

Looking Ahead to 2015-2016

In the next year, we will be developing new features for the Commons such as the collaborative authoring system The Social Paper; working on grant projects that will extend the reach of the Commons; and moving towards a site redesign that will put an emphasis on mobile usage.