Executive Summary

- The CUNY Academic Commons (CAC) experienced significant growth, and now has 7,904 members, 1,790 sites, and 787 groups.
- The CAC debuted several new initiatives, including the highly successful CAC Faculty Fellows program.
- The CAC is being used increasingly as an online course space by CUNY faculty for their classes.
- CAC development focused on onboarding new members and improving help and support.
- In partnership with the OpenLab at City Tech, the CAC received a highly competitive Digital Humanities Implementation grant from the NEH Office of Digital Humanities.

Development

During the 2016-2017 year, the CUNY Academic Commons team shifted focus from the development of major new features to instead enhancing existing functionality for both new and continuing users. These efforts have stabilized the Commons and prepared it for continued growth as it approaches the end of its first decade.

Our most significant enhancement was a collaboration with the Graduate Center’s IT services to migrate the Commons to a new state-of-the-art server infrastructure, which provides faster, and more stable hosting for the platform. Since the migration last fall, up-time statistics have improved and users have experienced faster response time.

In addition, the development team has delivered a large number of enhancements. Many of these were inspired by our 2016 User Survey, as well as our ongoing focused user-testing exercises, which are designed to reveal usability issues. The feature enhancements include the following:

- A new Help site with a modern, responsive design that enables users to find answers to their questions more easily.
- Improvements to group discussion forums, including rich-text posting; group libraries for post attachments; easier quotations of previous posts.
- Improved reply-by-email functionality, which enables members to interact with their groups via email instead of logging into the Commons. This year we improve Reply By Email in two major ways:
- Email alerts now make it easier to see the Group, Topic and Author of a Forum Post.
- Users can now initiate (rather than merely respond to) a new forum discussion via email.
- Enhanced event calendars: members can now utilize a date-picker and can set room numbers for the locations of their events. Calendars can now even be embedded in Commons blog posts.

In 2016-2017, the Commons also shifted its outreach strategy to engage new populations of users, including undergraduates. In Fall 2016 the Commons team solicited applications from tenure-track faculty across CUNY for the CAC Faculty Teaching Fellows program. More than two-dozen applicants submitted for five fellowships in which faculty taught undergraduate courses using the Commons. The selected faculty represented Lehman College, Bronx Community College, York College, Queensborough Community College, and Kingsborough Community College, and taught courses in Spring 2017 on the Commons in music, history, film, digital humanities, and political science. Feedback from the Faculty Fellows helped the Commons team refine the themes and plugins collections on the Commons and the documentation and help infrastructures that support the system.

Feedback from the Faculty Fellows has also helped fuel a complete rebuild of the process by which new users are added to the Commons and to sites and groups within the Commons. Our Fall 2017 release (Commons 1.12) will be built around this new on-boarding system, which will make it easier for users to access the spaces and relationships that facilitate their work. The new on-boarding module will provide value not only for the Commons but also for the scores of other WordPress/BuddyPress installations.

In 2017-2018, the Commons Team will prepare for the release of CUNY Academic Commons 2.0, which will require a complete redesign of the core CUNY Academic Commons BuddyPress theme. The redesign will focus on a streamlined, mobile-ready and accessible feature set, and will also integrate a BuddyPress API into the Commons’s core architecture to facilitate another decade of growth.

**Commons Usage**

The Commons is a vibrant academic community with 7,904 members, 1,790 sites, and 787 groups as of May 2017. With the addition of features that make it easier to run classes on the Commons, and along with continued outreach efforts, these numbers should continue to grow next year.

Site analytics suggest that roughly 35% of traffic on the Commons is from returning users—a slight increase from last year (~5% change). “Returning users” include
visitors who return to the Commons for updates and registered members who make use of the service regularly.

Just over half of users arrive at a site through a web search (Google, Bing, etc.) This pathway, however, has a 72% bounce rate, suggesting that visitors who arrive at the Commons through a web search do not usually find relevant content. WordPress is not an efficient tool for search engine optimization and much of the content on the Commons is not intended for a general audience, so this is not concerning. It does, however, suggest that training can be done to help members optimize their sites for search engines.

Referral traffic, which results when users link from another site or social media source, has a significantly lower bounce rate—only 50%. The sites driving the most traffic to parts of the Commons are the Commons homepage and the Graduate Center website. This shows the important role the Commons homepage serves. With its activity streams, the CUNY Academic Commons acts as a public “town square,” bringing together members of the community and highlighting work recent work. This should be preserved in future iterations of the Commons.

In Fall 2016, the Commons team solicited applications from tenure-track faculty across CUNY for the CAC Faculty Teaching Fellows program. More than two dozen applicants submitted for five fellowships in which faculty taught undergraduate courses using the Commons. The selected faculty represented Lehman College, Bronx Community College, York College, Queensborough Community College, and Kingsborough Community College, and taught courses in Spring 2017 on the Commons in music, history, film, digital humanities, and political science. Feedback from the Faculty Fellows has been used to refine the process by which new users are added to the Commons, as well as the themes and plugins supported and the documentation and help infrastructure of the system.

Grants
In August 2016, the CAC was informed that its application for a highly competitive $324,000 Digital Humanities Implementation grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities was successfully funded. The two-year project will help transform Commons In A Box (CBOX) into an extensible teaching and learning platform, modeled on the City Tech OpenLab and incorporating widely-used digital humanities tools, that can be used in the classroom to provide a powerful free and open-source alternative to proprietary learning management systems.

Screenshots: Murphy Institute Blog (p.1); Sample faculty profile website (p.2); Journal of American Drama and Theatre (p.3).