Institutional repositories provide an ideal medium for scholars to move beyond the journal article.

Reflecting on their experiences supporting the growth of Columbia University's Academic Commons digital repository, **Leyla Williams**, **Kathryn Pope**, *and* **Brian Luna Lucero** *make a clear case for why other institutional repositories should look to broaden the scope of the materials they house.*
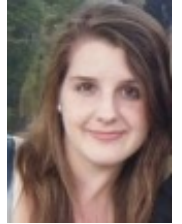
Institutional repositories (IRs) should actively collect the full range of work produced by scholars and researchers — not just "green" versions of peer-reviewed journal articles but student theses, data, working papers, blog posts, and more. In doing so, IRs become vital platforms that leverage the potential of the Web to reach a broader audience, bring new voices to scholarly discourse, and create opportunities for collaboration.

Peer review is the gold standard for scholarly publishing, and IRs do not require that materials be peer reviewed. Yet scholarly communication has always encompassed far more than peer-reviewed journal articles or monographs. Many of the materials in Academic Commons, our institutional repository at Columbia — such as conference videos, presentations, and technical reports and other "grey literature" — are not supported by the same access and preservation infrastructure enjoyed by more formal modes of scholarly publication. The IR may be the only viable long-term access and preservation option for such items. We hear from depositors ranging from undergraduates to full professors that repository features such as stable storage, permanent URLs, a means for attribution, and search engine optimization are of great benefit to their work.

By providing a medium through which scholars can enjoy a global reach for all kinds of scholarly outputs, IRs are crucial for authors whose work may not fit within the scope of any one scholarly journal. They are also vital for researchers with data that lies outside the parameters of disciplinary data repositories, for dissertation authors who want to make supplemental materials available, and for undergraduates.
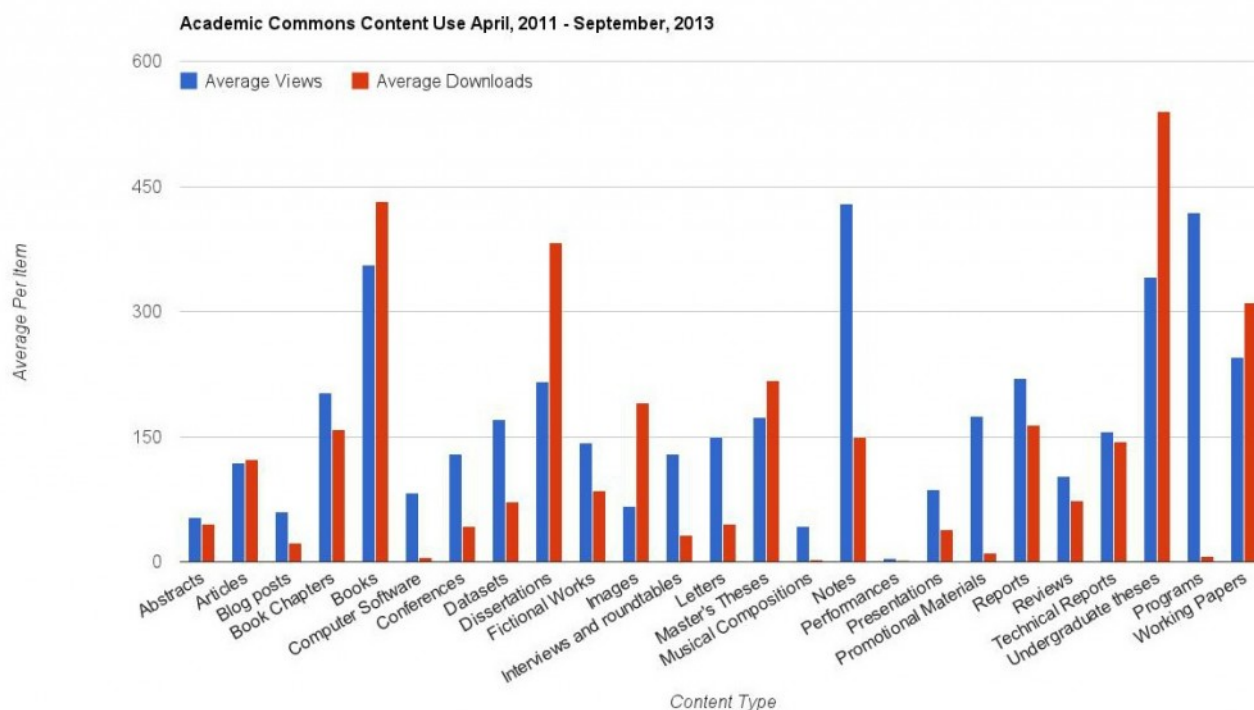
Academic Commons Use-per-item graph

The use of IRs by undergraduates represents an innovative use of a system that was designed largely to support published scholars and dissertation authors. This is crucial, as undergraduates have few opportunities for their scholarly work to attain a global reach. Undergraduate authors who opt to post their papers and projects to the repository tell us that knowing their work will be read beyond their professor's grading session motivates them to do more thorough research and write a stronger analysis. Their participation in the repository has paid off, too. A senior thesis on the use of Arabic and French among Moroccans on Facebook, for example, continues to be downloaded 300 times a month more than two and a half years after it was posted to the repository.

Rebecca Kennison and Sarah Shreeves argued last year in the Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication that shifting the primary purpose of the IR from green open access to the provision of persistent and reliable access to the full range and diversity of scholarly output of a research institution can mean a "vibrant, well used, and well understood system." Usage statistics confirm that the global audience visiting Academic Commons is interested in student work. In fact, when we count the average number of views per item, the work of undergraduates is more frequently downloaded than any other type of work in the repository. Authors have been able to parlay this exposure into internships and job offers from employers impressed by their work in Academic Commons.

Depositing her thesis in Academic Commons helped Daniela Cannizzaro, Barnard College '11, obtain the ultimate post-graduation prize: a job. "While looking for a full-time research assistant position after graduating from Barnard, I was able to point to my thesis in Academic Commons during interviews and mention that it was available in its entirety for free online. My current boss revealed that my thesis was used to assess my research abilities and skills and was ultimately a contributing factor in the decision to present me with an offer," said Cannizzaro, who now works at Columbia University's Medical Center as a Clinical Research Coordinator. "I'm very pleased with my decision to make my work available to a wide audience."

Other young authors have also contributed to scholarly discourse by depositing in Academic Commons. Recently, a Columbia alumna heard that a paper she wrote while studying for her Master's degree was still being passed around campus. She decided to deposit it in Academic Commons. Two months later, the paper has been viewed 282 times and downloaded 19 times.

Active use of social media around the repository further ensures that myriad Columbia scholarly works reach a wide audience. Academic Commons has a popular and regularly updated Twitter feed, @ResearchAtCU, from which we tweet the latest deposited research and build relationships with groups and individuals both on and off campus. For authors depositing into Academic Commons, this means their research doesn't just sit in the repository; it flows out via social media, where people read and share the work weeks, months, and even years after it was deposited.

We are confident that IRs benefit the researchers who use them — especially young researchers or those who wish to share their work beyond the journal article. This may be particularly true when an IR can provide the prestigious branding of a large research institution such as Columbia. Still, any IR has the potential to become an effective mechanism by which locally produced, unique research reaches a global audience.

As Figure 1 above shows, there is strong interest in the full range of research outputs in Academic Commons. That student work can be so popular is often a surprise to the authors. This highlights one of the great opportunities for IRs: to broaden the impact of works that, otherwise, might be seen by only a few. These works could be crucial for a high school student working on a paper, a researcher interested in the data underlying a journal article, a policy maker in need of information about the issue at hand, or a patient advocate looking for information on cutting-edge treatment options.

All areas of Columbia University, says its mission statement, are expected "to advance knowledge and learning at the highest level and to convey the products of its efforts to the world." Academic Commons helps to fulfill this mission, as other IRs help realize the educational mission of their institutions by providing access and long-term preservation to a broad range of research and scholarly outputs produced by their students, faculty, and staff.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our Comments Policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Authors

Leyla Williams *oversees outreach and publicity at Columbia Libraries/Information Services' Center for Digital Research and Scholarship. She works strategically with the Academic Commons team to get the word out about the repository at Columbia and beyond the university gates.*

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