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New College Social Networks, Unlike Facebook, Foster Academic Interaction

By Travis Kaya

Universities are turning to social networking to create online learning communities that mix serious academic work, and connections among working scholars, with Facebook-style fun.

At the City University of New York, a new project called Academic Commons is connecting faculty, staff, and graduate students across the system's 23 institutions. The CUNY-only network allows its more than 1,300 users—out of a potential user base of 10,000 eligible students and faculty and staff members—to write and share blogs, join subject groups, and participate in academic discussions.

"We're trying to create a kind of online virtual community that is open and organic in its nature," said Matthew Gold, Academic Commons' director.

Another effort, at the University of Pennsylvania, is connecting online learners in a similar fashion. And unlike the original Facebook, celebrated in the movie *The Social Network*, these platforms build scholars and administrators in.

As Mr. Gold put it, "You may not want to friend your dean on Facebook, but you still want to be connected to your dean."

At CUNY, registered members of Academic Commons get their own publicly accessible profile, where they can post information about themselves and link up with friends in groups online. Such groups focus on topics that include open-source publishing, graduate admissions, educational games, and—on the nonacademic side—New York City pizza joints. "It allows members of the CUNY community to find one another," Mr. Gold said.

In the fall of 2008, the university's Committee on Academic Technology, which includes faculty and administrators from each CUNY campus, met to figure out what a systemwide social network should look like. Rather than setting the Academic Commons in stone, the committee decided that it would leave the platform design—and the source code—open for user input, allowing it to evolve over time.

Monica Berger, a technical-services and electronic-resources librarian at CUNY's New York City College of Technology, said the site has helped her connect with faculty members and fellow librarians she otherwise might never have met. "It really is about

networking," she said. "It's a way to see what your colleagues are involved with, what they're doing, what they're interested in."

Online and Global

The University of Pennsylvania's College of Liberal and Professional Studies used its social-networking platform, Open Learning Commons, to foster student communities in online learning courses. The site lets faculty members post course material online and allows students to download, blog, and discuss the curriculum in forums.

Since the platform made its debut in the spring of 2009, it has hosted close to 2,000 students in 44 online courses. The college has also made some course material and class discussions—including a course on global environmental sustainability leading up to last year's climate-change talks in Copenhagen—available to the public to read through and comment on.

"We're really excited that we created an online space that a global audience could come together and interact around with Penn content," said Lisa Minetti, a Penn curriculum design and assessment specialist who helped build the Commons.

According to Nora E. Lewis, vice dean of the college, faculty members have also been receptive. Ms. Lewis said that a music professor teaching an online course found the platform especially convenient for collecting feedback from students to guide the curriculum. "The student-to-student interaction drives the teaching," Ms. Lewis said. In traditional classrooms, students "don't get to extend the conversation in between the live sessions," she said.

Mr. Gold and Ms. Lewis said they had been in contact with a handful of universities interested in setting up social-netwoking sites of their own.

Academic Commons users have been posting open-source code written for Academic Commons, allowing it to be adapted by Web developers at other university networks.

Ms. Lewis says that universities seem to be exploring new ways to incorporate social learning into the curriculum. "Everybody is excited about the fact that user-generated content is driving the learning community," she said.