Brown University seeks insight into research collaboration

Brown University is engaged in a pilot project to investigate how its library can support scholarly communication. As part of the pilot it is using Overleaf as an authoring and submission tool, which will enable researchers to publish articles directly into the institutional repository.

Andrew Creamer is a librarian in Brown's Center for Digital Scholarship. He works in close liaison with the Computer Science department, helping faculty members to write data management and data sharing plans for sponsored research. He also promotes the use of Brown's institutional repository to the department.

Close engagement
When he first started at Brown in April 2014, the Chair of the Computer Science department was keen to use a cloud-based LaTeX editor, and Andrew saw in this an opportunity to address how the library could offer better support to the department beyond collections delivery.

Earlier in his own career, Andrew worked on a team funded by a grant from the National Library of Medicine to develop data management roles for librarians. “I wanted to broaden our relevance,” he says. “If we could find out how the computer science department works as a unique community, how authors write their papers and with whom they collaborate, we could provide them with a much better collection of content to meet their needs.”

Staff at Brown's library had long thought that although there was plentiful material on the web concerning conference proceedings, there was an opportunity for the library to refine the resources it provides, such as monographs, e-books and database subscriptions, to provide better support for researchers.

“I could have gone through the biographies of every faculty member to find out the subjects in which they were interested,” Andrew says. “But I wanted a more efficient method. I wanted to see what they were doing now, what they were writing about, and with whom they were collaborating.”

Overleaf as the answer
To facilitate that quest for information, Brown decided to use Overleaf as its authoring and submissions tool. Overleaf is a cloud-based scientific writing, editing and publishing platform. It was the platform preferred by the department and as it is LaTeX compatible, it is particularly suited to the sort of content produced by computer science researchers. It has analytical tools, which allow Andrew the sort of insight he wanted into the subject matter produced by the department’s researchers.

Overleaf also has workflow features that make it easy for research authors to publish directly into Brown’s institutional repository, which is something Andrew advocates. “I want researchers to publish data and manuscripts to a repository as soon as papers are written,” he says.

Features of the platform that have been popular with researchers

cont.
A pilot development using Overleaf encourages greater communication between researchers and librarians. “I wanted a more efficient method to see what our researchers were writing about and with whom they were collaborating.” Andrew Creamer, Librarian in Brown’s Center for Digital Scholarship.

1,000 templates pre-loaded in the online editor, or users can create their own, for example to use in teaching courses and for homework assignments.

Metrics allow librarians to see which templates are popular among people writing theses and dissertations, along with details of collaborations (both internal and external), user activity, and overall project numbers.

“These metrics will allow us more insight into what researchers need and will help us to inform the collections department,” Andrew says.

Overall, Overleaf has been instrumental in the pilot – providing the library with the user information needed to better support scholarly communication, researchers, students and faculty. Users of the platform have been very happy with the ease in which they can now write and collaborate on scientific documents and the ability to publish directly to the Brown repository.

“It’s been a win for everyone,” said Andrew, “the library gets the insight and information it needs, the students and faculty get a great tool for writing and collaborating, and the University gets an easy submission portal for its online repository. We couldn’t be happier with Overleaf.”