



Inception Story

Back in 2009, Harvard University's Institute for Quantitative Social Sciences (IQSS) was faced with two problems: 1-satisfying growing demand for high quality websites tailored to academic usage (we had a website demand backlog) 2- responding to escalating web development costs. Thus began the OpenScholar research project at Harvard.

Professor Gary King is the director of IQSS and the creator of OpenScholar: "We studied the academic web, beginning with faculty sites. Of course, faculty members are in the business of creating and disseminating new knowledge and they understandably want to stand out with their own unique website design and URL, but we also learned that, underneath this diversity, almost all faculty websites are structurally identical. Every one lists courses, publications, CVs, contact information, and many other common features. So we asked: Can we avoid paying for an entire stack of software infrastructure -- from server hosting all the way up to graphic design -- for each and every faculty member, when all but the last layer is the same for everyone?"

The OpenScholar team found a way to solve this problem in a sufficiently general way such that faculty-- and then all of Harvard University, including students, departments, centers, projects-- could benefit. Their solution was OpenScholar software, which was made available under an open source license for any university to use.

The software is set apart from other CMS in three ways: 1- unique design, 2- local control, and 3- shared infrastructure. The team designed a single install/multi-site architecture that allows thousands of websites to be powered by a single code base. This makes it easier and less expensive to manage updates, apply bug fixes and security patches across an entire platform. They then added enterprise grade infrastructure and rolled it out across the university.

Scholars can customize the look and feel of their own sites-- the underlying structure of each site is uniform, while the creativity and individuality of each site is maintained. For a University's Communications Office or Office of the CTO, the branding specifications of a school's colors, fonts, and logos are managed centrally, resulting in a more elegant and coherent online branding strategy. The self-service sites require no knowledge of programming, meaning anyone can build an academic website. This saves IT departments a lot of time.

Today, OpenScholar runs over 8,000 Harvard websites, all of which are hosted at OpenScholar, LLC. The Harvard Gazette wrote recently that OpenScholar “provides the first coherent online presentation of the Harvard brand, empowers individual scholars to create excellent websites, and has saved the University more than \$100 million in external development fees.”

By 2014, OpenScholar had evolved into a robust, enterprise-grade Content Management System and the team noted that many universities outside of Harvard were also using the product-- 75 universities around the globe. But the product, outside of Harvard, lacked a platform to support it. This realization-- that OpenScholar is widely recognized as an excellent content management system, but truly thrives within a university when it is supported by a comprehensive platform-- got the team thinking...

In the fall of 2016, Jessica Drislane met Gary King and the OpenScholar team and they began brainstorming. They determined that:

1. The research project had grown too large for the confines of the university development budget. To continue growing, independence would help.
2. Demand for OpenScholar at other institutions was increasing despite a complete absence of marketing for the product (universities just kept finding us)
3. Harvard can't be in the business of hosting other university websites on its servers
4. Providing a robust and comprehensive service platform to support OpenScholar at schools beyond Harvard University would help all of academia.

With the support of the Harvard administration, the OpenScholar team did something that had not been done before in the University's 375 year history: they turned a Harvard research project into a private company that is now a SaaS vendor to Harvard University and other schools that use OpenScholar software.

By forming OpenScholar LLC, the team can offer services -- hosting, end user training, theming and design and a 9am-5pm helpdesk-- that support OpenScholar software at any institution while continuing to invest in the ongoing development of the product and platform. Now every university can benefit—from better websites and more coherent branding, to significant cost savings-- in the same way Harvard has done.