

Case study: Kenyon College

Sharing knowledge to advance scholarship: Supporting strategic goals with a *Digital Commons IR*

Jenna Nolt explains the breadth of open access content Kenyon College's IR hosts — and the global visibility and usage it's gaining



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Introduction

Nestling in the scenic landscape of Ohio, the [Kenyon College](#) campus may not be large, but it packs a big punch for its size — it is regularly rated one of the top 50 liberal arts colleges in the US.

However, back in 2013, it was struggling to showcase its scholarly achievements online. The open-source repository it shared with other Ohio colleges was too dated to support the college’s digital ambitions. It was clear a new solution was needed. Following a comprehensive tender process, Elsevier’s Digital Commons institutional repository (IR) was selected for its ability to offer widespread open access to Kenyon’s digital collections.

Digital Initiatives Librarian Jenna Nolt joined the college around that time. She recalls: “I came in as a repository manager in the ideal circumstances. The IR was new and so was my position. There was a lot of space and flexibility to decide on the best approach.”

In fact, Digital Commons was one of the factors that convinced Jenna to accept the Kenyon College role. “The system I used in in my previous job required me to spend a lot of time talking with the in-house IT team to get bugs fixed,” she explains. “So, when I was looking for a new position, I knew I wanted to work with a platform that I could actually *do* things with. And that’s Digital Commons. I no longer have to worry about the back-end IT work...instead, I’m free to focus on helping our scholars share their wonderful ideas with the world.”

In this case study, Jenna describes why sharing those ideas is so important, the breadth of scholarship the [Digital Kenyon](#) IR supports, and the benefits it delivers — both on campus and beyond. She also shares her top tips for maximizing IR potential.

Themes discussed

- Working in partnership to achieve institutional goals
- Enabling “global collaborative scholarship”
- Equipping students with workforce-ready skills
- The role of the institutional repository in an AI world
- Next steps for Kenyon College
- Getting the most out of your IR — lessons learned at Kenyon

“Because of the technical support I receive from Elsevier, I can put so much more of my effort into supporting our scholars. I feel like I’m on a team with my consultant. And that’s incredible.”

Jenna Nolt

Digital Initiatives Librarian

Working in partnership to achieve institutional goals

Although Jenna joined Kenyon following Digital Commons’ introduction, she was already familiar with the IR. “I became pro-Digital Commons in my previous role when I started researching other digital repository platforms,” she explains. “Digital Commons offers several things I find really important.” These include:

- **A collaborative approach to support:** According to Jenna, the fact that Digital Commons assigns customers a dedicated consultant is one of the biggest benefits. “In fact, it has been integral to my success,” she admits. “And the quality of the consultants that I’ve had over the years has been incredible. These are people I can bounce ideas off and discuss feature requests with.” Jenna also volunteers to test new features: “I wish more librarians were willing to do that because the vendors can’t know what we need unless we explain it. But you also need a vendor who is willing to put in the same effort, listen to feature requests and look at user behavior — with Elsevier I have that dialectic relationship.”
- **Substantial time savings:** For Jenna, the fact that Elsevier takes care of hosting, updates and security already reduces her workload. But she also buys time back with platform features like batch uploads. “We use that a lot, and recently I’ve been experimenting with using an AI chat bot to auto fill fields in the batch upload spreadsheet, which makes the process even faster.” The ability to assign granular administrator rights in Digital Commons also frees up time for Jenna. “It means we can have members of the community or student workers upload or annotate collections. And then based on individual capacity and learning curve, I can increase their permissions from there.”
- **Easy-to-access user insights.** “The ease with which I can share statistics is huge,” says Jenna. Visitors to Kenyon Digital’s homepage can view user insights, including how many times content on the IR has been downloaded — 6,758,804 to date*. In addition, Digital Commons provides an administrator dashboard packed with tracking metrics, and dashboards for individual authors. “It means we can export any timeframe, any subset of data, and that’s important for a lot of our collection managers. It says ‘yes, my scholarship matters — it’s connected to a wider world’.”

* Correct as of 16 July 2026.

“Information should be globally accessible, so that others can build on that knowledge. The power of a platform like Digital Commons is that we can integrate all this research in all these formats from all our disciplines and we can make it broadly available for people to use.”

Jenna Nolt

Digital Initiatives Librarian

Enabling “global collaborative scholarship”

For Jenna, the development of digital collections on the IR is very mission driven. “It’s all about creating the potential for global collaborative scholarship. And that’s what having an open access platform like Digital Commons helps us to do.” She uses Digital Kenyon to:

Build win-win collaborations

Jenna has been working with the Knox County Historical Society to digitize its local history resources, including small newspapers from the surrounding towns and city directories from the 19th century. “So, we’ve scanned them and added them to Digital Kenyon, taking care of the OCR and the metadata creation. Suddenly, this really important American history is publicly accessible and discoverable for the first time. And now our scholars are actively using the materials in their research and instruction, and the local community is using them too.” She adds: “I think it’s really important for institutions to benefit and engage with their community. Projects like this are a great way to strengthen those ties.” Digital Commons’ granular access and administration rights are also proving a big help here, enabling Jenna to grant editing access to community members whose knowledge can enrich existing collections.

Make information globally accessible

Before each collection is added to Digital Kenyon, Jenna encourages the owner to think about users beyond the confines of the campus. She points to the university’s [collection of plaster casts of early hominin remains](#) as a prime example. “They were purchased by the college in the first half of the 1900s. Due to their age, we wanted to limit physical contact with them, so we made 3D digital models of them. These scans are now available to view in Digital Commons using Sketchfab, with metadata to contextualize them. And the files can be downloaded.” While the anticipated audience was Kenyon students, when COVID hit, the scans went global. “I received several emails from faculty members around the world who used the collection to teach online archaeology classes. And they were asking us, ‘do you have any more?’ They found them so useful.”

Perhaps more importantly, the casts capture fossils discovered in regions of the world that have since experienced conflict and instability. “There is a real possibility the originals may be gone,” Jenna points out. “We may have the only copies of this heritage of all humans in our collection.” She adds: “To me, this is such a beautiful example of how we don’t know who will use material or how.”



Equipping students with workforce-ready skills

At Kenyon, the IR plays an active role in campus life — including supporting the college’s 1,700+ students. “We have so much interesting student scholarship we promote through Digital Kenyon. And that benefits our students in several ways.”

Among the IR’s most highly accessed collections are those from Kenyon’s digital humanities students. These include student-generated poster presentations and the outcomes of AI-related projects. Digital Commons also supports the publication of [Scientific Kenyon: The Neuroscience Edition](#), a journal featuring undergraduate work. “The IR really gives these students direct exposure as they go on into scholarship or professional fields. I know that a lot of them cite their work in Digital Kenyon, promote it on LinkedIn, and share it with potential employers. The IR also makes them more discoverable by those employers. And it gives students information in a way that is maintained and curated with an institutional framework around it.”

Students receive the Monthly Author Snapshot, an automatic email sent to IR authors showing how often their work is being accessed and where, which encourages engagement. “And the course supervisors are very happy to promote this cutting edge work they’re doing with their students — it gives them a lot of publicity.” The IR also hosts collections of educational content for use in the classroom, including a digital storytelling collection and oral histories, many of which are created by the students themselves.

Jenna also uses the IR to teach students real-world practical skills. “I’ll bring in students as interns and I try to make it a valuable experience for them,” she explains. She assigns tasks designed to develop specific skills or involves them in new feature testing. “The idea is to give them hands-on work experience they can put on their resume.

“I’ve had several interns who enjoyed the work so much, then went on to work in libraries, museums and archives after graduating.”

Jenna Nolt

Digital Initiatives Librarian



The role of the institutional repository in an AI world

With the use of AI tools now so widespread, many are concerned about the accuracy, reliability, and quality of the outputs they generate — including Jenna.

“You see a growing prevalence of low-quality information out there. And that makes IRs even more important. They have the capacity to contextualize valuable knowledge. They can assign rights statements and licenses to make that knowledge easier to use. They enable institutions to determine how they present themselves. These are things we risk losing in this AI era.”

However, unlike many repository administrators, Jenna is happy for Digital Kenyon’s scholarship to be included in the open web content some vendors use to train their AI models. “While I may have reservations about how some of these AI tools are developed and used, we need them to pull from better data sets if we want their outputs to be good. To me, an IR is a great example of a fabulous, high-quality data set. And honestly, if I look at the stats, these tools are where a lot of our visits come from and it’s how our students search too.” And with an increasing number of students using AI to help them select a college, it ensures Kenyon has an equal chance to be considered.

“In fact, one of the things I’ve always really liked about Digital Commons is how discoverable it makes us,” she adds. “For example, we are really well represented in search engines. I recently showed our library director our Digital Commons dashboard and she was impressed at how often our content is accessed. So, independent of whatever technology people are using to find and access our information, Kenyon College has a strong public presence — and that’s huge.”

Back in late 2025, that discoverability resulted in a Digital Kenyon collection featuring in a leading US newspaper. Jenna explains: “I noticed a huge spike in access to an image of an individual in our [Bulmash Family Holocaust Collection](#) — around 200,000 hits in a few days. The owner of the collection is a scholar who has given us so much beautiful information around the materials that they’re presenting, but they didn’t have the name of this particular individual. A scholar somewhere else in the world used AI to identify that person. And then their research was referenced in a *New York Times* article, which linked directly back to Digital Kenyon. That was great exposure for us.”



Next steps for Kenyon College

An upcoming priority for Jenna is to improve AI and digital literacy at the college. “We’re in such a dramatically changing digital landscape right now. AI is an incredibly powerful tool, but we need to recognize that it is just a tool ...I want our scholars to engage with new technologies critically and with agency. And Digital Kenyon will definitely play a role in that education.”

One of the IR collections Jenna plans to use is [Seeds of Resilience](#), a collaboration with a community program to collect the seeds from and information on local heritage plants. Jenna explains: “There are certain kinds of knowledge and information that can only be created and contextualized by people, and this collection is a great example of that. The seeds have history — for them to continue to live in a literal sense, they must be grown out over time. And while you can share knowledge about that process on a digital platform, it needs humans to nurture and grow the plants.”

Jenna also hopes to build closer connections with the communications department, which often uses items from the archives and special collections to promote history at the college. “I’d like to start digitally preserving these materials.” She smiles: “And I’m sure there are a few things we will make publicly accessible on Digital Kenyon as well.”

“I think licenses makes visitors more comfortable, and the kinds of people who are thinking about the ethics of reuse are probably going to use our material for really interesting, cool stuff.”

Jenna Nolt

Digital Initiatives Librarian

Getting the most of your IR — lessons learned at Kenyon

Just launching an IR or eager to expand your existing platform?

Here are 6 tips from Jenna:

1. Establish clear administrator guidelines from the get-go:

“To me, continuity is a core component of making digital libraries successful, so, I always document workflows. I’ve worked with peer institutions where that hasn’t happened and when they change platform or staff leave, it’s incredible the knowledge and projects that are lost.”

2. It’s better to start small, than to not start at all.

I’ve always had a, ‘let’s do what we can right now and then improve it on it later’ approach, and that has really paid off.

3. Zero in on the projects that make sense for your institution:

“When we started, we pulled metadata from externally published faculty works into the IR. But it was labor intensive, and no one really used the data. So, we stopped and thought about the value we add as a small liberal arts college — and that lies in our unique faculty and student-generated content.”

4. Ensure collection creators understand the impact and reach of what they share.

“I always make it clear that content uploaded to Digital Commons is hyper visible. It is full-text searchable. People should not upload things they aren’t proud of. And I stress that this is not a put it up for a semester and take it down platform — content is going to be permanently accessible.” In addition, Jenna encourages the creator to think about ensuring it’s contextualized for use by a wide audience.

5. Add rights licenses to your IR content.

“A model that ensures creators receive the credit that they deserve, while allowing others to build rapidly on their work, is really important.” Jenna underwent Creative Commons training last year and is gradually adding rights statements across existing collections — either via statements.org or Digital Commons. For new collections, she lets the creator know their work will fall under a CC 4.0 international license.

6. Meet your users where they are at.

“I see myself as a facilitator not a gatekeeper. So, I try to work with whatever level of comfort my faculty members or my students have in terms of the technology.”



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