Trying Allium

If you've become curious, point your browser to `math.sci.ccny.cuny.edu` and see Allium in action. In particular, you may want to check out the following features:

- Refresh the welcome page a few times and notice how the blurb on the right changes.

- Note how courses, sections, and instructors are neatly linked up.

- Choose a larger or smaller font size and notice that the pages scale with the font. Resize the browser window and notice how the page flows to accommodate the new dimensions.

- Print a page and note how the layout changes.

- Take a look at the page source and notice that email addresses are encoded in a way that makes them hard to decipher. Yet, in your browser window, they show up just fine.

If you'd like to see Allium from the point of view of a user with faculty privileges, please let me know (`brinkman@sci.ccny.cuny.edu`) and I'll be happy to set up a guest account for you.

Getting Allium

If you're interested in choosing Allium to power your website, there is a small set of requirements to meet.

- While the software per se is free, we need to agree on a suitable fee for my services. Those services include the customization of Allium for your department, the deployment of the software on your server, plus possibly training of your personnel and support by phone or email.

  Note that I only expect a fee for hours that I spend on your particular installation. After the initial deployment, updating your installation takes little extra work, and I will send you upgrades and bug fixes for free.

- I can create a template for the appearance of your site, but this may not be the most cost-effective approach for you. If your university provides a well-constructed template for departmental pages, that will reduce the amount of time I need to customize Allium for you. You can also have a web designer create a template for you.

- I will only deploy Allium on a moderately up-to-date, well-maintained Unix-based server. I will not deploy on a server whose software I consider obsolete, unreliable, or insecure. I will not deploy on a Windows server.[1]

- When deploying Allium on your server, I will need temporary root privileges or a system administrator who's available to do my bidding at a moment's notice. After the initial setup, I will not need special privileges to send you upgrades or bug fixes.

- You don't actually need your own server to run Allium. Instead, you can rent capacity on a commercial server[2] and leave the headache of maintaining the hardware and server software to people who do this sort of thing for a living.

If you're interested, I'd like to hear from you! My email address is `brinkman@sci.ccny.cuny.edu`.

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[1] The restriction to Unix *only* concerns the server. Once deployed, Allium will happily serve any client, including Windows-based ones.

[2] Joyent (`joyent.com`) seems to be a well-regarded web hosting service that provides an environment that'll work nicely with Allium.

Why You Want Allium

Peter Brinkmann
`brinkman@sci.ccny.cuny.edu`

Allium is a web application that manages the web presence of an academic department. If you want to see Allium in action, point your browser to `math.sci.ccny.cuny.edu`.

This brochure details why you want Allium for your department.

If you're a faculty member...

If you're a faculty member, you want Allium for your department because...

- ... Allium is fun to work with! In fact, fun was the original design goal. Utility came later.

- ... you can take charge of those parts of the website that concern you. You can update your profile, create personal pages, maintain courses and seminars that you are organizing, and more.

- ... you don't *have* to take charge of the parts of the website that concern you. Your webmaster can still maintain any part of the website. Once you've gained some familiarity with Allium, however, you may find that doing things yourself is faster and easier than emailing your webmaster.

- ... you don't need to know any HTML to work with Allium. Allium requires no skills other than basic interaction with a web browser. If you do know HTML, however, you can still write your own code and plug it into Allium.

- ... in addition to web pages, you can share documents (pdf, LaTeX, etc.) with students and

colleagues. You can choose who gets to see your documents — you can make documents available to the public, or to faculty, or to any other group of recipients.

- ... Allium includes an online discussion board that lets you discuss any topic in a convenient, asynchronous fashion. Online discussions can replace many committee meetings. Access to discussions can be limited to faculty or any other group of users, so that even sensitive topics can be discussed this way.

- ... Allium aims to be efficient, letting you get things done with as few mouse clicks as possible.

- ... Allium dovetails with other technologies such as mailing lists. It even provides an RSS feed that keeps you up to date.

If you're Chair...

If you're Chair, you want Allium for you department because...

- ... Allium provides a professional web presence at low cost. The software itself is free; you merely pay for the initial customization, deployment, plus possibly training and support.

- ... Allium comes with a licensing scheme that hardly imposes any restrictions on the user.

- ... Allium's decentralized content management improves your odds of keeping your page up to date. For example, faculty can update their office hours as they change and don't have to go through the webmaster to have them updated.

- ... many objects in Allium have an expiration date, making sure that your web presence won't be encumbered with, say, hot news items from five years ago.

- ... Allium can enliven static pages with a side bar that displays randomly chosen bits of information (such as profiles of faculty or distinguished alumni, brief descriptions of fields within your discipline, etc.).

- ... Allium makes it easy to meet university branding requirements, automatically creating a uniform look and feel across all pages.

- ... Allium helps you meet handicapped accessibility requirements. The output of Allium plays well with text readers for the blind. It is also robust with respect to scaling, so that users with impaired vision can choose a large font without breaking the layout.

- ... Allium optimizes the flow of information through your department, eliminating the need for most mass mailings.

- ... Allium can be administrated via any popular web browser. No matter whether you're using Linux, or MacOS X, or Windows, you can monitor and modify your site from your computer.

If you're a webmaster...

If you're a webmaster, you want Allium for your department because...

- ... Allium reduces your workload by decentralizing the maintenance of a website as much as possible.

- ... Allium automates the creation of lists of courses, sections, and personnel, significantly reducing the amount of depressing repetitive work that needs to be done.

- ... I am testing Allium with many different browsers (Firefox, Safari, Opera, Lynx, Internet Explorer). Most websites seem to be broken on at least one common browser. Allium aims to be browser-agnostic, allowing for uniform accessibility regardless of platform.

- ... Allium is free software, covered by the GNU General Public License. If you have the skills and the motivation, you can tinker with it to your heart's content.

- ... you won't have to worry about compliance with any suffocating license agreements.

- ... Allium is easily deployed and maintained on any reasonable Unix-based server.

Allium at a glance

Allium meets your needs: Allium provides support for all the major entities that an academic department deals with, such as personnel, courses, schedules, seminars, etc. It automatically generates course listings and schedules from spreadsheets.

I decided to write Allium when I was asked to manage the website of the CCNY Department of Mathematics. The design is the result of a lengthy meditation on which parts of the job could be automated or delegated. I use Allium extensively and tweak it all the time.

Allium is free: Allium is free software, covered by the GNU General Public License (www.gnu.org), and it will happily run in a free software environment (my installation runs on Ubuntu Linux with a MySQL database and an Apache web server, all of which are free).

You only pay for the time I spend customizing and deploying the software on your server, plus possibly some training and support.

Allium keeps security in mind: Allium's security scheme is several layers deep.

The first layer is obscurity; if you're not allowed to see privileged content, then you won't know it's there. A potential attacker wouldn't even know what to look for.

The second layer is the web layer; if you're not authorized to perform a certain operation, then the web layer will catch this and redirect you to the welcome page.

The third, and most important, layer is the database layer; if you're not authorized to access a certain piece of content, then the database layer will deny your request.

Allium also obfuscates email addresses to throw off spambots.