

How contributing to open source launched my academic career

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Open has defined my professional career in every way imaginable: for almost ten years now it has been the motivating force in my career, the mode in which I work, and the subject that I research. As a result, today I live and breathe open—but it has not always been this way.

What follows is the story of how open proved itself to me. It is a story that demonstrates how participating in open projects and processes can lead to unexpected opportunities. In my case, these opportunities have taken me on a journey from an itinerant software developer, to a workshop instructor in over a dozen countries, to a PhD at Stanford University, and finally to an academic career. These opportunities have led to my contributing thousands of lines of code, over a dozen research articles, two edited books, countless workshops for journal editors, and the teaching of undergraduate and graduate students. More importantly, they have allowed me to contribute back to the region of the world from which I emigrated as a child by helping to amplify the voices of Latin American scholars worldwide.

This unexpected journey started in January 2006 when I took a job at the open access Journal of Medical Internet Research ([JMIR](#)), where I was responsible, among other things, for upgrading the journal to the latest version of the Public Knowledge Project's ([PKP](#)) open source software Open Journal Systems ([OJS](#)). JMIR has been a pioneer in open access, and it was doing so using open source software as its foundation. Unbeknownst to me at the time, this convergence of open source with open access would become the defining trait of my career.

As a software developer by training, I knew the benefits of open source software from a practical level. The existence of OJS made my job at JMIR easier (plus, it came at a convenient price!). But it was not until I was ready to leave that job (I wanted to move back to my native Argentina) that I realized how contributing to an open source project could also lead to new and unexpected opportunities.

I had been contributing code back to PKP—this is what you do when you develop open source—and so when I emailed PKP's director (John Willinsky) asking for short contract to finalize a few contributions, he already knew who I was and readily agreed. What was surprising to me, was that he also asked me to lead a series of workshops on open access and OJS in Latin America. It is a testament to John Willinsky that he hired me to represent PKP without ever asking for a CV—my code contributions had spoken for themselves.

This work set off a chain of events that is still unfolding to this date. My open source code contributions lead to regular work with PKP: writing software, running workshops, conducting surveys, and studying

the results. The work kept me off the streets of Argentina, but more importantly, it allowed me to engage with Latin Americans and reconnect with a region I had emigrated from fifteen years prior. As I engaged, I learned about the plight of Latin American scholars, and of the incredible interest from the region in open access.

I quickly realized that my technical expertise in OJS could serve the interests of these scholars, and supporting them has become a driving motivation in all my professional activities. I have always felt proud of my contributions OJS, and in how this open source software supports open access, but over time I felt the need to better understand the role of open access itself.

This curiosity led me to a PhD program at Stanford University, where I was able to devote my attention to studying the *Public Impact of Latin America's Approach to Open Access* and other aspects of scholarly publishing. Along the way, I have ensured that all my research outputs are openly available. Contrary to researcher's concerns, this has not prevented me from getting a faculty position in a market where these are increasingly rare. My hope is to use this position to continue to further our understanding of open access and of Latin America's scholarly communication, with the belief that this will lead to positive outcomes for the region.

Whatever contributions I make—through research, software, or in my life in general—were enabled by contributing to open source and open access. I owe this debt to openness, and I intend to pay it back for the rest of my career by being open about my work, and by contributing to projects and organizations that support openness. This is, after all, what you do in an open ecosystem. It is the secret sauce of openness, and I invite you to benefit from it as much as I have.