Public Interest Technology University Network

Fostering Higher Education Collaborations and Innovations to Build the Field of Public Interest Technology

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Siegel Family Endowment

We are a foundation focused on understanding and shaping the impact of technology on society.

ABOUT SIEGEL

Siegel Family Endowment employs an inquiry-driven approach to grant making that is informed by the scientific method and predicated on the belief that philanthropy is uniquely positioned to address some of the most pressing and complex issues facing society today. Our grant making strategy positions us to be society's risk capital. We support high quality work that will help us derive insights to timely questions and has high potential for future scale. Our focus is on organizations doing work at the intersection of learning, workforce, and infrastructure. We aim to help build a world in which all people have the tools, skills, and context necessary to engage meaningfully in a rapidly changing society. Siegel Family Endowment was founded in 2011 by David M. Siegel, co-founder and co-chairman of financial sciences company Two Sigma.

OUR FOCUS ON INFRASTRUCTURE

We believe that strong social, physical, and digital infrastructure is a prerequisite for cultivating an equitable society. Our work aims to make the infrastructure of today and tomorrow work for all people. We do this by supporting organizations that foster the growth of resilient social networks and communities, strengthen public spaces and buildings, and expand access to digital life.



As technology's role in all parts of society continues to expand, it's our goal to ensure that everyone is conversant with technology as it affects all areas of our lives. We work with policymakers, technologists, researchers, and educators to ensure that the design, deployment, and use of technologies are leveraged in a way that advances the public interest. Our grantees use technology to enhance public institutions, imagine solutions that will fulfill unmet needs, and to critically examine technology's impact on civic life.





About Grantee

Public interest technology is an emerging field of practice dedicated to ensuring that new technologies are developed and deployed responsibly and sustainably, and serve the public interest. In order to help establish the field and advocate on behalf of its key principles, the Public Interest Technology Universities Network (PIT-UN) fosters collaboration across more than 60 universities and colleges committed to growing a new generation of civic-minded technologists. PIT-UN members' activities focus on six field-building areas: experiential learning; student scholarships; incentives for faculty; applying institutional data; prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion; and supporting curricula and faculty development. PIT-UN supports working groups, hosts convenings, and offers seed funding to test innovative approaches for developing technological strategies for achieving a public, civic good.

Executive Summary

YOU MAY NEVER HAVE HEARD OF "public interest technology," but chances are that you've felt its effect. Whether it's experts who raise thorny questions about biases inherent in generative AI at congressional hearings, social workers who help design accessible approaches for using technology to support clients, or researchers who uncover harmful effects of social media on young people and suggest product changes to mitigate those effects, public interest technology manifests in a diverse range of different and equally urgent contexts.

PIT-UN is one of the reasons why this broad conceptualization of public interest technology has taken off. The organization grew out of <u>New</u> <u>America's</u> pioneering work to <u>define</u> public interest technology, and to support initiatives that bring that definition to life. Public interest technology is much more than just technology used in the public sector; it encompasses a range of roles, sites, approaches, practices, disciplines, and strategies that embed the public interest at every phase of technology, from design to deployment to governance. In practice, public interest technology is centered around achieving a common good, emphasizes social justice, and aims to empower and protect members of society who are most vulnerable. \\

Andreen Soley, PIT-UN's director, explains that PIT-UN was founded on the idea that colleges and universities could be powerful sites for catalyzing the emerging public interest technology field around a common vision. These institutions are charged with developing leaders and have a responsibility to ensure that their educational offerings remain responsive to the needs of society. Further, colleges and universities must manage a challenging tension: that between fulfilling a public interest mission, and maintaining strong revenues in a highly competitive market. As such, they are important sites for encouraging deep thinking and developing practice around public interest technology.

"Faculty members were already doing the work," Soley recalls. But there were few institutional-level incentives for pursuing public interest technology work or spreading practices across colleges and universities when Soley began her work. Soley worked with colleagues to develop a landscape of public interest tech work in higher education, and met with college and university presidents and provosts to discuss models for advancing that



Higher education is an important lever for advancing a vision of public interest technology that is centered on equity and justice. Colleges and universities are the training grounds for the next generation of public interest technologists, and are also sites for cutting edge research and community partnerships in the field. Getting buy-in from university and college presidents and provosts can help accelerate the incorporation of public interest technology principles across disciplines and set the stage for largescale change.

Taking an interdisciplinary approach to public interest technology is an essential part of maximizing the field's potential and minimizing potential harms. The sciences, social sciences, and humanities all offer unique approaches, frameworks, and perspectives on technology's impacts on society and how technology can be used to advance the public interest.

A network structure that includes vulnerable populations allows each college and university to develop its own approach to public interest technology, while also drawing on the resources of the entire network. PIT-UN members can provide one another with material resources, matchmaking, working groups, and opportunities for relationship-building. Grants to pilot innovative ideas can help galvanize the entire network over time.

work in a more coordinated way. Those early meetings showed that there was a hunger among higher education leaders to develop shared language, to compare notes about successful projects, and to suggest new approaches for pursuing this work.

Today, PIT-UN is a formal network, with over 60 member institutions. That network includes 20 Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), including six Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and nine Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). The breadth of institutions reflects PIT-UN's commitment to reflecting the diversity of lived experiences among its constituents. While MSIs are not the only institutions that center and consider the needs of marginalized populations, MSIs are uniquely qualified to bring social justice framing and equity to the table, drawing from their core missions. They also include the communities that are most vulnerable to misuse of new technologies, and prioritize student-centered learning, engagement, and community empowerment — all important dimensions of public interest technology work.

PIT-UN's <u>Network Challenge</u> provides seed funding for projects that advance any of the network's field-building objectives, and has so far awarded grants totalling over \$15 million across more than 145 projects. The Challenge insists that institutions collaborate within and outside their institutions with community, government, and civil society partners. PIT-UN is also a <u>convener</u> across the higher education world, hosting working groups, an annual conference, and hybrid and in-person events. Together, these efforts are changing the way that universities and colleges support students and faculty in advancing public interest technology.

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Core Elements: What Makes the Program Work?

IN A FEW SHORT YEARS, PIT-UN has gone from a question about how to better define and unify the public interest technology sector through a membership model, to an organization that is becoming a network of networks. Together these institutions are working to build consensus on the definition of public interest tech and what constitutes a public interest technology career. <u>PIT-UN's rapid growth</u> is a testament to higher education's desire to meaningfully promote and shape the field of public interest technology, and reflects sensitivity to the unique nature of institutions of higher learning in program design. The program recognizes the impactful role that academia and higher education can play in advancing the field, but doesn't insist on a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, it supports coordinating work between institutions, respecting autonomy while leveraging network effects.







TOP: Jenny Toomey, Director of the Ford Foundation Catalyst Fund, discusses priorities for PIT Funding with PIT-UN Director Andreen Soley and Siegel Family Endowment Executive Director Katy Knight. (Photo by Mike Spencer)

MIDDLE: Howard University Student Morayo Adeyemi presents her PIT research at the 2023 Convening. (Photo by Mike Spencer)

BOTTOM: Students learn about careers in social impact at the Kickstart Your Social Impact Cardinal Careers Event October 9, 2018 at Paul Brest Hall, Stanford University. (Photo courtesy of Stanford University)



PIT-UN has grown to 63 institutions from 2019-2023.

► FOCUSING ON HIGHER EDUCATION

THE WORK OF THE <u>PIT-L FUND</u>, a consortium of funders committed to advancing the emergent field of public interest technology has <u>highlighted</u> the fact that practitioners are advancing public interest technology in many different places and contexts. Colleges and universities in particular are playing an outsized role in the development and direction of the field. One of New America's first contributions to the field was to offer up a <u>definition</u> of "public interest technology" that could be embraced within the academy. It was a multidisciplinary effort with scholars from the fields of computer science, information studies, and political science.

Soley explains that individual academic programs and faculty members were already thinking strategically about public interest technology, but were missing the ability to find and coordinate amongst themselves. Soley and her colleagues recognized that this type of coordination would require buy-in from the top.

"Student enthusiasm only takes you so far," Soley says. "We were hearing from faculty members that they needed senior leadership to help grease the wheels to address infrastructure challenges." Provosts and presidents were necessary to ensure that public interest technology classes were cross-listed; to rethink a financial model that traditionally rewarded a single department for student enrollment in a course; or in considering public interest technology projects in faculty tenure decisions.

The emphasis on higher education leadership and administration has proven effective in establishing public interest technology programming in colleges and universities around the country. At the same time, PIT-UN leaders recognize that students are a vital part of the organization's long term vision. In addition to its institutional convening work, PIT-UN has worked to amplify member institutions' experiential learning programs for students. Soley says, "Experiential learning [such as internships and apprenticeships] was so important and so key for our students to understand how they can apply their skills out in the world."

Importantly, PIT-UN launched a <u>National Student Club Network</u> with Boston University and Howard University to further develop student-oriented programs. These include an annual <u>PIT-UN</u> <u>Hackathon</u>, which will next take place at Boston University in February 2024. PIT-UN also expects to bring together club leaders for leadership development activities at its annual convening.

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WORKING ACROSS DISCIPLINES

SOLEY EXPLAINS THE EARLIEST ADVANCEMENT IN PIT was its work to ensure technologists could find a place in government. However, PIT-UN's founding in 2019 emphasized a role for public interest technologists in all sectors of society, including the private sector. PIT-UN's expansive definition included a range of fields, disciplines, and practices meant to reflect the breadth and depth of technology's impact on the world. The definition urged the cultivation of "a set of experts who can both wield the tools of the relevant technical domains and assess their social and political implications." That work necessarily draws on a range of disciplines, from engineering to law to history to economics.

Ultimately, Soley says that PIT-UN's goal is to empower future public interest technologists to "think not just about developing a tool in isolation, but to think about the impacts of that tool, and the values that may be embedded within them. This work requires interdisciplinary thinking.

The interdisciplinary nature of PIT requires structural changes to how the university supports faculty research, what courses it offers, what competencies it hires for, and what careers it prepares students for. PIT-UN recognized that different institutions would have different goals and approaches for embedding public interest technology framing



in the university design and course of study. As a result, it offers support in <u>six different field-building areas</u>, recognizing that not all institutions will have the same needs or goals in working across disciplines.

ADOPTING A NETWORK STRUCTURE THAT INCLUDES VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES often have different priorities and different resources available to them. As such, PIT-UN was designed to help institutions develop their own unique approaches to furthering public interest technology, and offers tips for institutionalizing public interest technology. This advice emphasizes the need to align programs with an institution's strategic plan and to develop a unique "flavor" of public interest technology that reflects the institution's priorities.

Crucially, PIT-UN has made an active effort to recruit Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs) to its network. Soley says, "We were very intentional about encouraging institutional diversity — making sure to include minority-serving institutions, community

20 Minority Serving Institutions in PIT-UN

- 9 Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs)
- 6 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)
- 4 Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs)
- 1 Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs)

colleges, and institutions from a range of regions."

Focusing on diversity helps PIT-UN center and elevate the voices of communities that continue to be excluded. Soley says that's crucial if the field is to truly reflect the public good. "Public interest technology is a framework for us to consider how emerging technologies impact vulnerable communities," she says. "We need to continually work to be inclusive, even if it means taking our time and moving more slowly and deliberately."

PIT-UN also offers opportunities for collaboration and coordination between institutions. It often serves as the matchmaker between colleges that are pursuing the same field-building area. PIT-UN's Network Challenge grantees form a <u>database</u> of projects that colleges and universities can use to keep track of the work that's being done at other institutions to achieve or advance a similar goal.

PIT-UN also offers opportunities for faculty members and administrators to discuss public interest technology, develop formal and informal relationships, and serve in working groups. In its next phase, PIT-UN hopes to build on these organic relationships and shared values to help develop regional and subject-specific projects across institutions. Subject-specific working groups responsive to emerging trends in technology include a National Science Foundation (NSF) working group, which <u>submitted recommendations</u> on how the NSF should prioritize allocating its share of the \$24 billion in CHIPS Act funding for technology; and an emerging AI Governance working group led by leading legal scholars and <u>a co-author</u> of the White House OSTP's "Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights."

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• Impact

PIT-UN'S GROWTH has been rapid and substantial. Over the course of just five years, the organization has seen institutional membership triple, from 21 to 63. In that same period, PIT-UN has awarded more than \$15 million in grants across more than 145 projects. PIT-UN has temporarily paused the expansion of its network until 2025. It is working with its current members to accommodate the overwhelming demand for regional and subject matter partnerships alignment which will likely include civil society and government partners.

While the numbers are impressive, Soley says that they tell only one part of the story. "What I'm hoping you can start to see are examples of the work that could be scaled," Soley says. PIT-UN leaders want to help institutions develop "examples of how to bring a public interest tech frame to different areas and different specialties," Soley says. The adoption of such examples across institutions will signal a different kind of growth and impact than membership numbers alone convey. Instead, it will signal "structural" impact, Solely says.

What does structural impact mean in the context of public interest technology? PIT-UN leaders share a few indicators that they look for when identifying impact:

- Colleges and universities offer degree programs, courses, certificates, and other credentials around an interdisciplinary vision of public interest technology, even if they don't always use that terminology.
- Students across the sciences, social sciences, and humanities begin to identify themselves as "public interest technologists" and seek out careers that draw on that background and approach.
- The proof-of-concept projects funded through PIT-UN's Network Challenge become widely accepted frames for tackling specific challenges such as climate change, or increasing diversity in technology across academia, civil society, government and industry.
- Both members and non-members begin to independently create partnerships inside and beyond academia to pursue public interest technology initiatives.
- The social justice orientation of PIT-UN's public interest technology vision begins to inform public discourse.

PIT-UN is actively working to advance these goals. For example, the organization is developing a comprehensive PIT Open Educational Resource (OER) repository to assist and guide institutions that are developing public interest technology programs, regardless of whether those institutions belong to PIT-UN. PIT-UN is investing in its student



Joseph Jaiyeloa, PhD student at University of Texas at San Antonio, presents his PIT research at the 2023 Convening. (Photo by Mike Spencer)

club network to respond to student demand. The program is working with institutions aiming to create regional networks within PIT-UN to scale impact. Current groupings include HBCUs, international members, and members within the Northeast and the Midwest. These efforts are designed to spread the influence of the public interest technology movement beyond academia and into the wider world.

Next Steps

PIT-UN INVITES a range of stakeholders to get involved in its work:

- Public interest technology practitioners, students, and faculty can visit <u>PIT-UN's resources page</u> to find materials and opportunities relevant to them.
- The expansion of the PIT-UN network is currently on-hold until 2025 but outside faculty and university leaders can <u>view</u> the existing network directory to identify initiatives of interest. They can also search across <u>PIT-UN's database</u> of public interest technology programs in higher education.
- Public interest technology students, practitioners, and faculty can join PIT-UN online and in-person <u>events</u>. Many of these events are open to non-members.
- Students interested in pursuing public interest technology careers can consult PIT-UN's <u>curated list of job boards</u>.
- Funders interested in applying a PIT approach to their key issue areas should reach out to PIT-UN Director Andreen Soley at info@pitcases.org.
- Individuals interested in receiving the latest updates about PIT-UN can <u>subscribe</u> to PIT-UNiverse, the organization's newsletter.

To learn more and contact Siegel Family Endowment, visit www.siegelendowment.org