Equity Center Awarded Major Grant to Support Burgeoning Field of Public Interest Technology

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The University of Virginia was recently awarded a Public Interest Technology University Network (PIT-UN) Challenge grant to further support the critical new field of public interest technology. The Equity Center at UVA was awarded funding to support local youth in building out a Regional Equity Atlas, joining 24 other colleges and universities across the country who received funding to continue their pathfinding work in the creation of this new field. This project will be led by Michele Claibourn, Lead Data Scientist for the Equity Center and Director of Research Data Services and the Social, Natural, and Engineering Sciences at the University of Virginia Library.

An Equity Atlas serves as a data and policy tool for leaders and advocates to advance a more equitable community while helping citizens hold decision-makers accountable, bringing more data to bear in evaluating equity in policy choices and outcomes. To be fully equitable it must be created with the community and driven by community-expressed needs. To be truly useful, the community must have access to data literacy skills and understand how data can be used for empowerment and change. Having begun to develop a prototype Equity Atlas for the Charlottesville region with community partners, the Equity Atlas team proposes using participatory methods to engage a wide cross-section of community members to help us evaluate and advance this public interest technology, to mentor students in high school and college in contributing to development of the platform and supporting materials, and to contribute to the reparation of trust between the university and community by making this data and technology platform a truly public resource. Working with multiple community partners, this team will model participatory methods and community co-creation in public interest technology and develop a roadmap for others.
As the country continues to face unprecedented challenges to our public health, democratic institutions, social norms and economic well-being, we have a critical choice to make. Will we use technology to develop a strong, unified response to COVID-19 and future crises, make our economy and democracy more accessible and equitable and create a country and systems that work for us all? Or will we use technology to perpetuate and even expand unequal and unjust policies. The work done at UVA and partner institutions across the network is advancing the use of technology for public benefit.

The Public Interest Technology University Network is a partnership of colleges and universities convened by New America, the Ford Foundation, and the Hewlett Foundation. The network is dedicated to building the nascent field of public interest technology through curriculum development, faculty research opportunities, and experiential learning programs, in order to inspire a new generation of civic-minded technologists and policy leaders.

“Our work points to how important it is to make public interest technology a permanent and vital pathway in higher education,” said Anne-Marie Slaughter, President of New America. “Public interest technologists are at the forefront of societal change and progress, and our students are leading us toward a more prosperous, more just, and more collaborative future. Institutional members of the University Network are already making big changes in our world. For example, our PIT-UN practitioners and students are among the many people working on Covid-19 testing, tracing, and response. In addition, our network members are working on solving the problems of environmental social injustices. I look forward to hearing more about both topics and the solutions our 2019 grantees have come up with at the 2020 Convening panel sessions.”

“When we announced the creation of the University Network, I was thrilled to work with these wonderful institutions of higher education to advance and expand the field of public interest technology towards a more just technological future,” said Darren Walker, President of the Ford Foundation. “The projects supported through this most recent round of awards demonstrate just how innovative and driven the faculty, staff, and students within the University Network are in their commitment to ensuring technology is a force for public good.”

The Public Interest Technology University Network is a partnership of colleges and universities convened by New America, the Ford Foundation, and the Hewlett Foundation. The network and challenge grants are funded through the support of the Ford Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, Mastercard Impact Fund, with support from the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth, Patrick J. McGovern Foundation, The Raikes Foundation, Schmidt Futures and The Siegel Family Endowment. The PIT-UN is dedicated to building the nascent field of public interest technology through curriculum development, faculty research opportunities, and experiential learning programs, in order to inspire a new generation of civic-minded technologists and policy leaders.