2025

POLICY FOR PUBLIC INTEREST TECHNOLOGY

PIT-UN

PUBLIC INTEREST TECHNOLOGY
UNIVERSITY NETWORK

Executive Summary

This moment in technology requires concerted action by an assemblage of players devoted to ensure technology is used for just and equitable purposes. This aim of the movement for public interest technology is to impact society. But to do this, requires an understanding of the role of policy. This research investigates the intersections of policy and public interest technology within the context of the Public Interest Technology University Network, and presents the findings from interviews conducted with U.S. based faculty and staff who are members of PIT-UN, as well as affiliated funders and other personnel, in combination with desk research.

I operationalize policy as "a complex assemblage of issues, processes, procedures, and restraints."[1]

This definition recognizes that policy goes beyond regulatory documents, and sets the atmosphere for the success of PIT programs on campuses. In investigating policy and PIT-UN, this research examines the key areas including the role of university policy, administrators, and funders in setting and enforcing policy and how these might change in order to ensure the success of PIT programs in the future.

1 See "Prologue: What do we mean when we say policy?"

The following are recommendations for administrators, funders, and PIT staff.

Reimagine what counts: Administrators should create pathways for PIT-related work to "count" for annual evaluations along with promotion and tenure.

Create support infrastructure: Administrators must rethink or ease financial, resource, and other obstacles to collaboration.

Go to bat with policymakers: Administrators, and their staff, have the opportunity to shape narratives surrounding PIT (and other) important programs on-campus, and to tell the story(ies) of why this kind of work is important.

Collaboration: Academic workers must form partnerships and/or collectives to build PIT programs and to meet the policy moments as they arise.

Using the benefits of senior status: Senior faculty must advocate to relevant parties about the necessity of PIT work and how traditional metrics for evaluating academic work may no longer be adequate.

Navigation skills: Academic workers must obtain skills that will allow them to navigate interactions and entities, both on and off-campus, that might impact their PIT programs.

Signal importance: Funders must continue to provide the language for PIT academic workers to use in connection with initiating and sustaining their work.

Equip PIT: Funders should assist with building the capacity for individuals, teams, and PIT programs.

Involve the corporations: Involve the foundations of tech organizations to provide unrestricted funds for PIT programs.

Prologue: What do we mean when we say policy?

Think of policy as a course of action; a set of decisions about how to reach a goal or a set of goals related to a desired outcome.

Policy is not law, although these two topics are very much interconnected.

Policy can be thought of as including law – legislation, court opinions, regulatory actions, etc. – but that is not its sum. Instead, policy can be understood as a complex assemblage of issues, processes (like the enactment of legislation), procedures, and restraints.[2] Policy is an umbrella, encompassing various foci related to a topic, while creating the environment for interventions and mechanisms designed to meet the ideals and challenges of those areas.

For example, perhaps the issue that has received the most attention in the past few years is artificial intelligence. Under artificial intelligence – the big tent of AI – exist several areas of policy focus, eg., facial recognition and other biometrics, algorithmic decision systems, data governance, intellectual property, etc. Each of these areas may have different connected issues, court

2 David W. Stewart, "What Is Policy? And Why It Matters," *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 33, no. 1 (April 2014): 1–3, https://doi.org/10.1509/jppm.33.1.1.

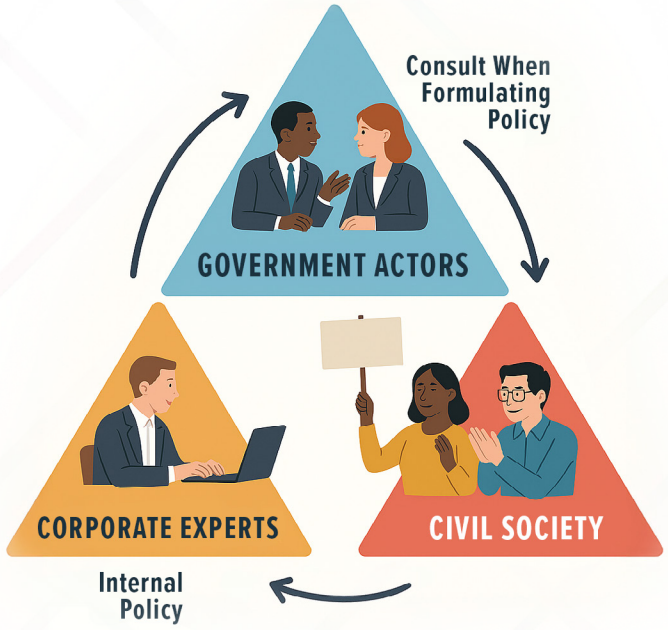
opinions, legislative pronouncements, strategies and guidelines, among other things, that define, shape, and restrain actions related to that area. The Biden Administration's AI policy, for instance, was shaped by an executive order, The Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights, the National Institute of Standards and Technology's (NIST) AI Risk Management Framework, and commitments from corporate organizations, among other animating activities and documents.

This network of declarations and actions is an example of *public* policy, or activity emanating from government actors to shape a problem or topic of interest. But non-governmental organizations can and do create and shape policy as well. Both corporate and civil society actors play active roles in modeling and modifying the contours of policy as it affects the larger public. In the same way that the US federal government announced its *Blueprint*, technology organizations, both large and small, have made pronouncements, incorporated strategy, and implemented frameworks related to the same issues, in this case AI. Big Tech firms like Meta and Google have public-facing documents detailing their ideas on responsible AI and AI principles, designed to provide guidance for how the organizations will create, manage, and use AI for their goals.

On the civil society side, organizations like UNESCO and the International Committee of the Red Cross, too, have also created and enacted AI policies. UNESCO, for example, has identified 11 areas of policy action that it recommended to United Nations member states, as well as other public and private actors. These areas include recommendations for specific implementations – like the creation of AI auditing systems – as well as subject area policy actions – like investigating and remedying the possible negative impacts of AI on gender and gender equity. The identified goals for the recommendations were to "provide a basis to make AI systems work for the good of humanity, individuals, societies and the environment and ecosystems, and to prevent harm." Likewise, the International Committee on the Red Cross, stated in the publication of its AI policy, that its goals were to create a "humanitarian, ethical and learning approach that promotes a responsible, safe, coherent and human-centred use of AI."

Those examples are but a few related technology policy, and AI is but one technology of interest as it affects members of the public. But the policies noted demonstrate how policy shapes courses of action. Importantly, policies are born from interactions. Neither government, corporate, or civil society policy is created devoid of influence from other sectors.

Government actors, for example, consult with corporate and civil society experts when formulating policy; corporations shape internal policy, many times, in reaction to campaigns from civil society, and bounded by governmental policy. These linkages demonstrate the interconnectedness of both the subjects and objects of technology policy.



It also illustrates that policy should be viewed as an ecosystem. Within this ecosystem exist institutions, actors, and networks, among other animating objects. As Ben Tarnoff, writer and co-Founder of *Logic Magazine*, wrote in his *2022 Internet for the People: The fight for our digital future*, "[e]cosystems are full of feedback loops, cycles, and flows; organisms are ceaselessly interacting with one another and with the nonliving.[3]" To make sense of this living policy, then, we might consider the artifacts (documents), ambience (the atmosphere(s) created), and reverberations of the system.[4] This more complex approach to thinking about policy that goes beyond simply considering government documents, according to Marcus Weaver-Hightower, professor of education at Virginia Tech University, allows us to "capture the full complexity of policy contexts" and its various components.[5] This kind of investigation, then, is most appropriate for examining the role of policy in the interactions between universities and public interest technology.

---

3 Ben Tarnoff, *Internet for the People: The Fight for Our Digital Future* (Verso Books, 2022), 145.

4 Tess Lea, "Policy Ecology as Concept and Method," *Critical Policy Studies* 0, no. 0 (n.d.): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2024.2370581.

5 Marcus B. Weaver-Hightower, "An Ecology Metaphor for Educational Policy Analysis: A Call to Complexity," *Educational Researcher* 37, no. 3 (April 2008): 153, https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X08318050.

Introduction: Policy + Public Interest Technology

Public interest technology (PIT), as defined by Tara Dawson McGuinness and Hana Schank in their 2021 book, *Power to the Public: The Promise of Public Interest Technology*, is "the application of design, data, and delivery to advance the public interest and promote the public good.[6]" For McGuinness and Schank, PIT was shaped by those three essential elements which positioned organizations to serve the public. The concept was based on the idea that government and civil society organizations are needed to solve the pressing societal problems of the age.

The question of how to define the "public interest" has a long history. In US federal communications/telecommunications policy, for example, the definition of public interest and the regulations/activities to ensure its existence have taken many iterations since the early 20th Century.

The Federal Communication Commission's conceptualization of the public interest was expressed through policy born from regulations, regulatory actions, legal cases, and memoranda concerning its areas of authority as outlined by Congress including, broadcast, cable, and the internet.

---

6 Tara Dawson McGuinness and Hana Schank, *Power to the Public: The Promise of Public Interest Technology* (Princeton, UNITED STATES: Princeton University Press, 2021), ix, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ufl/detail.action?docID=6455289.

For broadcast this meant, for example, that stations and channels had to "air programming that [wa]s responsive to the needs and problems of its local community of [broadcast] license." This has also been served through rules requiring that broadcast and multichannel video programming distributors (think cable and satellite) provide equal opportunities for legally qualified candidates for office to purchase time at rates and placements comparable to those of opposing candidates.

Fast forward to the 21st Century, and there are concerted efforts to be more explicit in expressing the public interest at its intersection with technology. With the creation of the Broadband Equity, Access, and Development program (BEAD), for example, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) is tasked with meeting the policy goal of internet for all through the administration of grants to the states and U.S. territories. BEAD grants are supposed to be used for upgrading or creating the infrastructure that communities need for high-speed internet, as well as workforce development, and digital equity programs.

The accurate and adequate administration of this program, so far, has required not only work from government agencies, but also partnerships and work from civil society institutions, including universities and community organizations that desire to ensure the accuracy of the data used to make the decisions about the amount of funding awarded to each state and community. The University of Chicago's Internet Equity Initiative of its Data Science Institute, has been involved in the creation of tools for more accurate broadband data mapping, collaborating with regional governments and community organizations. Through the creation of a consortia of organizations, the IEI has been able to assist with addressing both federal and local policy goals.

The work of the IEI is but one example of how the public interest, as defined by government, needs more than just government agencies working to bring the public interest to life. It further demonstrates the importance of collaborative PIT organizational structures as they intersect with policy. This illustrates the necessity of programmatic interactions with communities and community organizations to actually understand how policy might truly serve the public interest and which policy actions work toward that goal. Without this grounding, the actions aimed at serving the public interest will miss the important goal of serving the entire public[7].

---

7 Paul Matzko, "The 'Public Interest' Serves the Interest of the Powerful," *The New Atlantis*, no. 67 (2022): 81–86.

This echoes calls from Greta Byrum, co-director of the Digital Equity Laboratory at The New School and sociologist and author Ruha Benjamin, founding director of the Ida B. Wells Data Justice Lab at Princeton University, among others, for an understanding that technology, though a tool to assist with problem-solving, is not the solution to societal problems.[8]

> Technosolutionism in the public interest, instead of helping to resolve long-standing issues undergirded by systems of racism, sexism, classism (name the -ism). In fact, technology only amplifies and entrenches long existing injustices.[9]

8 Greta Byrum and Ruha Benjamin, "Disrupting the Gospel of Tech Solutionism to Build Tech Justice," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, June 16, 2022, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/disrupting_the_gospel_of_tech_solutionism_to_build_tech_justice.

9 See also Meredith Broussard's description of "technochauvinism." Meredith Broussard, *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World* (Cambridge, UNITED STATES: MIT Press, 2018), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ufl/detail.action?docID=5355856.

Byrum and Benjamin, and others, have argued for a "Just Tech" agenda that prioritizes the "leadership of those who have been most impacted," an idea that has been crystalized in the Social Science Research Council's Just Tech Fellowship Program.

A framework like Just Tech, which "reimagine[s] the limits and potential of new technology and ensure[s] that expertise and experiential knowledge inform efforts to produce structural change," requires a structure for active engagement of community expertise at the intersection(s) of policy and technology. Fostering this kind of participation mandates infrastructure, and demands "a cross-disciplinary approach that demands technology be designed, deployed, and regulated in a responsible and equitable way."10 This definition of the public interest inherently recalls the need to understand policy as more than just documents, but as a larger ecosystem. And ecosystems have structure, and structures that facilitate more structure. For PIT, this includes the Public Interest Technology University Network, **designed to provide programming and funding so that member institutions can "respond to the core ethical, legal, policy, social, economic and political implications of technology.**" With a membership set in academia, PIT-UN members represent institutions in the United States and globally, with individuals and collaboratives who have created programs aimed at using the power of universities to meet the core problems while using technology in ways that advance the public interest. Foundationally, these are training programs, designed to include students of all levels in the pipeline of expertise needed to address the societal issues using technology, while at the same time using "relevant insights from fields like public policy or sociology."[11]

PIT-UN, and other PIT programs and institutions, aim to meet policy goals, whether leveraging science and engineering to inform public policy or integrating the power of PIT by leveraging libraries as intermediaries for civic practice.

At the same time, PIT-UN programs exist within policy environments and are, therefore, shaped by how different policies manifest both on- and off-campus.

---

10 Jenny Toomey and Latanya Sweeney, "Building the Public Interest Technology Infrastructure of the Future," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, April 11, 2022, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/building_the_public_interest_technology_infrastructure_of_the_future.

11 Toomey and Sweeney.

This report examines the intersection of PIT(-UN) and policy, how policy and public interest technology interact for programming outcomes, as well as the future possibilities for PIT programs where policy, broadly defined, is central to meeting the goal of work in the public interest.

Universities + Policy

Universities are critical infrastructure for advancing PIT-related goals.

According to Jenny Toomey, former Director of the Ford Foundation's Catalyst Fund, and Latanya Sweeney, Daniel Paul Professor of the Practice of Government and Technology at the Harvard Kennedy School where she directs the Public Interest Tech Lab, academia's participation in PIT can lead technologists to purposeful and successful careers.[12] This requires, however, a re-envisioning of curricula for fields traditionally labeled as those birthing technologists, as well as rethinking who gets to become a technologist. Both of these requirements have to face the reality of the university policy environment, which codifies academic worker labor practices, shapes collaborative efforts through funding schemes, sets the tone for rewarding "meritorious accomplishments," and must interact with larger and more powerful government and community expectations and pressures.

Worker Precarity

A significant pressure for academic workers is the continuing shift in the permanence of university jobs. In the U.S., the number of tenured university faculty has declined significantly since 1987, now at around 21 percent according to the American Association of University Professors.[13] In 2022, the number of full-time, non-tenure track faculty and those working at American universities without tenure outnumbered tenured faculty;[14] the number of non-tenure track new highers outpaced new tenure track highers in the same year.[15] The majority of the academic workforce is composed of part-time instructors.[16] Several factors have contributed to the quantitative shift away from faculty job permanence, and these numbers are not solely the result of the existence of fewer permanent jobs, but also pushes from state legislatures to remove tenure protections.[17]

---

12 Jenny Toomey and Latanya Sweeney, "Building the Public Interest Technology Infrastructure of the Future," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, April 11, 2022, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/building_the_public_interest_technology_infrastructure_of_the_future.

13 American Association of University Professors, "Tenure," AAUP, June 30, 2006, https://www.aaup.org/issues/tenure.

14 Glenn Colby, "IPEDS FT Faculty," *AAUP Data* (blog), December 4, 2022, https://data.aaup.org/ipeds-ft-faculty/.

15 Glenn Colby, "IPEDS FT Faculty New Hires," *AAUP Data* (blog), May 15, 2024, https://data.aaup.org/ipeds-ft-faculty-new-hires/.

16 Glenn Colby, "Academic Workforce," *AAUP Data* (blog), December 4, 2022, https://data.aaup.org/academic-workforce/.

17 Ryan Quinn, "The Growing Trend of Attacks on Tenure," Inside Higher Ed, accessed December 16, 2024, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/tenure/2024/08/05/growing-trend-attacks-tenure.

Although changes in the composition of university faculty and political pressures on universities, especially public universities, are not the subject of this report, these factors provide important context for considering the policy environment on university campuses. These factors further impact the environment of public interest technology programs and the faculty and staff who lead them.

What work matters?

Successful on-campus PIT programs need personnel to provide vision, management, administration, and labor. For faculty, a major question inherent in their participation in these programs is whether their PIT work will "count" for annual and tenure and promotion reviews. Full-time faculty at most universities continue to be evaluated on traditional factors like research, teaching, and service. The weight of these three areas differs depending on the focus of the university (research university, small liberal arts college, regional university, community college, etc). At many universities, for faculty evaluations, research is the area receiving the most attention and evaluated on the number and placement of publications including journal articles, books, and refereed conference proceedings. Although PIT programs can foster research or research-like outputs and impacts including reports and digital publications, for the most part, these are not viewed in the same way as traditional publications.

According to an assistant professor in the humanities working at a STEM focused university in the Northeast, although his colleagues appreciate his PIT work, they still have expectations for him based on traditional humanities scholarship. This means that faculty like him who want to create PIT projects have to do more, "You're basically doing double the work," he said, "There is invisible labor that you need to do – a lot committee work and teaching well, so that it doesn't look like I'm ignoring what I have to do." This also indicates that colleagues and administrators reviewing faculty work may have no point of reference for making sense of the work of PIT faculty or how it relates to the larger departmental mission. A key, then, for junior faculty who want PIT to be valued by their departments and the larger university is for senior faculty to be more vocal about the need for including non-traditional scholarship and work as a part of the artifacts used to assess their colleagues, said one faculty member, "Cultural capital attaches to senior faculty."

Progress would not only mean that the PIT programs and projects created were valued, but also the style of research, which may differ by field, would be valued as well. Although the humanities, where the researchers can traditionally work on solo book projects, papers, and reviews, many of the PIT-related projects and programs are team endeavors. Therefore, evaluators and university administrators need to understand and appreciate the

importance of collaborative and interdisciplinary work. According to one assistant professor, many people do not consider teamwork a part of traditional scholarship, "There's no understanding of team science, which is extremely important for what comes next."

Many of the teams for PIT projects and programming are composed of faculty, staff, and students from various departments and expertises.

PIT is inherently interdisciplinary, seeking to ensure tech is responsive to human, social, and environmental needs.

Yet, despite interdisciplinary research – and the structures that encourage it – spurring grant activity to federal organizations like the National Institutes of Health, the value in interdisciplinarity is not always reflected in university policy memorialized in budgets, resource allocations, faculty lines and responsibilities. And funding is an area of concern for universities and individual faculty and PIT project teams. For faculty and teams, funding can allow faculty to buy-out a portion of their teaching load, or for PIT teams to hire additional staff. Funding can also be the difference between a temporary PIT project and a sustainable PIT program.

Financial Pressures

A university's policies for managing grants and other funding that an individual or team is awarded can also impact the success and sustainability of PIT programming. Many universities have negotiated rates for indirect costs – facilities and administration costs for research grants that do not cover the direct research – with federal government funders that equate to over 50 percent of the direct costs, cutting down on the amount of direct funding for which researchers can ask when grants are limited. Indirect costs and grant administration schemes can also impede collaboration with faculty from other units and universities. A senior faculty member at a large research university told the story of having to use a creative scheme to make sure a collaborative event between three universities was able to move forward because of internal policies of both the donor and the university, which made it difficult to transfer money between universities. "The collaboration infrastructure sucks!" she said.

For staff, issues with funding can be the difference between a short engagement at the university, and a more permanent position. According to one university staff member at a public research university in the Midwest, "The biggest challenge is resources. Grants and contracts are fundamental to working and paying salaries." And the quest for funding signals the financial pressures some universities face, which make it difficult to sustain programs with community partners. It also affects the ability to pay students who work for PIT programs. "We must find infrastructure to provide reliable financial support," she said.

Political pressures

And staff positions can also be more vulnerable to political pressures than those covered by traditional faculty contracts. The recent spate of state universities closing their offices with mandates related to diversity, equity, and inclusion is illustrative.[18] These firings are the result of recently passed state legislation aimed at curbing or outright banning campus diversity initiatives. While some universities have attempted to save staff jobs through reorganization,[19] many of these offices were run by workers that did not have a faculty appointment, and who now have had to find positions elsewhere.[20] These kinds of policies have implications for PIT programs as well, especially those framed around using a Just Tech or similar ethos aimed at centering traditionally marginalized and vulnerable communities. The sustainability of these PIT programs may depend on faculty and staff ability to navigate these limiting policies and to frame the work in ways that persuade external influences about the value of the programs.

And it is not solely DEI programs that have faced scrutiny and cuts based on political pressures. Departments in the humanities and social sciences have faced closure and reorganization, especially at public universities around the nation. As states question whether and where to invest in higher education, many policymakers are arguing the need for states to support only those departments that "improve the value they provide to both taxpayers and graduates."[21] Inevitably, this kind of framing weighs in favor of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, along with business majors, viewed as more practical or career-oriented than those in the humanities and social sciences.

---

18 Laura Spitalniak, "A Look at DEI Eliminations at Colleges across the US," Higher Ed Dive, September 19, 2024, https://www.highereddive.com/news/dei-eliminations-cuts-offices-colleges-texas-florida-kentucky-alabama/727414/.

19 INSIGHT Staff, "More Universities Shutter DEI Offices," *Insight Into Diversity* (blog), August 21, 2024, https://www.insightintodiversity.com/more-universities-shutter-dei-offices/.

20 Erin Gretzinger et al., "Tracking Higher Ed's Dismantling of DEI," The Chronicle of Higher Education, December 20, 2024, https://www.chronicle.com/article/tracking-higher-eds-dismantling-of-dei; Katherine Mangan, "'A Slap in The Face': How UT-Austin Axed a DEI Division," The Chronicle of Higher Education, June 27, 2024, https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-slap-in-the-face-how-ut-austin-axed-a-dei-division

21 Anemona Hartocollis, "Can Humanities Survive the Budget Cuts?," *The New York Times*, November 3, 2023, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/03/us/liberal-arts-college-degree-humanities.html

This "careerist" perspective of higher education, too, has negative implications for PIT, which is inherently interdisciplinary. Without training in social sciences and humanities, technologists may lack the ability to evaluate the possible outcomes of the creation and deployment of technological systems.

Said Toomey and Sweeney, this dearth of knowledge related to society means that instead of working in the public interest, technologists will only "replicate and reinforce existing inequities, invisibly encoding them in the digital world."[22]

22 Toomey and Sweeney, "Building the Public Interest Technology Infrastructure of the Future."

Policy + Funders

Although funding influences the success of PIT programs, providing resources for staffing, students, and sustainability, it is how funders frame the public interest and its impact that shapes PIT programming. The organizations that fostered the NetGain partnership in 2015 – a joint venture between the Ford Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, and the Mozilla Foundation – deemed it important to promote the use of the internet for justice. This partnership went on in 2016 to commit $18 millions in grants to the funding of PIT programs focused on the government and civil society.[23] Ford Foundation President Darren Walker explained, "Philanthropy has a responsibility to ensure that technology makes the world more equal. For many of society's most disenfranchised, their relationship with technology is a virtual extension of their exclusion." This framing of the purpose of public interest technology, sets the atmosphere for how funders will evaluate PIT projects and programs seeking grants.

This, too, is policy.[24]

In the nearly one decade since the NetGain funding commitment, several organizations including New America and the now independent Public Interest Technology University Network, have made commitments to fund PIT-related initiatives. The federal government, too, has recognized the importance of monetary commitments to PIT. In 2024, for example, the Biden-Harris administration announced commitments of almost $100 million from philanthropic organizations and agencies for PIT programs and initiatives. These pledges from around the PIT ecosystem were designed to promote, as the White House defined it, "technology that protects our safety, security, democratic values, and human rights."[25]

Among those organizations included in the White House announcement were both private funders and government agencies. In the U.S., however, the federal government funds the majority of academic research.[26] Therefore the National Science Foundation commitment of a minimum $48 million in funding for its experiential learning funding scheme and a second round of its newer Responsible Design, Development, and Deployment of Technologies (ReDDDoT) program

---

23 Communications, "Five Major Foundations Announce Groundbreaking Plans to Develop Public Interest Technologists," Open Society Foundations, February 16, 2016, https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/newsroom/five-major-foundations-announce-groundbreaking-plans-develop-public-interest

24 See Christopher Newfield, "Humanities Decline in Darkness: How Humanities Research Funding Works," Public Humanities 1 (January 2025): e31, https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2024.39.

25 OSTP, "Fact Sheet: Biden-Harris Administration Announces Commitments from Across Technology Ecosystem Including Nearly $100 Million to Advance Public Interest Technology," The White House, July 16, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/Biden-HarrisPIT.

26 "Higher Education Research and Development (HERD) Survey" (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2022), tbl. 1, https://ncses.nsf.gov/surveys/higher-education-research-development/2022.

– a collaboration with private funders aimed at ensuring "ethical, legal, community, and societal considerations are embedded in the lifecycle of technology's creation," was notable. The framing of this program finds its basis in the NSF's "broader impacts" proposal merit criterion, which has been used to evaluate grant proposals since 1997. A research project can be thought to fulfil the broader impacts criterion if both the project and its associated activities "contribute more broadly to achieving societal goals."[27] Examples of societal impact include the creation of infrastructure, improving national security, broadening the participation of groups traditionally underrepresented in STEM, and enhancing the economic competitiveness of the US.

According to one tenured professor at a large public university in the Southwestern US, the NSF's Technology, Innovation, and Partnerships Directorate was a natural fit for a PIT funding scheme because it attracts a large number of PIT researchers. "The NSF has shown an orientation toward community oriented research, applied research that makes an impact," he said. At the same time, researchers have argued that the employment of the broader impacts framework reifies societal inequities.[28] Further, some may consider the NSF's mandate for the furtherance of science – what Mark Solovey called the "scientistic"

27 "Perspective on Broader Impacts" (National Science Foundation, November 2014), https://nsf-gov-resources.nsf.gov/2022-09/Broader_Impacts_0.pdf

28 Thomas Woodson and Sophia Boutilier, "Impacts for Whom? Assessing Inequalities in NSF-Funded Broader Impacts Using the Inclusion-Immediacy Criterion," *Science and Public Policy* 49, no. 2 (April 1, 2022): 168–78, https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scab072.

approach in his 2020 *Social Science for What?*[29] – as narrowing the scope of both the kinds of PIT projects it supports and the kind of research teams that might receive funding. And although extramural funding for social scientific endeavors may find more mechanisms for funding depending of framing of the funding call, the humanities, according to Christopher Newfield, Director of Research at the Independent Social Research Foundation, are underfunded or unfunded, which "weakens interdisciplinary collaborations with neighboring fields, and curtails the public benefits of humanities work."[30]

Like the federal government, private funders, too, consider the impacts that grant funding may have for projects and the larger society. Said one funding director, the organization's role is define to who they are going to work with and identifying the impacts of the project beyond a paper publication. How work beyond the research publication might appear is a question that the Transforming Evidence Funders Network has been investigating. The group's aim is societal impact through "the generation, mobilization, and use of evidence across a wide range of issue areas and policy sectors worldwide."[31] This network and its associated Transforming Evidence Network seeks to convene a community of entities to create strategic change.

Beyond convening other agencies for collaboration, funders shape the atmosphere, including the language used in connection with PIT projects and initiatives. Said one former manager at a philanthropy, "We try to think about policy expansively," she said. This incorporates the ability of a diverse and inclusive group of people being able to participate in the decision-making about the role of technology in society. It also equips communities with the tools needed for participation, as well as the need to consider power dynamics with any work on or with technology.

This power analysis differentiates PIT from other tech and society conversations, "PIT might just be a rebrand of older civic tech conversations," she said. "But [civic tech] doesn't fix the problem. We want to have a deeper focus on the public interest values."

Therefore, prospective grantees lacking a power analysis in their proposals may not be funded.

---

29 Mark Solovey, Social Science for What?: *Battles over Public Funding for the "Other Sciences" at the National Science Foundation*, The MIT Press (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2020).

30 Newfield, "Humanities Decline in Darkness."

31 "The Transforming Evidence Funders Network," April 25, 2022, https://pew.org/3LfGDOW.

Funders also help academics with the language they can use to persuade their administrations that PIT work is valuable, which might appear as contractual phrasing. This requires funders to consider how to assist faculty in doing work that is not the most traditionally scholarly, but that commands broader visibility. The question funders wrestle with, then, is "How do you provide funding for the kind of work that doesn't look like it fits into the normal?" the former fund director said. Answering this question sends strong signals to administrators and researchers that "applicable, practical, and policy-relevant work is the kind of work that needs to be supported." Although researchers themselves understand that funding mandates require nontraditional scholarship, university administrators and other senior decision-makers on campuses have lagged behind in recognizing the importance of practical, public work. Built into funding calls and mechanisms, then, is the necessity of convincing universities that PIT-related work receives positive attention from key external organizations. Therefore, although the importance of private philanthropy signalling this shift toward funding more PIT-oriented projects cannot be understated, having a government organization like the NSF announcing its support for these kinds of projects, and creating a specific mechanism, lets administrators know that applied work is worthwhile.

"How do you provide funding for the kind of work that doesn't look like it fits into the normal?"

The Future of PIT + Policy

In setting out a public interest agenda for what she called the "technological Gilded Age" in an article for Forbes online, Katy Knight, Executive Director and President of Siegel Family Endowment, wrote,

"PIT must rise as a cohesive movement, coordinating across actors and systems to drive long-term change."

To do this, according to Knight, entities across all sectors must meet the challenge of societal problems amplified by technology. For Knight, this meant that PIT could be "an overarching movement and ethos, [it can be] an aspiration that technology can be a force for good, as long as we govern it effectively and prioritize pro-social values."[32] Achieving this requires an understanding of policy, which encompasses more than solely the documents announcing rules and regulations, but also the associated environments created. And if we understand policy as "being the conditions that overdetermine what is possible,"[33] we might use these interactions to shape the future and create interventions that might change outcomes.

Administrators, PIT faculty and staff, and funders supporting PIT work should take certain policy-related actions that will assist in the success and sustainability of on-campus PIT programs. Because the power and vulnerability of the players in the on-campus PIT ecosystem is disparate, the below recommendations have been divided by both who has the authority and who is best able to take on that task.

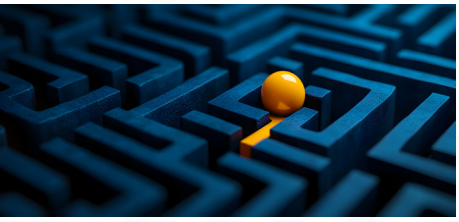
---

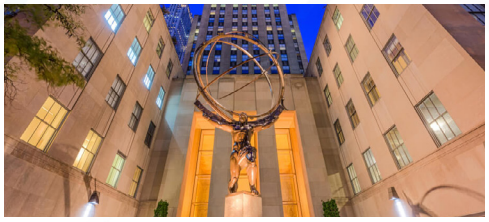
32 Katy Knight, "A Public Interest Agenda For The Technological Gilded Age," Forbes, November 13, 2024, https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbesnonprofitcouncil/2024/11/13/a-public-interest-agenda-for-the-technological-gilded-age/.

33 "Resetting How We Think of Policy: A Conversation with Safiya Noble," Logic(s) Magazine, December 13, 2023, https://logicmag.io/policy/resetting-how-we-conceive-of-policy/.

Administrators

Reimagine what counts: By far one of the most repeated obstacles that the faculty and staff I spoke with over the course of this research mentioned was not knowing whether or how their PIT work would be valued at their university. Although some academic laborers worked in centers or in programs that are explicit about their mission and connections to the PIT mission, many others worked solo or in teams of other workers who have no explicit mandate to engage in PIT work. Their work is evaluated using traditional metrics. Therefore, many have little room for additional work without being overloaded or face reviews on PIT work from colleagues who may not value or understand the public-facing work they have undertaken. Therefore, it is incumbent upon administrators, then, to make pathways for PIT-related work to "count" for annual evaluations along with promotion and tenure.





Create support infrastructure: Administrators can also rethink or ease financial, resource, and other obstacles to true interdisciplinary collaboration. Said one tenured faculty member at a midwestern public university, "The system is designed for individualism." But individualism makes it difficult to meet the challenges of PIT. Therefore, according to the faculty member, "We need overarching university policy about building programmatic initiatives." This includes university support for on-campus collaboration such as removing or rethinking disciplinary boundaries. This would also mean university support for off-campus collaboration with other universities and organizations. This may require that the university change the financial requirements that are placed on grants or paid work in which on-campus PIT organizations might be engaged. It may also mean making it easier for PIT programs to share resources with community or civil society organizations, as well as their colleagues on other campuses.

Go to bat with policymakers: One of the significant concerns for PIT academic workers was the policy environment of the state in which they worked, this was especially for those who worked at public schools, that are more vulnerable to legislative changes. Administrators, and their staff, have the opportunity to shape narratives surrounding PIT (and other) important programs on-campus, and to tell the story(ies) of why this kind of work is important. One tenured faculty member in the Southwest described how having a politically astute chancellor at their large public research university had allowed the university's PIT offerings to grow to achieve a measure of sustainability. This also meant making room for the business community to inform the legislature about the needs of business from university graduates. If university administrators are able to leverage the framing of PIT programs as net goods for business and society, this may persuade legislators of their value.

Staff + Faculty

Collaboration: That collaboration and interdisciplinarity are at the heart of PIT is definitive. Academic workers must form partnerships and/or collectives to build PIT programs and to meet the policy moments as they arise. Collaboration will not only allow for more people to be involved in doing the work, but also as a signal to funders and programs that PIT teams have the skills and experience to meet the policy moments. Over the past few years, the federal government has created mechanisms that offer large funding awards to assemblages of experts. Said one faculty member, "They don't want to use disciplines to fund; they want to use teams, or systems." This provides an opportunity for on-campus teams and/or cross-campus teams to form collectives aimed at working through PIT problems. Successfully funded proposals might also signal to administrators about the value of PIT work.

Using the benefits of senior status: If one of the major obstacles for successfully participating and sustaining PIT programs, especially for untenured or non-permanent faculty and staff, is not having the time or assurance that the work will matter for their careers, senior faculty and staff should use their seniority to ensure fair and accurate review of junior work. This will require advocacy, on the part of senior workers, for changes in systems of review and/or participation on review committees.[34] This will allow senior faculty to persuade other reviewers or those in supervisory positions about the necessity of PIT work and how traditional metrics for evaluating academic work may no longer fit the needs of work that aims to impact those outside of traditional academic and research boundaries.

Navigation skills: Along with administrators requiring skills to successfully advocate for PIT in the current policy environment, academic workers, too, need to attain skills that will allow them to navigate the interactions and entities, both on and off-campus, that might impact their PIT programs. This might mean cultivating policy literacy and the ability to communicate about the problem they are solving and why it matters. According to one academic turned policy professional, "Academics care, but have some fear about doing this kind of research." Therefore, acquiring the relevant skills is important for PIT-oriented academics who would like to shape the perspectives of those external to the PIT program.

34 I Know

Funders

Signalling is crucial: Funders must continue to provide the language for PIT academic workers to use in connection with initiating and sustaining their work. In considering how external pressures might impact the success of PIT programs, funders may be in the best position to tell the story of the value of these programs. In addition, funders will be able to provide language for PIT academic workers to use when discussing programs with administrators and others. This demonstrates the importance of translation. Said one funder, "[Our new grant focuses on] how to translate scholarship into policy research, how to make research more actionable for stakeholders."

Equip PIT: If the ability to translate research into actionable impacts and policy literacy are important skills for PIT academics, funders are in the best position to provide this kind of education. Funders can assist with building the capacity for individuals, teams and PIT programs.

Involve the corporations: Some might consider this suggestion controversial, especially as there has been a movement to question the influence of corporate money on academia and academic independence. Yet, much of the technology at issue is made and deployed by corporations. And tech workers are organizing around better working conditions and responsible technology concerns. Further, many tech organizations have established foundations from which PIT programs might obtain funding, so long as the funds are unrestricted. Said one PIT staff member and former tech worker at a university in the Northeast, "I believe the conversation that needs to happen is with the for-profit industry. We have to incentivize participation in developing their workforce."

Understanding policy is important for the success of public interest technology initiatives like those of the members in PIT-UN. As Dr. Fallon Wilson has called for PIT to redefine itself, the definition of policy must be reimagined to encompass all of the ways that processes, procedures, and interactions will shape PIT and influence both those working in these spaces and who these programs are designed to serve. A more accurate understanding of the policy ecosystem of actors and actions will allow for designing structures and collaborations that can meet the challenges of the environment, and make lasting positive impacts on all of the communities touched by this work.

Epilogue

When I wrote this report in late November 2024, it had been over a year since the beginning of the latest explosive conflict in Palestinian territories as well as civil war in Sudan. The globalized conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo continued, and the current active war in Ukraine was in its second year. In the United States, the votes of the 2024 election had not too long before been counted, and there was a new administration on the horizon.

We would not know the full extent of the changes that were going to be enacted, although there were credible reports about what was planned. This was before researchers began losing funding from federal and private sources, before agreements by once-thought powerful organizations to the rollback of inclusion and equity initiatives, and obedience in advance in an attempt to avoid attention and backlash. Not to mention the cuts to federal funding for food for non-researchers, the decimation of the federal workforce, the unbridled power unleashed against perceived immigrants, and major layoffs by tech and non-tech firms.

What can be the role of policy in a time in which policy seems to be whatever powerful actors want it to be at the moment?

It is policy that offers those of us working in the public interest technology sphere hope for significant, demonstrable change in society. If we continue to work under the definition of policy as a complex assemblage of issues, processes, procedures, and restraints, we can see policy as facilitating the pushback against the disparate negative impacts currently being deployed. Policy, in the form of legal actions initiated by state and local governments to enjoin federal action and to restore funding and services. Policy, in the form of the creation of collectives whose stated objectives are to resist the pressure to conform to machine and monetary logics over humanity. And policy in the form of campaigning for and winning elected positions that have the potential for significant change to the status quo.

Policy remains important, the intersection of PIT and PIT-UN and policy all the more.

And PIT praxis is for moments like this. Work using, creating, and designing technology in the public interest can be a part of the assemblage of things fomenting systemic change. Policy can help to provide the infrastructure, if not the impetus.

So while we are doing the work, we still have work to do. And although the environment has certainly changed, it is exactly the kind of environment where PIT should thrive. It is the opportunity for PIT to return to a community-focused emphasis, and to reimagine, again, what society could be.

Whatever the case, let's *keep it moving*.

Acknowledgments

This report was supported by a fellowship with Public Interest Technology University Network and New America. I would like to express my gratitude to Andreen Soley, director of PIT-UN for her guidance on this project. I would also like to thank the PIT-UN staff for their assistance during this research.

I am grateful for the time and perspectives of the PIT-UN members and affiliates who participated in this research.