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Lots of computer science students dream of landing a lucrative job at Google or Facebook when they graduate, but a new grant program [1] aims to shine a light on an alternative career path: the public sector.

A group of 21 universities and colleges, all members of the Public Interest Technology University Network, were awarded $3.1 million last week to fund 27 projects promoting the use of technology for the public good.

A project at Princeton University, for example, will develop a summer internship that places talented computer science students in local, state and federal consumer protection agencies. The Georgia Institute of Technology will create a fellowship program to bring together computer scientists and social scientists to address historic and ongoing equity challenges in the South. The University of Virginia will design and offer an interdisciplinary graduate-level course called Innovation in the Public Interest that will tackle real-world problems faced by government partners.

Members of the Public Interest Technology University Network

- Arizona State University
- Carnegie Mellon University
- City University of New York
- Columbia University
- Florida International University
- Georgetown University
- Georgia Institute of Technology
- Harvard University
- Howard University
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- Miami Dade College

- Olin College of Engineering
- Pardee RAND Graduate School
- Pepperdine University
- Princeton University
- Stanford University
- University of California, Berkeley
- University of Chicago
- University of Michigan
- University of Texas at Austin
- University of Virginia

The university network was convened in March and seeks to support the nascent field of public interest technology. Its ultimate aim is to train a new generation of civic-minded technologists and tech-savvy policy makers. The network is supported by the Ford Foundation, New America and the Hewlett Foundation. New college members are encouraged to join.

Public-interest tech is important to the Ford Foundation because "technology is touching everything," said Jenny Toomey, international director of technology and society at the foundation.

"The majority of technologists are taking their computer science and engineering degrees and working in the private sector," Toomey said. "The government and NGOs are missing out."

The public sector has been slow to recognize the value of technologists -- it doesn't understand how to recruit, retain and best use these staff members, said Toomey. The private sector, on the other hand, is offering exciting and well-paid opportunities.

Speaking to many tech professionals who've built careers in the public sector -- including the former chief technology officer of the White House and other high-profile positions -- Toomey and her colleagues kept hearing the same sentiment: they weren't encouraged to pursue public-interest tech by their college professors. In fact, some said they were actively discouraged from taking this path.

"They all said the same thing -- no one understands how important this work is. There isn't enough funding, there's nowhere to publish -- there are all of these structural impediments to prevent the field developing," said Toomey.

The 21 members of the network were selected because of their existing work in the area of public-interest technology or their expressed interest, said Afua Bruce, director of engineering for New America's public-interest technology program.

Though many of these institutions already were thinking about public-interest tech, Bruce said, few had launched formal programs or pilots in support of this work. "There's a lot of energy from faculty, administrators and students that wasn't there before."

Miami Dade College, a public, two-year institution located in Miami, secured funding for two projects through the network. One is a resource that aims to inform Miami residents about the geographical environment around them. The other is a web platform that will give Miami residents a say in the city budget.

David Freer, professor of computer science, is leading the city budget project -- a partnership between Microsoft, Code Miami and the municipal government. The project won't be offered for credit, but it will pay student developers.

"We have a lot of students working multiple jobs," said Freer. "If we want to encourage them to participate, then we need to make it worth their time."

Freer recognizes that many of his students are studying computer science because they want high-paying jobs, but he wants to show his students they have options.

Nik Marda, a junior at Stanford University, is studying computer science and political science. While he supports the work the network is doing, he thinks there is a more effective approach to encouraging students to work in the public sector: loan forgiveness.

"We can create all the programs in the world to train young civic technologists, but it's kind of all for naught when Google comes in and offers these new graduates a $150,000 starting salary," Marda said. "The public sector just can't compete with that."

While the public sector may never match private-sector salaries, the prospect of a reasonable salary with no loan debt is an attractive one, said Marda. He is

one of a small group of students spearheading a push for <u>PICTURE grants</u> [2] --
Public Interest Civic Tech University Repayment Effort grants.

"If it can work for doctors and lawyers, why not technologists?" asked Marda.

<u>Technology</u> [3]

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Links
[1] https://www.newamerica.org/public-interest-technology/press-releases/31-million-awarded-grow-field-public-interest-technology-leading-colleges-and-universities/
[2] https://picturegrants.org/
[3] http://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/technology