

# A Community Fellows Program for Public Interest Technology

University of Virginia and Center for Civic Innovation

*Grant Number: NVF-PITU-University of Virginia-Subgrant-012800-2020-11-12*

Jonathan Goodall

Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering

Director, UVA Engineering Link Lab

[goodall@virginia.edu](mailto:goodall@virginia.edu)

## Project Summary

The goal of our project was to create a community fellowship program that intentionally fosters civic innovation, including equity-related projects, and gives innovators the space, network, and support to realize success. Our project resulted in a new class of community fellows at the Center for Civic Innovation (CCI), a nonprofit based in Charlottesville, Virginia. Employees and students at the University of Virginia assisted in the fellows class as mentors and instructors. The community fellows program can serve as a model for other university/community partnerships to foster community-lead public interest technology (PIT) projects.

## Progress Toward Objectives

In our proposal we expressed two objectives for our project. The first objective was to create a curriculum and programming for a community fellows program. The second objective was to disseminate these materials for the benefit of the larger PIT-University Network.

As a result of the project, we were able to partially support the 2021 class of CCI Fellows. Their work, as described here <https://www.centerforcivic.org/fellows2021>, provides a rich set of examples of community-led projects related to PIT. Despite disruptions caused by the COVID pandemic, many fellows were able to complete a final presentation for their projects and CCI made these final presentations available on their website.

Our initial objective of creating a full curriculum for a community fellows program proved challenging given other disruptions caused by COVID. For example, the CCI Executive Director had to resign during the project period, impacting the potential for our project to fully

meet its original objectives. Despite this, we believe that the examples from the 2021 fellows class and the fact that CCI currently has applications open for a 2023 fellows class focusing on Web3 approaches for civic innovation being positive outcomes resulting from the PIT-UN funding.

As evidence of the success of the program, the following text is a summary statement from the CCI Board Chair describing the 2021 fellows class. “This year's Fellowship in Civic Innovation has come to a close and as we reflect on this program, one thing that we can say for sure (in such uncertain times) is that we had a great cohort, with fellows working on amazing projects to help our local community. It was our pleasure to support these projects and we look forward to seeing where they go in the future. We were able to support these projects through our regular training sessions on topics like developing a marketing plan, and forums that introduced them to non-profits that could help support their goals. The final weeks focused on training to perfect their pitch to future funders, and then recording these pitches. Through these training sessions and the financial support that we were able to provide, we believe that this cohort is on its way to great things. We have one project that has been able to expand as a business, one project that is about to open its doors to the public, another that was able to use what they had learned about pitching their project and find funding, and another that was able to come together and help provide a new opportunity for young African American women in the Arts. The fellowship not only provided the cohort with an opportunity to learn from experts, but they also were able to meet and learn from each other and build a community. For both the cohort and CCI, this fellowship offered a way to give back and strengthen a community that we all care so much about. This fellowship truly was about community.”

## Challenges and Lessons Learned

During our project we learned many lessons about creating a successful community fellows program.

1. There is a strong desire among residents in our community to advance their civic innovation ideas and work.
2. Recentring the civic innovation conversation on the community, with the university taking a service role, is important for authentic community engagement.

3. Open ended, inclusive, and supportive fellowship programs can broaden participation in civic innovation.
4. We are just beginning to recover from COVID disruptions, especially to nonprofit community-driven efforts.

## Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

Equity, diversity, and inclusion was at the center of our community fellows program. Our fellows represented the diversity within the Charlottesville community in terms of race, age, gender, and many other measures of diversity. Through the mentoring and training experiences provided as part of the fellowship, we emphasized a culture of inclusion where people are welcomed and encouraged to bring their full selves, their experiences and expertise, to the community fellows cohort. The fellows program is designed to address equity concerns within our community by providing fellows with training and networking opportunities that are not always widely available. Members of the university community played a role in this by providing their experience and expertise to mentor and assist the fellows in reaching their goals.

## Network Impact

Our hope is that our project and the concept of a community-led fellows program will inspire other universities within the network. Too often PIT initiatives center the university. While they may invite the community into their plans and efforts, the community is not centered in these discussions. We believe this power dynamic should be shifted. The university has a lot to offer community members and community members have ambitious and deeply impactful ideas from their own experiences within the community. Partnerships like the CCI community fellows program our project supported are an example of how to center the community in bringing innovation to the PIT community and to have impact on problems residents are facing.

## Institutionalization of Public Interest Technology

Our university has as its mission to be both a great and good university. As part of being a good university, serving our local community is a priority of the university administration. This has resulted in a number of initiatives partnering with the community. While it is difficult to say exactly how our project has influenced these efforts, it was an important part of the conversation

and provided an example of how our university can be a good neighbor by coming alongside a nonprofit effort in PIT. The university has funded an Equity Center and an Environmental Institute, and both have offices within the community to intentionally be outside of the campus as a means for community engagement. These two efforts provide a means for continued collaboration with the Center for Civic Innovation and their community fellows program.

## Appendix: Resources Created as a Result of the Project

Please visit <https://www.centerforcivic.org/fellowship> for more details on the project. Materials will be provided at this site at the conclusion of the project.