A Broad and Expansive Vision for Public Interest Technology (PIT) Careers

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About the UCLA Center on Resilience & Digital Justice:
The UCLA Center on Resilience & Digital Justice (CRDJ) is committed to dreaming and actualizing a just society rooted in the restoration and expansion of civil, sovereign, and human rights. We do this by conducting research on how digital, internet, and AI technologies diminish human possibilities. We inspire and advocate for interventions on anti-democratic and anti-social tech, and we champion democratic and pro–social values.

About UCLA DataX-Data Justice:
UCLA DataX-Data Justice and Critical Data Studies is a community of scholars concerned with key issues at the intersection of technology and society. This often includes the construction and use of data and its impact on people and communities. We are UCLA scholars from many social science and humanities fields focused on critical questions of data access, power, and equity, which are key to data justice and data studies.

About PIT-UN:
The Public Interest Technology University Network (PIT-UN) fosters collaboration among universities and colleges to build the field of public interest technology and nurture a new generation of civic-minded technologists.

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Executive Summary

Public interest technology (PIT) emerged from the simple idea that technology can and must serve the public good. Across the country, students, educators, organizers, researchers, and technologists are carrying this vision forward and working to ensure that digital systems reflect the highest values of justice, equity, and democracy. Our study and this report confirm that the next generation does not see public interest tech as a niche or marginal field. They see it as a broad civic mission, spanning disciplines and sectors, and as central to the future of the democratic experiment.

This is a moment not only of challenge but also of extraordinary possibility. The rapid expansion of artificial intelligence, shifts in public funding, and political uncertainty have raised the stakes for those pursuing careers in public interest technology. Yet these same dynamics create an opportunity to reimagine how to build institutions, train technologists, and align investments, to strengthen and expand the PIT ecosystem into something more ambitious, durable, and inclusive than ever before.

The students and early-career professionals we surveyed bring both urgency and hope. They are interdisciplinary, justice-oriented, and motivated by a desire to put technology to work for communities, movements, and democratic institutions. They want careers that do not force them to choose between values and livelihoods. They are ready to build, provided the infrastructure is there to support them.

The support must come from every sector:

- ⇒ **Funders and investors** must move beyond project-based experiments to long-term investment in people, institutions, and civic infrastructure.
- ⇒ **Educational institutions** must embed PIT as a core interdisciplinary field, building accessible pathways for diverse students.
- ⇒ **Civil society organizations** must become engines of PIT employment, offering roles and apprenticeships that place technology in service of community power.
- ⇒ **Government** must institutionalize PIT as a public function, creating civic technology roles, restoring civil rights protections, and embedding accountability into service delivery.
- ⇒ **The private sector** must open pathways for technologists to do rights-respecting, community-centered work and must develop new business models that align sustainability with justice.

The opportunity is clear. With bold vision and cross-sector collaboration, public interest technology can be transformed from a fragile ecosystem into a thriving civic infrastructure.

This report offers a road map. It draws on survey insights and field analysis to show both the barriers and possibilities. Above all, it is a call to act with imagination and resolve. Aligning efforts and centering rights and equity will not only protect the field of public interest technology but will also expand it into a durable, intergenerational project that advances justice and democracy for decades to come.

The future of public interest technology is not a question of possibility; it is a question of will. The vision, talent, and energy are already here. What is needed now is the commitment to build boldly, together.

I. How We Got Here

Public interest technology (PIT) has always been about the possibility that digital systems can be built to serve people, communities, and democracy. But possibility does not emerge on its own. It comes from people who are willing to challenge dominant models of technology, to demand that equity, care, and justice be centered in design and deployment. Over the past decade, universities, community organizations, funders and investors have invested in building this vision. Among them, the Public Interest Technology University Network (PIT-UN) has created a national platform for higher education institutions to collaborate, share knowledge, and nurture the next generation of technologists. At UCLA, the Center on Resilience & Digital Justice (CRDJ) and the Minderoo Initiative on Technology & Power have been similarly committed to interrogating the harms of technology and working toward rights-based alternatives. This report emerges from the shared commitment of PIT-UN and UCLA CRDJ to protect and expand the field.

II. Public Interest Technology at a Crossroads

In every corner of society — from classrooms to courtrooms, from hospitals to city halls — the future of technology is inseparable from the future of justice, equity, and civic life. PIT has always carried a bold promise that digital tools, data systems, and emerging technologies can be designed and deployed in service of people, communities, and democratic institutions.[1] Today, that promise is both under threat and full of possibility.

[1] NetGain Partnership. “A Pivotal Moment: Developing a New Generation of Technologists for the Public Interest.” NetGain Partnership, 2015. https://netgainpartnership.org/resources/2018/1/26/a-pivotal-

The report captures a moment of transformation. Students and early-career professionals are stepping forward with expansive, justice-driven visions of what PIT can be. They see it not just as a pipeline into government service or a niche alternative to Silicon Valley, but as a broad ecosystem of careers that weaves together coding and community organizing, advocacy and design, research and storytelling. Their aspirations are clear. They want to use their skills to advance civil rights, strengthen democracy, and serve communities that have long been excluded from technological decision-making.

At the same time, the 2025 political landscape has brought a sharp escalation of fear and instability for those seeking to pursue careers in PIT. While prior administrations weakened civil rights enforcement and civic infrastructure through disinvestment and neglect, the current administration is doing so through deliberate dismantling. The impacts are immediate and chilling, especially for students and early-career professionals who are entering the field, and educators who are guiding others into PIT careers.

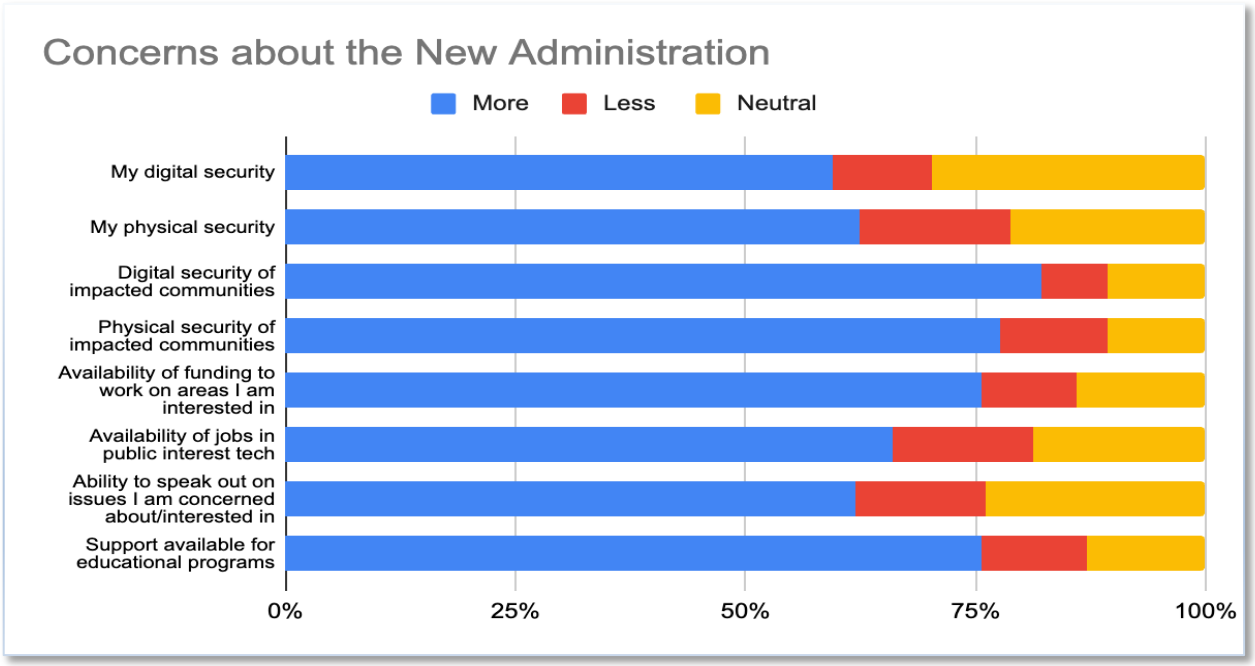

Figure 1. Concerns about the New Administration

moment; Freedman Consulting. “A Pivotal Moment: Developing a New Generation of Technologists for the Public Interest,” 2016. http://tfreedmanconsulting.com/documents/pivotalmoment.pdf; Kyle Doran, Emily Van Dusen, and Elijah Scott. “Building the Future 2019: An Update on Progress, Opportunities, and Lessons Learned for Public Interest Technology in the Academy.” New America, March 2020. https://www.newamerica.org/pit/reports/pit-building-future-2020/; Freedman Consulting. “A Pivotal Moment,” 2016.

The students and young professionals we surveyed detailed a variety of concerns about the new administration and what it means for them, their communities, and their future careers.[2] They identified fears of threats to community and personal safety, the collapse of funding and job opportunities in the public sector, the chilling effects of surveillance and political repression on speech, and how all of this affects their ability to plan for the future. At the same time, the proliferation of AI is raising new challenges for those seeking to enter the job market. These are not abstract concerns. They shape the real choices students must make about whether they can afford to pursue or stay in PIT careers. Nor are these concerns personal anxieties. They are early warning signals of the institutional fragility in the PIT ecosystem.

Yet, even in the face of these challenges, the survey insights reveal something powerful: The next generation sees public interest technology as expansive, interdisciplinary, and deeply personal.[3] Their vision encompasses everything from data privacy to environmental justice, from reproductive rights to tribal sovereignty, and from platform accountability to local civic innovation.

But many barriers exist, and survey respondents indicate that the path to entry and retention in the field is riddled with obstacles.[4] These are not just individual barriers but structural failures across sectors — philanthropy, education, government, civil society, and the private sector — that reflect the absence of a coordinated, well-resourced, and justice-oriented ecosystem.[5] If these gaps are not addressed, an entire generation of technologists who want to serve the public but cannot find a way to do so could be lost. This moment calls for a coordinated, long-term investment on infrastructure, guided by the shared understanding that PIT can be about redistributing power, not just modernizing services.

This report offers a road map for action. Its recommendations call on funders and investors to move beyond short-term projects and invest in people and institutions; on educational institutions to rethink curriculum and credentialing; on civil society to become a platform for talent and power; on government to institutionalize PIT as a core public function; on the private sector to reimagine and build new business models that create new PIT opportunities.

This report is not just a warning about what could be lost. It is a blueprint for what can be built by working together and getting it right: an ecosystem for public technologists

[2] The survey was open for responses from December 13, 2024, to February 2, 2025. Eighty-four respondents participated in the survey. See Appendix for full survey and demographic information.
[3] See Section IV of this report.
[4] See Section V of this report.
[5] See Section III of this report.

who are not forced to choose between values and livelihoods, institutions resilient enough to weather political storms, and a digital public infrastructure that strengthens democracy rather than erodes it.

Aligning efforts across different sectors will:

- ⇒ Create lasting, community-rooted career pathways that don't ask students to sacrifice mission for money.
- ⇒ Build institutions and networks resilient enough to withstand political shifts, ready to support and protect public technologists.
- ⇒ Normalize the view that technology is a pro–social public concern, governed by the people, not just designed for them or to extract from them.
- ⇒ Embed PIT everywhere: in schools, local governments, civil society organizations, the public sector, and beyond.

The barriers are surmountable; the possibilities are vast. The moment to act is now.

III. Public Interest Tech: A Field Under-supported across Sectors

Public interest tech is often imagined as a field grounded in a rights-based approach to government reform or civic innovation, but the truth is more complex. While PIT has gained visibility over the past decade, its infrastructure remains fragile. This is not because of lack of interest or talent, but because key sectors have failed to adequately support it. Scholars have been central to arguing for technology as a public good – while at the same time highlighting the harms emanating from industry – yet educational institutions have not institutionalized PIT pathways. Overall, technology jobs are still primarily under the purview of engineering schools which are not oriented toward PIT. Information schools have been the long-term academic home of civic and public interest tech projects, rooted in disciplines of information science/studies, data science/studies, data curation, internet studies, human-computer interaction, knowledge management, and cultural institutions such as libraries, museums, and archives. While these iSchools are among the fastest growing and most profitable academic schools/divisions to prepare students for public interest tech careers, there are far fewer of them than there are engineering programs.

Philanthropy has been hesitant to fund long-term infrastructure. Government has neglected, and in some cases dismantled, the very roles needed to sustain rights-based or civic-forward technology development. Civil society has underinvested in the capacity to absorb and grow technical talent, and it is increasingly asked to be a policy watchdog

and fill in gaps around services provided by government. The private sector continues to extract from, rather than contribute to, a pro–social tech ecosystem. To secure a just and democratic digital future, these sector-specific failings must be reckoned with and a coordinated, cross-sector response must be built.

A. Philanthropic Funders Have Invested in Innovation, Not Infrastructure

Philanthropy has been instrumental in launching public interest technology initiatives, but too often funders have treated PIT as a series of short-term experiments rather than a long-term civic infrastructure project. Investments have skewed toward novel tech projects and high-visibility initiatives, while underfunding the unglamorous yet essential work of institutionalizing career pathways, supporting public-interest teaching faculty, and sustaining the PIT ecosystem. Despite widespread acknowledgement of the importance of the field, few funders have committed to multiyear strategies or to providing general operating support that could stabilize institutions and talent over time.

This fragmented funding approach creates churn and precarity in the institutions and organizations best positioned to steward the next generation of public technologists. In times of political retrenchment, philanthropic capital could serve as a bulwark for justice-aligned work. This is achievable only if funders embrace their role not just as supporters of innovation but as architects of civic infrastructure. The current moment demands bold investment in people, institutions, and long-term field building.

B. Educational Institutions Are Teaching 'Tools,' Not Values

Educational institutions have played a paradoxical role in the development of public interest technology. Critical academic and research movements have consistently sought to center civil and human rights in the design and delivery of technology and tech services. These projects have arisen at the intersection of digital technologies and society and are known by a variety of other names: community informatics[6] and critical informatics (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign),[7] social informatics (Indiana University),[8] sociotechnical informatics (United Kingdom), critical information studies

[6] Leigh Keeble and Brian Loader, eds. *Community Informatics: Shaping Computer-Mediated Social Relations*. London, New York: Routledge, 2001, 1–10.
[7] Miriam E. Sweeney and André Brock. "Critical Informatics: New Methods and Practices." *Proceedings of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 51, no. 1 (2014): 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1002/meet.2014.14505101032.
[8] Rob Kling. "What Is Social Informatics and Why Does It Matter?" *The Information Society* 23, no. 4 (June 21, 2007): 205–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/01972240701441556; Rob Kling. "Learning About

(University of Virginia Law),[9] and internet studies, data in society, or data justice (UCLA).[10] While differing in approach, these pro–social technology scholars and research centers, alongside practitioners, and community organizers, have laid the groundwork for the contemporary and more nascent public interest technology movement. This has led to a burgeoning network of public interest technology centers at universities across the United States, such as the Center on Resilience & Digital Justice at UCLA, which is responding to the demand of communities and providing research expertise to local, state, and federal governments on technology in the public interest. All of these projects focus on teaching technology as more than simply a suite of "tools," to learn, but as a framework of *values* deployed through products and projects that shape society.

At the same time, most institutions have failed to institutionalize PIT as a viable, accessible career pathway. Where curricula do embrace ethical, justice-oriented approaches to technology, it is often in elective courses or fringe programs rather than embedded into core degree offerings. For many degree programs, this type of training is not required at all. Career services remain geared toward private sector tech jobs, leaving students interested in public interest work without adequate guidance, mentorship, or opportunities to gain practical experience. This failure is compounded by the fact that many U.S. faculty, administrators, and university leaders still treat PIT as a niche rather than a foundational part of education in a digital democracy. Professional schools (e.g., information schools) have been central to PIT through librarianship, informatics, community tech, and civic tech graduate programs, but many do not have undergraduate offerings or on-ramps earlier in the pipeline.

These challenges are reflected in the survey results, where respondents expressed serious concern about the availability of education support, funding, and jobs in PIT.[11] These concerns are not just about individual employment. Rather, they reflect a field with few signposted and stable on-ramps, compounded by insufficient support and resources for those seeking to pursue PIT careers.

Information Technologies and Social Change: The Contribution of Social Informatics." *The Information Society* 16, no. 3 (2000): 217–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/01972240050133661.

[9] Siva Vaidhyanathan. "Critical Information Studies: A Bibliographic Manifesto." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2005. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.788984.

[10] Safiya U. Noble and Sarah T. Roberts. "Transforming the Culture: Internet Research at the Crossroads." *IEEE Data Engineering Bulletin* 43, no. 4 (December 2020): 3–10.

[11] Sixty-five of the 84 respondents are concerned about the support available for educational programs, 65 cited concerns about funding to pursue mission-aligned work, and 56 cited an insufficient number of available jobs in PIT.

Trump administration actions — gutting the Department of Education;[12] altering student loan terms and availability;[13] making massive reductions in force via the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE);[14] eliminating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies and programs;[15] slashing support for public interest research initiatives;[16] and terminating billions of dollars of federal grant money, with profound consequences for educational institutions and the research that will be affected, in particular in the STEM fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics[17] — all cement the reality of a difficult landscape for emerging PIT professionals.

In addition, students and young professionals must now contend with increasing restrictions on free speech, both on college campuses and in broader society. Through the survey, many students noted that they now feel unsafe speaking out on issues that matter to them, which is in direct contradiction with a core ethos of public interest work.[18,19]

In this increasingly hostile environment, students must self-navigate fragmented programs, unpaid internships, and invisible career pathways — an especially hard challenge for first-generation, low-income, or nontraditional students. Educational institutions have an obligation not only to train technologists in ethical frameworks but also to prepare and support them for careers in fields that defend rights, challenge inequality, and serve communities. As of now, that obligation is largely unmet.

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[12] See, for example, Brandon Wolf. "Donald Trump Moves to Gut the Department of Education." Human Rights Campaign, March 12, 2025. https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/donald-trump-moves-to-gut-the-department-of-education.

[13] See, for example, Executive Order 14235, "Restoring Public Service Loan Forgiveness" (March 6, 2025), https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/03/12/2025-04103/restoring-public-service-loan-forgiveness; Cory Turner. "Republicans Plan to Overhaul the Federal Student Loan System. Here's What to Know." *NPR*, April 30, 2025. https://www.npr.org/2025/04/30/nx-s1-5381149/trump-republicans-student-loan-repayment.

[14] See, for example, Stephen Fowler. "Federal Agencies Plan for Mass Layoffs as Trump's Workforce Cuts Continue." *NPR*, March 15, 2025. https://www.npr.org/2025/03/15/nx-s1-5328721/reduction-in-force-rif-federal-workers-job-cuts-musk-doge-layoffs.

[15] Executive Order 14151, "Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing" (January 20, 2025), https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/29/2025-01953/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing.

[16] See, for example, Charles Kenny and Justin Sandefur. "New Estimates of the USAID Cuts." Center for Global Development, March 20, 2025. https://www.cgdev.org/blog/new-estimates-usaid-cuts.

[17] See, for example, Mary Ellen Flannery. "Trump Cancels Federal Research Grants. What Are the Consequences?" National Education Association, May 27, 2025. https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/trump-cancels-federal-research-grants-what-are-consequences.

[18] Over 50 respondents reported concern about the ability to speak freely, with others expressing alarm about campus crackdowns, loss of research funding, and silencing of transgender and immigrant voices, all of which have come to pass since January 2025.

[19] See, for example, "How Trump's College Crackdown Is Raising Concerns about Free Speech and Academic Freedom." *PBS News Hour*, May 6, 2025. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-trumps-college-crackdown-is-raising-concerns-about-free-speech-and-academic-freedom.

C. Civil Society Isis Underbuilt and Overburdened

Civil society organizations are well -positioned to act as engines for public interest technology innovation and employment, yet few have made —- or are indeed capable of making —- the structural investments needed to absorb and support tech talent. Many nonprofits rely on outdated digital systems, lack the funding to employ technologists full -time, or treat tech as an auxiliary rather than core capacity. Furthermore, PIT roles are often underpaid, precarious, or disconnected from clear career ladders, despite the fact that mission-aligned students are eager to bring their skills to these spaces. In addition, civil society is increasingly called on to do more: to act as a watchdog against the excesses of the government and the private sector;, to fill in the gaps left around dwindling government services and support;, and to advocate for policy, regulatory, and legislative changes at the local, state, and federal levels.

In failing to recognize themselves as central actors in the PIT ecosystem, many civil society organizations have inadvertently ceded the digital field to extractive corporate actors. At a time when communities need civic infrastructure that is rights-respecting and co-designed, civil society must rise to the challenge by creating intentional roles for technologists, investing in digital justice, and embedding technology work within moments for equity and liberation.

D. Government Has Retreated from the Public Good

Government services are not neutral. Despite common portrayals of public systems as merely technical mechanisms to deliver speed, efficiency, or cost savings, every form, portal, and database encodes political choices about who is seen, who counts, and who deserves care. From Medicaid and immigration systems to unemployment and education platforms, these tools shape access to rights and resources and reflect underlying power dynamics.[20] Government services are, and always have been, a site of political struggle, negotiation, and power.[21]

The government should be the largest employer and standard-bearer of public interest technology, but instead it has often been a source of institutional fragility and instability.

[20] Richard Batley and Claire Mcloughlin. “The Politics of Public Services: A Service Characteristics Approach.” *World Development* 74 (2015): 275–85. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.05.018.
[21] See, for example, J. Craig Jenkins and Barbara G. Brents. “Social Protest, Hegemonic Competition, and Social Reform: A Political Struggle Interpretation of the Origins of the American Welfare State.” *American Sociological Review* 54, no. 6 (1989): 891. https://doi.org/10.2307/2095714; Janice Iwama, et al. “Segregation, Securitization, and Bullying: Investigating the Connections Between Policing, Surveillance, Punishment, and Violence.” *Race and Justice* 14, no. 3 (2024): 313–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/21533687221105906; Virginia Eubanks. *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor*. New York: Picador St. Martin’s Press, 2019.

While some past administrations made strides in integrating PIT into digital service delivery, those gains have been uneven, easily reversible, and insufficiently rooted in civil rights protections.[22] Today's political climate — with open attacks on civil service,[23] civil[24] and human rights,[25] and digital equity[26] — has made federal employment in PIT fields precarious or untenable. The current dismantling[27] or restructuring[28] of departments, elimination of DEI programs,[29] and criminalization of dissent[30] reflect not only neglect but also a deliberate retreat from rights-based digital governance. Against this backdrop, a majority of survey respondents reported heightened fear about both their own digital and physical safety and that of the communities they aim to serve.[31]

These fears are not abstract. Students noted specific threats, many of which have come to pass in the first half of 2025, such as government surveillance of activists and

[22] The Obama administration created the United States Digital Service and 18F, a digital services team within the General Services Administration, to bring technologists into government.
[23] See, for example, Shannon Bond. "Thousands of Federal Workers Would Be Easier to Fire under Trump Rule Change." *NPR*, April 18, 2025. https://www.npr.org/2025/04/18/nx-s1-5369550/trump-federal-workers-schedule-f.
[24] See, for example, Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. "CBCF Executive Order Tracker: Understanding What's at Stake for Black America." *https://www.cbcfinc.org/policy-research/cbcf-executive-order-tracker-impacts-on-black-america/*.
[25] See, for example, Amnesty International. "Chaos & Cruelty: 10 Compounding Assaults on Human Rights: A Review of President Trump's First 100 Days in Office," April 30, 2025. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr51/9313/2025/en/.
[26] See, for example, Associated Press. "The Digital Equity Act Tried to Close the Digital Divide. Trump Targets It in His War on 'Woke.'" *PBS News*, May 25, 2025. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/the-digital-equity-act-tried-to-close-the-digital-divide-trump-targets-it-in-his-war-on-woke.
[27] See, for example, Stephen Fowler. "Federal Agencies Plan for Mass Layoffs as Trump's Workforce Cuts Continue." *NPR*, March 15, 2025. https://www.npr.org/2025/03/15/nx-s1-5328721/reduction-in-force-rif-federal-workers-job-cuts-musk-doge-layoffs; "Judge Rules DOGE's Dismantling of USAID Unconstitutional." AFGE, March 25, 2025, https://www.afge.org/article/judge-rules-doges-dismantling-of-usaid-unconstitutional/.
[28] 18F, a digital services team within the General Services Administration that focused on helping other government agencies build, buy, and share technology solutions, was eliminated in March 2025. See, for example, Rebecca Heilweil. "GSA Shutters 18F, Possibly Leaving Agencies in the Lurch." *Fedscoop*, March 1, 2025. https://fedscoop.com/gsa-shutters-18f-possibly-leaving-agencies-in-the-lurch/.
[29] See, for example, Executive Order 14151, "Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing" (January 20, 2025). https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/29/2025-01953/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing.
[30] See, for example, Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Hamed Aleaziz. "Inside Trump's Crackdown on Dissent: Obscure Laws, ICE Agents, and Fear." *New York Times*, March 12, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/12/us/politics/trump-crackdown-dissent.html; David A. Graham. "Trump's Newest Crackdown on Dissent." *The Atlantic*, May 20, 2025. https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2025/05/lamonica-mciver-charged-justice-department/682864/.
[31] Sixty-nine respondents expressed concern for the digital and physical security of impacted communities, and 50 reported concern for their own digital security.

immigrants,[32] retaliation for protected speech on campus or online,[33] increased vulnerability of transgender, nonbinary, and undocumented individuals in public institutions,[34] and the elimination of DEI initiatives aimed at leveling the playing field.[35]

State and local government capacity and operations are also affected by what is happening at the federal level.[36] But beyond that, they face additional challenges. State and local government agencies often lack the technical literacy, procurement flexibility, or funding to attract and retain PIT talent. Without a structural commitment to creating civic tech roles, resourcing ethical design processes, and embedding public accountability into technology governance, government will continue to fall short. The failure to institutionalize PIT within all levels of government is not merely a staffing issue; it is a governance crisis that erodes the possibility of equitable public service in the digital age.

E. The Private Sector Has Monopolized Talent

The private sector has long dominated the technology labor market, offering compensation and prestige that public interest roles are rarely able to match. While some companies have built ethics teams or social good initiatives, these remain marginal in influence, are rarely used to drive structural change and, in some cases, have already been abandoned.[37] Worse, many dominant tech companies actively erode the PIT landscape: they monopolize talent, lobby against regulation, and export technologies for profit that undermine rights and civic trust.[38]

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[32] See, for example, Adrian Shabaz. "Trump's Immigration Crackdown Is Built on AI Surveillance and Disregard for Due Process." *Freedom House*, May 21, 2025. https://freedomhouse.org/article/trumps-immigration-crackdown-built-ai-surveillance-and-disregard-due-process.

[33] See, for example, Sharon Otterman and Liam Stack. "White House Cancels $400 Million in Grants and Contracts to Columbia." *New York Times*, March 7, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/07/nyregion/trump-administration-columbia-grants-cancelled-antisemitism.html.

[34] See, for example, Associated Press. "6 Ways Trump's Executive Orders Are Targeting Transgender People." *PBS News*, February 1, 2025. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/6-ways-trumps-executive-orders-are-targeting-transgender-people.

[35] Executive Order 14151, "Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing" (January 20, 2025) https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/29/2025-01953/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing.

[36] See, for example, The Council of State Governments. "The Impact of Federal Spending on the States," April 29, 2025, https://www.csg.org/2025/05/13/the-impact-of-federal-spending-on-the-states/.

[37] See, for example, Taylor Hatmaker. "Elon Musk Just Axed Key Twitter Teams like Human Rights, Accessibility, AI Ethics and Curation." *TechCrunch*, November 4, 2022, https://techcrunch.com/2022/11/04/elon-musk-twitter-layoffs/.

[38] See, for example, Brendan Bordelon and Chase Difeliciantonio. "How Big Tech Is Trying to Shut Down California's AI Rules." *Politico*, May 12, 2025. https://www.politico.com/news/2025/05/12/how-big-tech-is-pitting-washington-against-california-0033648.

There is also a missed opportunity. Technologists working in corporate environments often want to align their labor with public good but find no structured pathway to do so. Without clearer incentives and career bridges between private and public sectors, PIT work becomes either inaccessible or co-opted. The challenge now is not only to critique harmful private sector practice but also to catalyze a new model of industry that recognizes its civic obligations and creates meaningful opportunities for rights-respecting innovation.

F. (Re)Building Toward a Shared Responsibility

Each of these sectors holds a piece of the solution. The future of PIT depends on building and strengthening not just individual programs or isolated initiatives, but an integrated ecosystem in which education, employment, research, and community power are aligned. This means reimagining what it looks like to prepare, hire, fund, and retain public interest technologists across institutions. It requires commitment to a long-term investment, civil rights frameworks, and shared responsibility for the digital public sphere. Only through collective action can public interest technology not remain a marginal ideal, but become a core function of a just, democratic society.

IV. Survey Insights: A Broad and Expansive Vision for PIT Careers

Despite respondents' myriad concerns, our survey results show that the next generation of public interest technologists has a broad vision. Far from seeing PIT work as confined to government digital service teams or narrowly defined tech-for-good roles, students and early-career professionals describe public interest careers expansively: as a spectrum of civic, community, research, advocacy, industry, and design-based work across sectors.

This diversity of interests is not a weakness. It is a strength, and it challenges us to design a PIT ecosystem that is broad, flexible, and rooted in justice, and is not limited by traditional definitions or institutional silos.

A. Intersectional, Justice-Oriented, and Deeply Personal

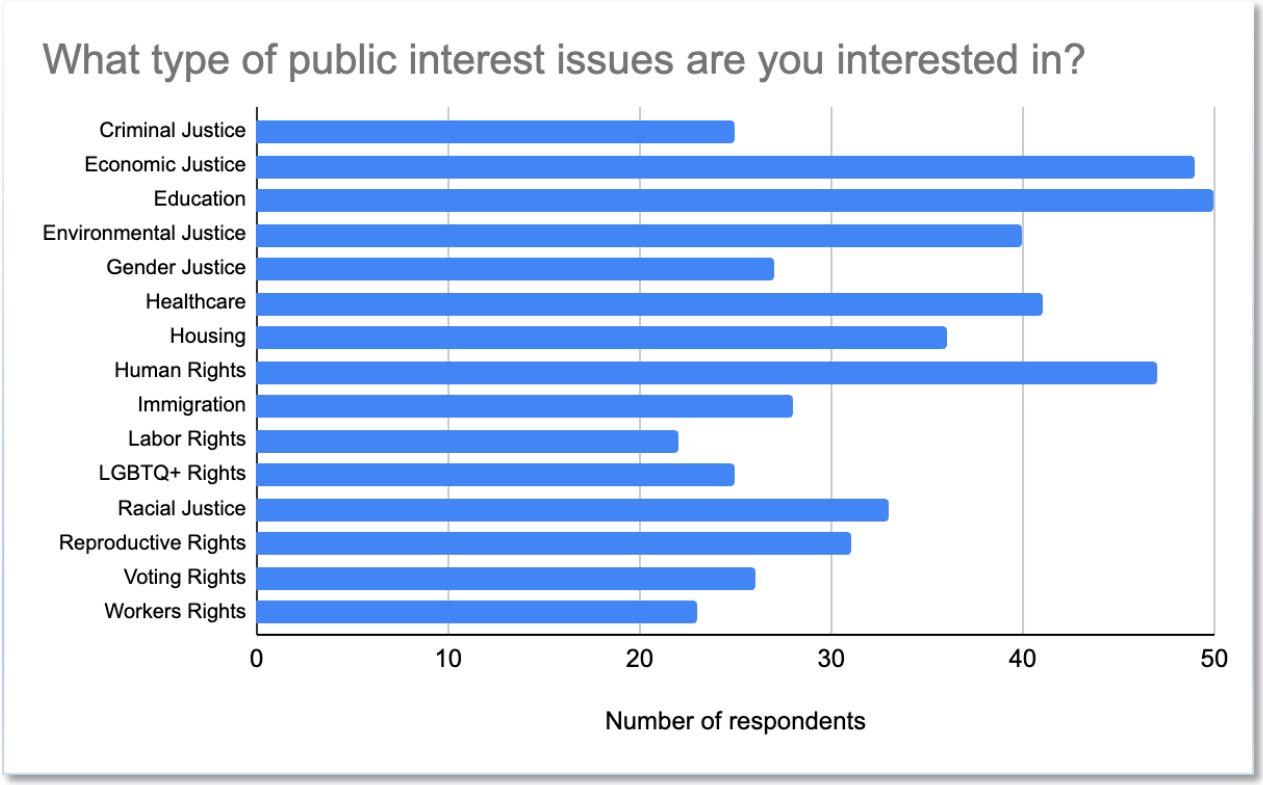

Figure 2. What type of public interest issues are you interested in?

Survey respondents articulated a wide range of public interest issues that animate their career aspirations. These included:

- Core equity domains such as education, economic justice, human rights, healthcare, housing rights, racial justice, reproductive rights, and LGBTQ+ rights.
- Policy-heavy domains like healthcare, voting rights, immigration, data privacy, environmental justice, transit equity, and criminal justice reform.
- Community-specific concerns such as tribal sovereignty, veterans' benefits, and mobility exclusion.
- Digital rights and platform governance, including algorithmic accountability, digital surveillance, and AI ethics.

These interests are intersectional and often justice-driven: Students are seeking not just to "apply tech to policy" but to address structural inequalities and repair historical harms.

***Implication**: A rights-based PIT ecosystem must be designed to support multiple points of entry, not just for technologists, but also for community organizers, legal advocates, educators, designers, and researchers who engage with technology as a tool for equity and systemic change.*

> *"As someone who is graduating under the new administration, I am concerned that I will not want to work a public sector job, especially when only a few days into this administration that many nonpartisan/bipartisan agencies like the USDS are reinterviewing employees with the intention of scrutinizing personal political ideologies.*
>
> *– survey respondent*

A. From Coding to Community Organizing

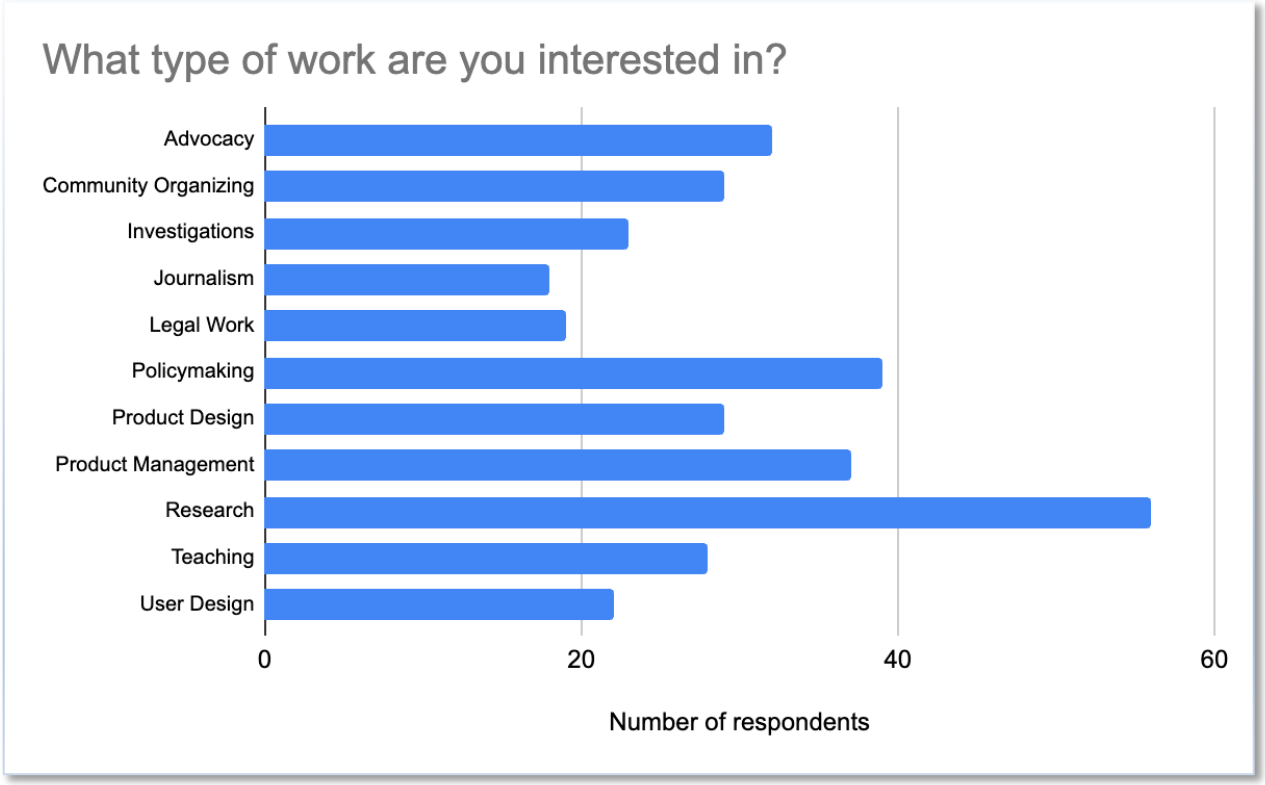

Figure 3. What type of work are you interested in?

Respondents reported interest in a wide array of types of work extending far beyond traditional "tech" roles, including:

- Research and analysis (e.g., data science, investigations, policy research).
- Advocacy and policy (e.g., legislative analysis, community policy campaigns).
- Community engagement and education (e.g., organizing, public education, teaching).
- Product development and design (e.g., user experience, service design, ethical tech development).
- Legal and journalistic work (e.g., civil rights litigation, investigative reporting).

This confirms that students see technology not as a stand-alone skill set but as one embedded in broader civic and political work. They are drawn to interdisciplinary careers that blend technical fluency with ethics, storytelling, community knowledge, and systems thinking.

***Implication**: PIT training programs, career pathways, and institutional investments must embrace interdisciplinarity. The future of PIT is not confined to computer science departments or civic tech teams; it spans journalism and law schools, public health departments, the social sciences, data sciences, grassroots movements, and more.*

B. The Desire to Serve across Sectors

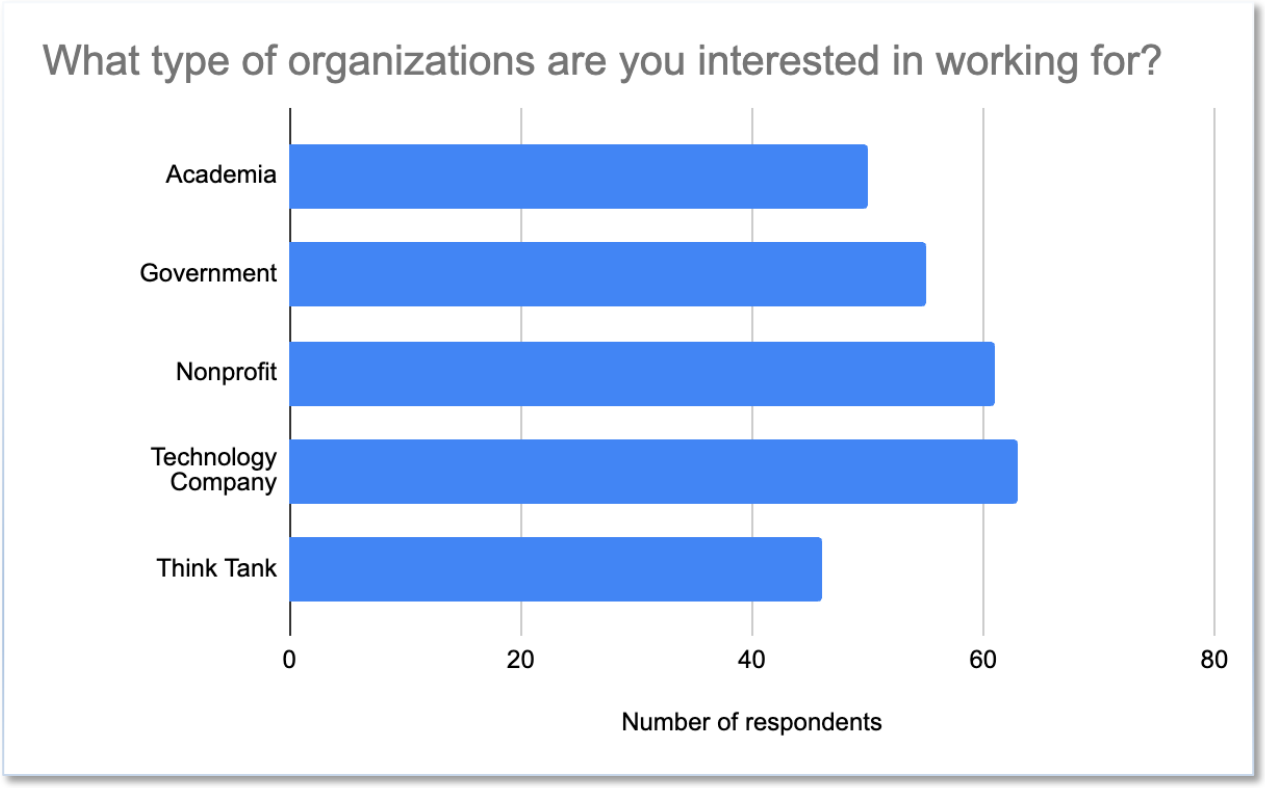

Figure 4. What type of organizations are you interested in working for?

While there is strong interest in nonprofits and government work, a surprising number of students also expressed interest in working at technology companies. This likely reflects both a pragmatic response to compensation realities and a strategic mindset. Many students want to reshape tech from the inside, bringing ethics and equity into dominant institutions. Others are drawn to public service organizations, mission-driven startups, and local government initiatives.

***Implication**: A rights-based PIT ecosystem must support sector-crossing roles and recognize that public interest work may happen in unexpected places. This includes creating roles and incentives for technologists in*

journalism, healthcare, philanthropy, education, and advocacy, not just within government and the traditional tech industry.

What emerges from this survey data is a transformational vision for PIT careers. Students are searching for institutions and jobs that affirm rights, build power, are aligned with their values, and honor their full range of skills and passions.

To create opportunities for the next generation of the PIT workforce, it is necessary to:

- Reimagine PIT infrastructure as a multi-sector, multi-role, multi-issue project.
- Invest in hubs, centers, and collaborations that can support nontraditional learners and workers.
- Fund legal, narrative, educational, and organizing capacity as core components of the PIT field.
- Ensure that all people interested in PIT work are approaching it from a rights-based framework that is infused throughout their education and training.

V. Barriers to Pursuing Public Interest Technology Careers: A Crisis of Support and Sustainability

The survey data collected from students and early-career professionals paints a clear picture: Interest in PIT is high, but the path to entry and retention in the field is riddled with obstacles. These are not just individual barriers, but structural failures that reflect the absence of a coordinated, well-resourced, and justice-oriented ecosystem. If these gaps are not addressed, there is a risk of losing an entire generation of technologists who want to serve the public but cannot find a way to do so.

> *"I believe the new administration will remove guardrails currently in place in regards to DEI and will make it more difficult for HBCU grads such as myself to find employment.*
>
> *– survey respondent*

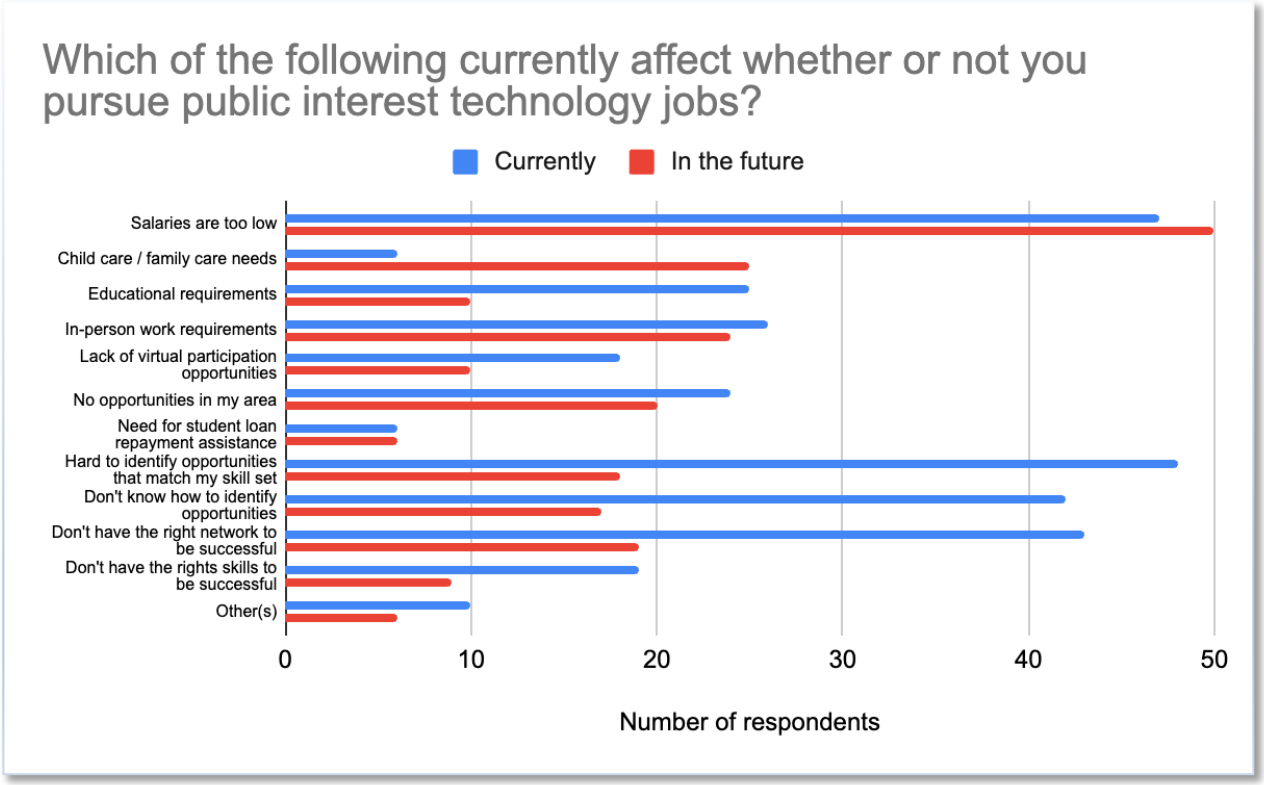

Figure 5. Which of the following currently affect whether or not you pursue public interest technology jobs?

A. Low Pay, High Commitment

The most frequently cited barrier — both now and projected into the future — is low pay. Forty-seven respondents said that salary limitations may deter them from pursuing PIT careers today, and even more expect it to be a problem in the future. This signals a deep misalignment between the mission of PIT and the material conditions needed to sustain the people doing the work.

Public interest technology cannot afford to be framed as a sacrifice. When PIT roles are underpaid and under-resourced, they become accessible only to those who are already privileged, reinforcing the very exclusion and inequity the field claims to dismantle.

> ***Implication:*** *Funders and institutions must treat fair compensation as a civil rights and equity issue, not a budget constraint. Aligning mission with money is essential for field building.*

B. Lack of Access, Not Lack of Talent

Many students shared that they struggle to find PIT opportunities in their geographic area. Others pointed to limited visibility into roles that align with their skills or interests, and inadequate guidance on where to look.

This is compounded by structural challenges in higher education: there is a dearth of academic pathways that provide a clear curriculum and training in skills and knowledge based in the internet, at the intersection of technology, data, AI, and society; university career services often prioritize corporate or private sector pathways; PIT internships may be unpaid or poorly promoted; and first-generation or nontraditional students face additional hurdles in navigating opaque networks. Traditional programming, data science, data analysis, and statistics-driven majors are not seen as directly tied to public interest technology pathways or priorities, and they often fail to address ethics and social inquiry. Colleges and universities need to foreground social sciences and humanities-driven courses that intersect with technology/data to undergird public interest tech, and they need to assign institutional value similar to what they do for traditional engineering, math, and computer science.[39]

> ***Implication**: Institutions must provide clearer pathways, dedicated mentorship, and virtual access to opportunities that reach beyond major metropolitan areas or elite institutions. Majors, minors, and degree offerings that clearly define career pathways need to be made more available and visible to students.*

C. The Network Deficit

A majority of respondents reported that networking — or lack thereof — is a barrier to pursuing PIT careers. While students may be deeply motivated to do public interest work, they are often disconnected from the people, institutions, and funding sources that could help them thrive.

This reflects a broader challenge in the PIT ecosystem, which lacks a community of practice at scale. Early-career professionals too often operate in silos, unaware of where their work fits or how to sustain it.

[39] Safiya U. Noble, Sarah T. Roberts, and Stacy Wood. “Mellon Report: Grant to Support Research on Internet Studies Programs and Explore the Feasibility of Curriculum Development in This Area.”

> ***Implication**: Funders, educational institutions, and employers should support cohort-based programs, PIT alumni networks, and peer learning spaces that foster long-term connection and cross-sector solidarity. Relationship building is essential infrastructure.*

D. Skills and Certification: A Double-Edged Sword

While relatively few students cited lack of technical skills as a primary barrier, many shared concern about educational requirements and the lack of clear, accessible training pipelines. This reflects a fundamental tension in PIT: Its openness is both a strength and a source of confusion.

Without a shared baseline such as certification, degree majors, or defined competencies, students struggle to understand what qualifies them for PIT work. At the same time, rigid credentialism risks excluding the very people who should be brought into the field.

> ***Implication**: To create varied pathways to entry, funders, educational institutions, and employers should develop flexible certification pathways that recognize lived experience and community-based learning as much as formal degrees.*

E. More Than a Pipeline Problem

Participation in PIT careers is not simply a workforce development issue. It is a question of power, access, and survival. The barriers students face today are the direct result of a field that has been structurally underbuilt, without sustainable career pathways, without political support, without academic institutionalization through degrees and professionalization at the undergraduate level, and without the long-term investment that real civil rights and pro–social technology work demands.[40]

To meet the moment, and prepare for what comes in the next decade and beyond, it is important to reinvest in the people who are ready to serve now and those who will serve in the future. That means building a durable, distributed, and values-aligned ecosystem that sees students as co-creators of a just digital future. The professionals of tomorrow

[40] The authors recognize that a variety of graduate and professional degree pathways emerge for students in graduate programs across library and information studies/science, data science, informatics, and traditional information school programs, certificates and degrees; however, there are far fewer pathways for undergraduate students, community college students, and lifelong learners.

need to be equipped with rights respecting knowledge, and they need to be educated on that today.

VI. Recommendations: Building a Just and Durable Future for Public Interest Technology

The future of PIT will not be secured through piecemeal programs or short-lived initiatives. It requires a deliberate sequencing of actions: immediate steps that stabilize the field, medium-term investments that institutionalize pathways, and long-term commitments that build a resilient civic infrastructure capable of weathering political or technological disruption.

What follows is a road map, organized into short-, medium-, and long-term proposals for each sector — funders and investors, educational institutions, civil society organizations, government, and the private sector. Together, these actions can transform PIT from a fragile ecosystem into a durable, justice-centered field.

A. For Funders and Investors: Invest in Institutions, Infrastructure, and People

SHORT TERM (1–2 years)

⇒ Provide scholarships for school and stipends for work experience to students to lower financial barriers.
⇒ Support alumni coalitions, peer networks, and convenings to strengthen community.
⇒ Support full-time, competitively paid pathways from education to impact (e.g., service year programs, mid-career apprenticeships).
⇒ Convert existing programmatic grants into multiyear general operating support.

MEDIUM TERM (3–5 years)

⇒ Establish PIT centers and interdisciplinary research hubs rooted in equity, justice and pro–social values housed in R-1/R-2/R-3 public universities, teaching-focused universities, liberal arts colleges, community colleges, historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic serving institutions, tribal colleges and universities, and community-based public interest organizations.
⇒ Invest in executive education and stackable credentials for nontraditional learners.
⇒ Build impact investment portfolios aligned with pro-social, community-centered technology.

LONG TERM (5+ years)

⇒ Endow institutions, academic chairs, networks, and leaders for long-term stability.
⇒ Fund scenario planning, foresight work, and distributed leadership to prepare the field.
⇒ Anchor philanthropy as a permanent pillar of civic digital infrastructure.

B. For Educational Institutions: Rethink Curriculum, Credentialing, and Career Preparation

SHORT TERM (1–2 years)

⇒ Launch PIT-focused job boards, career fairs, and employer partnerships.
⇒ Encourage skill tracking and development so workers can communicate their skill sets to prospective employers (e.g., Skilltype).
⇒ Create co-op, practicum, and clinical placements modeled after public interest law and medical education.
⇒ Develop wraparound support, including mentorship, digital access, and mental health support, to retain diverse learners.

MEDIUM TERM (3–5 years)

⇒ Embed PIT into general educational requirements to expose all students to technology and society issues.
⇒ Institutionalize cross-departmental PIT programs and majors/minors that bridge social sciences, humanities, law, and computer science.
⇒ Expand certificates, boot camps, and part-time pathways for working learners and those pursuing a career change.

LONG TERM (5+ years)

⇒ Establish PIT as a foundational discipline across higher education, not a niche or elective field.
⇒ Build a permanent PIT teaching and research workforce through endowed chairs, fellowships, and tenure-track lines.
⇒ Create interdisciplinary departments and institutes that make PIT a core part of undergraduate and graduate training.

C. For Civil Society: Become an Engine of Opportunity and Ethical Deployment

SHORT TERM (1–2 years)

⇒ Launch fellowships, apprenticeships, and mentorship programs for PIT practitioners.
⇒ Hire technologists with lived experience in the communities served.
⇒ Begin embedding PIT practitioners into campaigns, community education, and advocacy efforts.

MEDIUM TERM (3–5 years)

⇒ Develop clear PIT career ladders and roles within nonprofit and advocacy organizations.
⇒ Establish community tech steward programs and participatory data teams to support local policy and organizing.
⇒ Form digital justice coalitions that bring together legal, academic, and grassroots expertise.

LONG TERM (5+ years)

⇒ Institutionalize PIT as a core function of nonprofit and community organizations.
⇒ Build durable civil society capacity to absorb, mentor, and retain PIT talent at scale.
⇒ Position civil society as a permanent employer of technologists advancing justice and equity.

D. For Government: Institutionalize PIT as a Core Public Function

SHORT TERM (1–2 years)

⇒ Pilot new PIT roles in local and state agencies (e.g., digital rights ombudsman, AI equity officers, participatory governance leads, ethical procurement management).
⇒ Offer small state-level grants to fund civic innovation and digital equity zones.
⇒ Expand retraining and reskilling programs in partnership with local colleges and universities.

MEDIUM TERM (3–5 years)

⇒ Establish a national PIT corps modeled after AmeriCorps and Peace Corps.
⇒ Restore and expand civil rights offices to enforce algorithmic accountability and digital equity.
⇒ Require participatory procurement and design processes for all government technology initiatives.

LONG TERM (5+ years)

⇒ Embed PIT as a permanent civil service function across federal, state, and local agencies.
⇒ Institutionalize rights-based governance frameworks that endure beyond political cycles.
⇒ Rebuild and fortify civil rights infrastructure within government to ensure technology consistently serves democracy and equity.

E. For the Private Sector: Reimagine and Build New Business Models

SHORT TERM (1–2 years)

⇒ Fund public-good tech fellowships and partnerships with universities and nonprofits.
⇒ Create sector-bridging secondment programs to place industry technologists in civic and nonprofit roles.

MEDIUM TERM (3–5 years)

⇒ Develop structured career pathways that allow technologists to move between private sector and public interest roles.
⇒ Support and invest in community-driven product design and ethical innovation models.

LONG TERM (5+ years)

⇒ Reimagine business models to prioritize pro–social rights-respecting technology.
⇒ Build alternative ecosystems, such as cooperatives, mutual aid platforms, and civic technology enterprises, that operate beyond extractive profit logics.
⇒ Normalize the private sector's civic obligation as a core responsibility of technological innovation.

Taken together, this approach allows PIT to grow with both urgency and durability. Short-term actions create safety and opportunity for today's students and early-career professionals. Medium-term investments institutionalize pathways across sectors. Long-term commitments build the resilient civic infrastructure needed to ensure that PIT careers remain viable for generations.

VII. What Is Built When This Is Done This Right

When funders and investors, educational institutions, civil society, government, and the private sector align, they can:

- ⇒ Create lasting, community-rooted career pathways that don't ask students to sacrifice mission for money.
- ⇒ Build institutions and networks resilient enough to weather political shifts, ready to support and protect public technologists.
- ⇒ Normalize the view that technology can be a pro–social public concern, governed by the people, not just designed for them, or to extract from them.
- ⇒ Embed PIT everywhere: in schools, local governments, civil society organizations, and beyond.

This challenge isn't about tweaking the pipeline. It's about building a new public digital infrastructure, one that centers rights, care, equity, and democracy.

####

Appendix. Survey Methodology and Demographics

Survey Methodology

The survey was developed in response to changing political circumstances in the United States that will affect the job market that students and young professionals are seeking to enter. The survey was open for responses from December 13, 2024, to February 2, 2025. It was disseminated to constituents of various PIT-UN communities including PIT-UN Tech for Change clubs and PIT students at academic institutions that are members of PIT-UN. Responses were anonymous, although participants had the option to enter their email address to receive a $20 digital gift card for their participation. The CRDJ team conducted the data collection and analysis.

Participants were asked to rate their level of concern (more, less, neutral) about different risks or challenges arising out of the new administration including:

- ⇒ Their personal digital security.
- ⇒ Their personal physical security.
- ⇒ The digital security of impacted communities.
- ⇒ The physical security of impacted communities.
- ⇒ The availability of funding to work on areas they are interested in.
- ⇒ The availability of jobs in public interest technology.
- ⇒ The ability to speak out on issues they are concerned about/interested in.
- ⇒ The support available for educational programs.

Participants were asked a range of questions to unpack their understanding of the landscape and their interest in public interest technology careers including:

- ⇒ How do you understand public interest technology?
- ⇒ How do you understand civic engagement?
- ⇒ What type of public interest issues interest you?
- ⇒ What type of work are you interested in?
- ⇒ What type of organizations are you interested in working for?
- ⇒ What are the current and future barriers to pursuing a career in public interest technology?

Finally, participants were asked a range of questions aimed at understanding how they identify PIT career opportunities and identifying opportunities and resources that may be helpful for students and early-career professionals to increase awareness and engagement with the PIT sector.

Survey Demographics

Eighty-four respondents participated in the survey. Of those, 66.7% indicated that they intend to pursue a career in PIT, and a further 23.8% indicated they may pursue a PIT career. Fifty-three participants identified as female, 23 as male, one respondent identified as transgender, one identified as nonbinary, and six respondents preferred not to answer. Of the respondents, 57% were ages 18–24; 30% were 25–35; 9.5% were 35–44, and 3.5% were 45–54. A majority of participants identified as Asian (52.4%). Respondents who identified as white constituted 38.1% with smaller numbers identifying as Black (7.1%) or as American Indian or Alaska Natives (3.6%). Respondents could select as many categories as apply. A large majority identified their ethnicity as not Hispanic or Latino (88.1%).

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