

Texas iSchool Joins Social Justice Informatics Collaborative Effort in City of Austin



The School of Information at The University of Texas at Austin is pleased to partner with Good Systems, a UT Grand Challenge, Huston-Tillotson University, and government and community organizations in Austin for the [Public Interest Technology University Network \(PIT-UN\) Social Justice Informatics Faculty Fellows Program](#). This city-wide collaborative effort will bring together faculty fellows with diverse expertise in social justice and public interest technology who will partner with local organizations, producing collaborative cross-institutional research teams working toward achieving social justice in Austin, Texas.

“There’s a need for more research and educational innovations in the social justice informatics space,” says Ken Fleischmann, Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies at the iSchool. “Social justice informatics is an emerging field that involves leveraging public interest technology toward the pursuit of social justice, and that requires a combination of social science and information technology expertise. It also needs to be grounded in real problems that happen

in the world; virtual education is a good example. If a school district switches from an in-person to an online instructional model but does not account for differences in access to devices and bandwidth across student households, then that's going to make an already unequal educational environment worse. One aspect of informatics is using IT to serve people, but we need to make sure that we serve everyone and use technology to close gaps in opportunities and resources instead of inadvertently creating new digital inequalities or exacerbating existing problems. Community members and government and nonprofit stakeholders have a much deeper, richer understanding of these problems than academics do. That's part of the reason why academics alone can't solve these thorny challenges. We need to build collaborations with nonprofits and governments, which is what we're doing here. Social justice informatics requires community-driven solutions."

The University of Texas at Austin is one of the 21 founding members of PIT-UN and hosted the organization's first Informatics Education 2020 conference in March, which focused on undergraduate education for public interest technology. One particular highlight of the conference was a panel bringing together presenters from Huston-Tillotson University (an HBCU and the oldest university in Austin) and several social justice-oriented nonprofits, including MEASURE and Capacity Catalyst. Another panel focused on collaborations between The University of Texas at Austin (through Good Systems, a UT Grand Challenge) and the City of Austin. Fleischmann, who is also the Founding Chair of Good Systems, said, "Observing these great interactions between UT, Huston-Tillotson, the City of Austin, Capacity Catalyst and MEASURE seemed like a real opportunity to do something that showcases that Austin is *THE* place for social justice informatics—especially given that one of the major concentrations in the iSchool's new [undergraduate Informatics program](#) is social justice informatics!"

The PIT-UN Social Justice Informatics Faculty Fellows Program is a yearlong fellowship that will provide training in social justice informatics, produce collaborative cross-institutional research teams, and provide a proof-of-concept for city-wide collaboration across universities, government, and nonprofits. Twenty-four faculty fellows will be selected from Huston-Tillotson University and The University of Texas at Austin. Faculty fellows will participate in a weekly virtual seminar, a research project design workshop, collaborative interdisciplinary and multi-institution research projects, and colloquium presentations—providing different modes of engagement throughout the fellowship that ensure that faculty fellows can synergistically combine a wide range of disciplinary perspectives within the broad umbrella of social justice informatics. Learn more about the [Faculty Fellows program and apply by November 23](#).

Learn more about PIT-UN at www.newamerica.org/pit/university-network or at the [PIT-UN 2020 Virtual Convening](#) on **November 12-13**, which includes a session discussing the [Informatics Education 2020 conference](#).

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