The Public Interest Civic Technology University Repayment Effort (PICTURE) Grant

A straightforward proposal to empower young public interest technologists

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Overview

There is a growing need for public interest technologists. However, new computer science graduates, saddled with debt, cannot afford to take these lower paying jobs. Universities should support public interest technologists by instituting PICTURE, a loan forgiveness program modeled after the Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP).

Problem

I. **The importance of public interest technology**

Public interest technology is important and growing rapidly. New America defines it as follows:

> Public Interest Technology is a field dedicated to leveraging technology to support public interest organizations and the people they serve. For decades, public interest organizations have worked to improve the lives of the general public. They work on issues that shape our everyday lives, including protecting the environment, human rights, child welfare, and reforming criminal justice.

> - New America

Universities have recognized the urgency in training public interests technologists, recently establishing the Public Interest Technology University Network to develop relevant coursework and projects.

II. **Debt inhibits full-time public interest technologists**

It remains difficult to attract recent graduates to full-time careers in public interest technology. Saddled with loans that typically exceed $30,000, computer science graduates overwhelmingly choose higher paying private sector jobs.

III. **Existing loan forgiveness programs are inadequate**

Government loan forgiveness programs are limited in scope, confusing to navigate, and severely underfunded. For example, just 262 public servants (1% of applicants) received loan relief through Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF). Furthermore, these

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programs target federal loans, ignoring private loans that constitute a significant portion of student loans.

IV. **Law schools faced a similar problem**
Public interest lawyers are also paid less than their private sector counterparts. Law schools responded to this problem by creating [Loan Repayment Assistance Programs](#) (LRAPs), which provide forgivable loans for educational debt to graduates working in public interest law.

Solution

Universities should establish Public Interest Civic Technology University Repayment Effort (PICTURE) Grants for graduates who pursue careers in public interest technology.

The PICTURE Grants would be a forgivable annual loan given to recent graduates that continue to meet the following conditions:

1. Works for a 501(c)(3) or a city, state, or federal government,
2. Holds an engineering, design, or product position,
3. Still has unpaid student loans for an engineering, design, or product degree.

The cost of instituting PICTURE Grants would be dependent on the size and duration of these loans. A $5,000 grant for 10 years would cost at most $50,000 per graduate, which is less than the cost of LRAPs at many law schools. Furthermore, these grants could be supported by external donations; multiple large philanthropic groups have recently shown an interest in funding civic technology initiatives.

PICTURE Grants are a straightforward way to encourage recent graduates to become public interest technologists. Adopting this program will empower the next generation of civic technology leaders.