InfoEco Podcast Transcript S3Ep2: Imagining and Creating Pathways

Grace DeLallo 0:00
Disclaimer before we begin: This episode experienced technical difficulties across a few of the interviews. And in consideration of the wonderful cohort members who were gracious with their time, we are opting to provide a transcript of the episodes instead of re-recording interviews. You can expect transcriptions for future episodes as well, which will serve for both clarity and accessibility purposes. Thank you for understanding and enjoy.

Hello, and welcome back to the second episode of the third installment of Information Ecosystems. I'm your host, Grace DeLallo. Last episode, we explored what data science and social justice are independently, so those definitions inform our understanding of the DS4SJ seed project here at the University of Pittsburgh, and what the project as a whole encompasses. Today we're diving into the specific projects that each of the cohort members and their teams are enacting through different modes to help imagine what a data science for social justice framework could look like. Now, let's meet the team.

Bob Gradeck 1:11
Hi, I'm Bob Gradeck, I'm at the University Center for Social and Urban Research, and here I manage a project called the Western Pennsylvania Regional Data Center. And it's a collaborative effort between the University of Pittsburgh, Allegheny county and the city of Pittsburgh's data, so we help maintain the civic data infrastructure that they and other organizations use to share data, then that data becomes available for students and faculty and community members and other people in government. And so with the project here that we're looking at, we're going to actually be able to leverage a lot of the community relationships and build around affordable housing, housing development, and the model that I really like to test is, can we bring community organizations into a relationship with students through first small scale projects, help desk kind of things — I need a map, or I need somebody to pull data together for a meeting that I'm having? And how can we turn that into larger scale project opportunities and relationships that are mutually beneficial to students and Community practitioners.

Grace 2:16
What do you think has been the most beneficial and effective aspect of the relationship building between students and the community that you've seen?

Bob 2:23
Yeah, I think trust really matters. And I think patience on the part of community organizations and working with students, like kind of understanding more about this is, in some ways, an opportunity for them to even fail sometimes, which is good to have that kind of flexibility as a student. So opportunities for this kind of work have mutual benefits. And so I think community

organizations that we work with are practitioners, you know, not to mention that students can actually provide really valuable working insight to those organizations and to those people, too. So I think there's benefits there, benefits to the students themselves is a lot of a lot about exposure to lots of different kinds of organizations and opportunities in different ecosystems. But it's also an opportunity for students to build their skills directly working with data and working with clients. I think I see an opportunity with this project.

Grace 3:21
Yeah, absolutely. And I think it's wonderful, especially because a lot of Pitt students exist in some of us called the Oakland bubble, where they rarely go out and intimately interact with communities outside of campus, or just Oakland in general. Have you seen good reactions from the students in the community centered work?

Bob 3:41
Yeah, absolutely. Like we got, especially in this housing space, we have a few capstone projects that, over at the School of Computing and Information, we have with students interested in archiving, and they're working to better capture data contracts and other documents in a way that can be shared. But also, how do they preserve those records? I think there's lots of other opportunities. Like we get requests all the time from organizations that say, like, I want somebody to help me understand who the largest property owners are. Their examples could be things like how many properties sold in a certain community, and that was the sales.

Grace 4:16
And considering your part of the project is so hands on with communities and students, how do you think that we can go about this work while maintaining it in the future and bringing forth a durable framework that works with shifting partners and when students graduate, new students come in?

Bob 4:33
Yeah, I think, you know, thought about that a lot. And, like, so much of what we do is ad hoc where someone approaches us out of the blue, whether it's, you're somebody that has a home here on campus, and looking for a capstone opportunity or student looking for an internship or just projects, or datasets that they can use in class project. All are the way to community partners. I think there's like a ton of opportunity there to kind of make these connections and see what happens if there's this intermediary organization that has trusted relationships with the community and trusted relationships among students, like this infrastructure for making those connections and providing support. So I'm really interested in seeing how this might start small but leads to bigger opportunities to students work.

Zara Glaze 5:30
Hi, I'm Zara Glaze, my pronouns are she/her and I'm a research assistant here with student resources.

Ivy Chang 5:39

Hi, I'm Ivy and I use she/her pronouns. I'm a project manager for CAASI.

Natasha Williams 5:46
Hi, I'm Natasha Williams, Assistant Director of Career Services and DEI initiatives for the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs. I use pronouns she and her.

Grace 5:47
Can you tell us about the project that your team is concerned with within the DS4SJ ecosystem?

Ivy 5:53
Sure. So I was using myself as an example, because I'm currently on the job market. So that being said, when I go to my career center, they, usually knowing economics and finance major, will recommend going into investment banking or become financial analyst, right, something more traditional, given my majors. But what we're really trying to show students is that by studying at Pitt, you've developed a set of very translatable skills to other careers. One opportunity I'm looking at, is leveraging my financial backgrounds to increase liquidity in the housing market, and make housing more affordable, right? So, there's a host of other opportunities that are less traditional that students can explore.

Grace 6:40
What are some of the other examples besides the ones that you just mentioned, Ivy, of opportunities you're trying to present to people?

Natasha 6:47
Yes, I would say that in regards to careers, the possibilities are endless. As Ivy stated, it doesn't really matter what you really coming into school initially, your transferable skills are going to get you to that next level. So just exposing students to how to use your transferable skills in what they want to do. So and data science and also social justice. Some of the careers could be the our activism, being a lawyer, you could work for government agencies, things like that, a lot of nonprofit organizations need social justice individuals within there. But just you know, the importance of exposing students to as many different career opportunities, I think, is very important, no matter what they're going to school for. And also to educate students on, you don't have to know exactly what you want to go to school for. And I think a lot of students will say, Oh, I wanted to go for business and now I want to change because I found this career is more interesting. And I think that is a disservice to students. I think that when they begin to switch a lot, it's more money right? Because you're having to retake classes. So, I think by exposing students to a variety of different career opportunities and allowing them to use transferable skills, no matter what you get your degree in, you can do this type of work.

Grace 8:02
In your opinion, what has been the most valuable thing that come out of looking at these different pathways that students can take?

Zara Glaze 8:10

These are careers, honestly being, that are only found in small towns or big cities, but it's found all over the place. There are these multiple careers that offer decent salaries, and not only these careers in, like, one aspect of social justice, like civil rights, or like Black Action, or like women's health rights, and it can be international, it can be national, it can be local.

Ivy 8:39
I think really Zara brings up a really important point, which is that students are usually taught that there's a trade off in terms of either a high salary, or you can sacrifice your salary to go into nonprofit social justice work, which in my own career journey, and also in participation in this project, I learned was definitely not the case. And so our aim is to kind of get rid of that divide.

Kiara Jimenez 9:16

Hi, I'm Kiara Jimenez, my pronouns are she/her. I'm a senior here at Pitt and I'm double majoring in English literature and psychology. I am currently working for CAASI, I am the Communications Coordinator for the Pitt seed project.

Nora Mattern
And I'm Nora Mattern, a faculty member in School of Competing and Information, working with Kiara on the DS4SJ project. At the school of Computing and Information, I teach in the library information science program. Last year I led the year of Data and Society, which was a year-long engagement thinking about the impacts of data on our lives and on our communities. And I also direct an entity within the school computing information, called the Sara Fine institute.

Grace 10:07
Great, and what kind of events are you envisioning to support and expand this work?

Nora Mattern 10:12
So Kiara and I are working on planning programming to support the Pitt project. Specifically, we are trying to learn how students are currently engaging with data science for social justice work at University of Pittsburgh, and where they may be encountering barriers. Maybe not knowing about how to get started with data science work that's community focused, or building it into their studies in some way. And then thinking about how the university supports in broadening student pathways. So the conversations that we're holding are intended to bring people together to think through what data science or social justice might look like.

Grace   11:13
What are some of those barriers, like you mentioned, Nora, that you hope to overcome, or you can potentially start to address?

Kiara 11:14

Like you mentioned, Nora, that you hope to overcome, or at least can start to potentially address are, there's a certain level of diversity within departments that are being represented, for example, English writing people are not stepping up, not realizing that they're have skillsets to utilize. And so part of our mission is to talk more about how do we get more people engaged with these pathways and also recognize that they have skillsets that are valuable and are necessary.

Eleanor Anderson 11:54
So I'm Eleanor Anderson. I'm an assistant professor in the School of Education. I use she/her pronouns, and I am working with Ashlyn on the Data Science for Social Justice project as part of a research project and trying to understand how the work that Data Science or Social Justice is doing can be or may encounter obstacles in becoming sustainable and durable in the long term.

Ashlyn 12:19
My name is Ashlynn Salvage, and I use she/they pronouns. I'm a second year PhD student in the School of Education in the Education Policy Program. And as Eleanor said, I'm working with her on the research part of this project. So I got involved working with this project, initially, over the summer. I did a qualitative analysis of the course that was taught out of GSPIA that Sera [Linardi] developed with Brett [Say] called working with public interest technologies and civic data. So it was really interesting to get that perspective, and then get involved in the pit seed grant this fall. And

Unknown Speaker 12:52
How did that course influence how you're conducting your research?

Eleanor 12:57
One of the things that we've been learning and talking to different people that are involved in the project, because we've started to do our interviews is just how many different iterations this project has taken over over years. And there are some through lines that have been consistent across that time, and there's some things that have changed. I would say that we're focusing on what's happening right now, what folks are doing and how that work is working towards, and potentially encountering, obstacles with kind of becoming durable and sustainable, but also recognizing that it's building on all of this work that's come before and that some of those pieces are really brought through and threaded through consistently in the different forms that it's taken.

Grace 13:44
So what is your aim and doing this research? And what is it looking at in the present, specifically,

Eleanor 13:53
This project falls for me, where I want to understand why it is that so often new initiatives and I think especially initiatives that are connected to social justice or to equity, there's a lot of effort that goes into kind of putting them together and getting them up and running. And then they kind

of fall apart. So either there's our strong advocate who gets burnt out or they leave, or the funding runs out, or there's a new initiative that comes along and people get excited about that shiny object and sort of the old thing falls by the wayside. But trying to understand why does that dynamic happen? And what could we do to help things take a different path?

Unknown Speaker 14:39
And have you gotten good feedback, like have people said it is helpful and it is useful?

Eleanor 14:44
Yeah, I mean, I think that the puzzle resonates for a lot of people. You know, a lot of people have experienced and recognize that pattern of sorts of things not lasting. And I know it's something that you know, Sera invited me to be part of the project, in part because it resonated so much for her. And she was saying like, Okay, we we want to do this differently. How do we do that? You know, like, how can we use this framework to help us?

Ashlyn 15:12
And I'll say, too, we have seen people kind of like take on those ideas and use that same language when talking back to us. So there has been a lot of focus on, in the cohort meetings and through other discussions, acknowledging that the university has certain structures that allow or inhibit this work. And I think the fact that we're seeing kind of like acknowledgment of that and that coming up in conversations as evidence that it is resonating with the group and giving people a way to think about how do we sustain this work when, say, one specific person, likely Sera, right, the person holding it all together with, she used the phrase duct tape and bubble gum at a meeting the other day. If Sera was not around, or there is a shortage of duct tape for bubble gum, how does this project outlive that?

Grace 16:03
Nick Farnan, an assistant professor in the Computer Science department at Pitt and cohort member, was unable to be interviewed. But he and his team are working to integrate DS4SJ into computer science capstones. Nick's students will work on improving an existing CAASI project, the Allegheny County Prison Project, which you can find more about at the link in the show notes.

Lastly, this podcast is part of the DS4SJ project. My hope in carrying this out is that it serves to document the importance of each project to serve the broader seed goals, and to inform more people, hopefully students, of DS4SJ, and how it can work here at Pitt.

Before working on this project, I had absolutely no idea what bridging these two ideas look like. But now that I understand, I can't help but see that interdisciplinary work is the most logical pairing for driving social change. Ideas do not exist in a vacuum, and when we work together with others who help to break us out of our traditional ways of thinking, we're exposed to countless possibilities otherwise hidden beneath our ignorance. But even more than that is gaining the real world experience and empathy that comes with meaningfully engaging with the community you hope to positively impact. The relationships that DS4SJ encouraged are

incredibly important for empowering an equitable society that can thrive due to adequate access to materials, information and skills. This project hopes to fill those gaps and the vision for this project, as Sera Linardi keyed us in on last episode, is to envision an ecosystem where students, faculty and community members can intersect for a symbiotic relationship where we thrive with the resources, skills and relationships forged in the process.

Thank you so much for joining us today and we hope that you tune into the next episode. Until then, I'm Grace DeLallo and this is information ecosystems.

If you want to learn more about this series, you can follow us on Twitter at info underscore ecosystems.

This episode was hosted and edited by me, Grace DeLallo, and was created in affiliation with the University of Pittsburgh. If you enjoyed this episode, please share, subscribe and rate the show. It helps others find us and we really appreciate it.