

coding it forward >

To: The Honorable Dr. Joseph Heck
Commission Chairman
National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service
2530 Crystal Dr., Suite 1000
Arlington, VA 22202

The Honorable Mark Gearan
Vice Chair for National and Public Service
National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service
2530 Crystal Dr., Suite 1000
Arlington, VA 22202

The Honorable Debra Wada
Vice Chair for Military Service
National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service
2530 Crystal Dr., Suite 1000
Arlington, VA 22202

From: Chris Kuang
Co-Founder and Director of Operations
Coding it Forward
Cambridge, MA

Date: January 9, 2019

Re: A 21st Century Call to Public Service

Dear Commissioners,

My name is Chris Kuang and I am a junior at Harvard University and a co-founder of Coding it Forward (www.codingitforward.com). I write today to share my experiences leading Coding it Forward as they relate to the mission and mandate of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service.

For the last two years, Coding it Forward has issued a 21st century call to public service for mission-driven young people who possess innovative technical skills to create impact and serve with those skills, demonstrating that technology and public service does not have to be mutually exclusive. Our nation's public institutions have largely been left behind by the 21st century digital revolution but Coding it Forward believes that our generation of digital leaders has the potential to reverse this trend.

Sincerely,
Chris Kuang

A. Background and History

Coding it Forward was founded in January 2017—two years ago to the day—by a group of college students with a mission to inspire and empower young people to use their technical skills to create social impact in fields like healthcare, education, nonprofit, and public service. Our inspiration and impetus came from many anecdotal experiences and conversations with students studying technical disciplines, like computer science, at Harvard and beyond. We heard many talented students lament that the “only” possible career option for students in their field after graduation was industry, including the world of startup ventures and “big tech,” but many students were disillusioned by prospect and sought opportunities to create broader impact. Technologists have been turned off by companies building the “Uber for dogwalking” and selling electric scooters, as well as drumbeat of reporting about Silicon Valley missteps and scandals, and students are no exception.

Today, computer science and other technical disciplines rank among the fastest-growing college majors across the United States, graduating over 35,000 students each year. A [recent study](#) showed that **88% of young people are more fulfilled by jobs that offer opportunities to make a positive impact**, suggesting that service- and social-oriented organizations can capitalize on this largely yet untapped talent pool.

We founded Coding it Forward to bring together like-minded students and show them that there were indeed opportunities at the intersection of technology, social impact, and public service. In less than two months in 2017, our mission attracted over 800 young technologists—primarily students at colleges and universities across the United States. But still, regardless of college or age or technical discipline, **students faced systemic barriers to entry**, including:

- Little awareness of exciting projects;
- Opaque recruitment and hiring processes;
- Few visible role models;
- Low or no pay.

Acknowledging these, our team decided to create our own opportunity *for students, by students*: the Civic Digital Fellowship.

B. Civic Digital Fellowship

The Civic Digital Fellowship is a first-of-its-kind internship program that places mission-driven technical students in high-impact roles within the federal government, modeled loosely off of the U.S. Digital Service and Presidential Innovation Fellows approach for more experienced technologists. The 10-week Fellowship was piloted in 2017 with 14 students at the U.S. Census Bureau; the inaugural cohort was championed by former Chief Marketing Officer Jeff Meisel and included software engineers, data scientists, product managers and designers. This past summer, the Fellowship placed 36 Fellows across six federal agencies—the Census Bureau, International Trade Administration, General Services Administration, and the Departments of State, Veterans Affairs, and Health and Human Services.

In our first two application cycles, the Civic Digital Fellowship attracted over 1,000 students across the country—from 200 colleges and universities—who were interested in using their technical skills to serve. One notable observation is that both cohorts of Civic Digital Fellows and the 2018 application pool were majority female with strong representation of people of color. In building a culture of public service for technologists, it's important that those building our nation's digital services look like those they serve.

On the other side, dozens of government entities at the federal, state, and local levels expressed an interest in leveraging Coding it Forward's uniquely-skilled talent pipeline to advance key missions in the service of the American people.

This tremendous supply of *and* demand for mission-driven talent could not be more timely. A 2016 report by the Office of Personnel Management found that one-third of U.S. federal employees would be eligible to retire by 2020, and at the rate that technology is innovating, **it is becoming more and more important that our public institutions are proactive in addressing their digital needs and talent strategy.**

Coding it Forward has faced many barriers to implementing the Fellowship at scale. Most prominently is agencies' inability to quickly recruit and hire top young tech talent into the federal government, which has forced us to constantly seek contracting workarounds to place Civic Digital Fellows. Existing student models, like Pathways, have proven too inflexible and many tech-specific direct hire authorities cannot be leveraged for students and entry-level talent. Conversion of Fellows into full-time positions after their service is also difficult, as Coding it Forward lacks non-competitive conversion or eligibility authority.

C. What a Comprehensive “21st Century Call to Public Service” Could Look Like

The 20th century saw a rise of national service programs for young people—Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, City Year, Teach for America, and others—and an increase in the levels of civic engagement and volunteerism. In total, the nonprofit Service Year Alliance estimates that there are over 1.3 million Americans who have participated in a year-long service opportunity. **Where I see room for innovation and improvement is in the the proportion of volunteers that are considered “generalists” without specialized training in any given area;** an October 2018 Congressional Research Service report found this proportion to be 80% among Peace Corps volunteers.

In mapping a national culture of service to the 21st century, it is important to recognize that increasingly, students are graduating college with advanced skills that they want to use in creating change. I believe the time may be right to consider **a new addition to the various opportunities available to the service-minded: one that leverages students' growing talents in technology and engineering to advance the greater good.**

Whether such a program resembles a tech-focused Presidential Management Fellows program at the federal level or a coordinated effort placing students and recent graduates in city halls and community organizations across the country, meaningful exposure to the scale of impact possible in the public sector can inspire a generation of digital leaders to serve. Soon, all organizations will become tech organizations, from the State Department to community food pantries, increasing the demand for mission-driven talent with innovative skills.