Florida Community Innovation: Project Process

Welcome to our working document about our project process from scoping to sustainably scaling! We're Florida Community Innovation (FCI), a civic technology non-profit focused on tackling our state's most pressing issues with human-centric technology. We connect Floridians to trusted resources, services, and information when they need them most.

Our process integrates on-the-ground community organizations, the latest academic research, and our own team of young innovators (50+ college students) to uncover solutions and develop scalable social services technology for their communities. FCI has a robust history of building relationships with organizations and institutions including the United Way of Northwest Florida, the Central Florida Foundation, the Community Foundation of North Central Florida, the University of Central Florida, the City of Miami's Parks Department, Florida Humanities, Georgetown University, University of California Berkeley, the University of Michigan, and American University's School of Public Affairs.

Our website is floridainnovation.org and you can read a snapshot of FCI's impact in our handbook.

Basically, FCI is a nimble organization composed of students and volunteers of all ages, who work on tech-for-good, research, and outreach projects in partnership with communities to make Florida a better place. We often call ourselves a civic tech nonprofit.

What's civic tech, you may ask? According to Cyd Harrell, author of "A Civic Technologist's Practice Guide", "Civic tech is a loosely integrated movement that brings together the strengths of the private-sector tech world (its people, methods, or actual technology) to public entities with the aim or making government more responsive, efficient, modern, and more just."

The realm of civic tech also takes place outside of government, where individuals and communities collaborate to develop technologies and/or initiatives to address community needs or reduce gaps in resource access.

Florida Community Innovation (FCI)'s flagship project, the Florida Resource Map (FRM), is an example of a civic tech project built in partnership with local stakeholders, student interns, and

volunteers. This comprehensive map of available local resources will empower Floridians to engage with services in a way outside of typical government engagement.

Since 2020, FCI has been scoping and developing the FRM, doing community-engaged research about the topic and designing the FRM to be a tool for social and community workers to find and manage information about food banks, job resources, and more.

There are two versions of the FRM – a legacy version at **floridaresourcemap.org**, that showcases resources from community foundations, municipalities, and agencies – and a version under development at **dev.floridaresourcemap.org** being piloted in a neighborhood in Orlando.

In this document, we outline how civic tech organizations can effectively scope projects with community organizations, students, and individuals of all ages and backgrounds in a way that brings about win-win outcomes and social good! We're sharing some lessons learned from our ongoing projects, and inviting you to join us.

It's a work in progress, so don't be afraid to add your thoughts. Please send any feedback to info@floridainnovation.org. We're just sharing our story and we are eager to learn from you, too.

First…how we work with students.

Our Model: Paying Students for Civic Tech Work

FCI is committed to ensuring that students engaged in our projects receive financial support for their contributions, and that our volunteers are connected with work they find meaningful. We believe that civic tech work is valuable, and all participants should have some sort of return for their time, labor, and expertise. Our model includes:

- **Paid Internships**: Students working on projects receive stipends (usually around $500 per five month cohort) through grants and partnerships, ensuring that financial barriers do not prevent participation.
- **Engaging volunteer work:** Volunteers who contribute their time gain hands-on experience, mentorship, and networking opportunities, ensuring that their efforts are rewarded with skill development and career-building potential.

This model promotes equity by making civic tech accessible to all students, regardless of financial background, and fosters long-term engagement through meaningful experiences for both students and volunteers. The result is high-quality, community-driven outcomes.

We always need motivated donors to help support us! Find out more at floridainnovation.org/donate.

Next…how we scope projects.

Scoping a Project

Scoping is a crucial step before starting a project. At FCI, we prioritize understanding what the community needs and learning what solutions already exist. Our projects include elements of research, outreach, and/or tech. The main requirements are that a project is (1) innovative and (2) helps Florida. We choose to take on projects based on proposals from our students, partners, and/or volunteers. Here's an overview of our steps to scope a project:

1. Pick a social problem (human trafficking, gentrification, recycling, etc.).
2. Establish a team!
3. Start interviewing experts, sending out surveys, and doing a thorough literature review. (1-4 months)
4. Recruit community partners. (1-4 months)
5. Finalize a timeline, budget, and project plan. (1-4 months)
6. Set up an intellectual property (IP) agreement with FCI. You can take the project elsewhere someday, but if you've used FCI resources to develop it, we need to be able to use it later on for social good.
7. Find funding (Grants? Community foundations?).
8. Establish a prototype tech product or project deliverable. (1-4 months)
9. Do community listening sessions, iterate and evaluate with help from graduate student researchers, launch another version. (1 year+)
10. Now that you've earned community trust, find a sustainable way to maintain the important project you have created, or sunset it responsibly!

When we decide to tackle a project, we start with some sort of issue our community is facing, whether that's gentrification, access to information, or underrepresented histories, all of which FCI has worked to help address.

The project idea does not have to be large. A smaller proof of concept can later be expanded into a larger project. Once you've identified a need, the next step is researching what already exists and how other communities may have addressed similar problems. Then, you can scope out how you can help— that can be adding more capacity to an existing ongoing project or developing a product or research specific to an identified need.

Understand the Problem

Speaking of identification, there is a lot that goes on before you can understand what you may want to work towards.

Let's take **FCI's SHINE—Stop Human-trafficking through Industry Networking and Education**—project as an example. When the student project leader first resolved to address human trafficking in Florida, the team initially thought of creating a program to scrape the internet to identify instances of human trafficking.

Yet, once the team conducted a months-long process of research which included writing a literature review, sending a survey throughout the state to Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), and conducting interviews with people working in the space of anti-human trafficking, they quickly realized that this idea was not feasible.

Instead, SMEs across the state pointed our team in the direction of Florida Statute § 509.096. This statute requires hotels to train housekeeping and front-desk employees with anti-human trafficking materials. The contents of these hospitality trainings, however, remain a black box. Do they have accurate, relevant, and up-to-date statistics? Do they have actionable steps for employees to take if they suspect trafficking in the hotel? This project aims to ensure that these trainings are effective, not just "in effect."

SHINE will bridge the gap between education and implementation. The project will consist of a database and badge system: Hotels will submit their anti-human trafficking trainings for evaluation, and if their training meets certain policy criteria, the hotel will be listed in SHINE's database and receive a mark of excellence.

Through this initiative, SHINE seeks to elevate the standard of anti-human trafficking education in the hospitality industry, ensuring that every employee is equipped with the knowledge and tools to effectively combat human trafficking.

And this is a long-term project! We've been building it for two years, and it might take two more years to finish…because we're doing it the right way, through iteration, community listening, and thorough research.

This project experience shows that while we might want to create big projects with a huge impact, creating a project for a niche need can be just as impactful.

Supporting Volunteer Teams

Once you establish a team and assign roles, it is time to develop policies and practices to support the team. If you are working with a student research team to scope a project, our **primer on working with students on civic tech projects** can be a great resource!

When working with busy professionals or students, a clear structure is key. It keeps everyone accountable, minimizes confusion, and streamlines communication, meetings, and document sharing. This reduces stress and makes the experience more enjoyable for the whole team!

Have a common communication platform.

FCI uses the free version of Slack to organize multiple projects effectively. We recommend having a general channel where all organization members are added and can receive organizational announcements and messages.

Specific projects, initiatives, or teams should have their own channels to communicate. Make sure to assign the project manager/leader as admin of their channel to help facilitate adding or deleting members, sending messages or polls to the channel, and managing any additional items.

In addition to the channels dedicated to specific project teams, it would be beneficial to have the following channels: one for your leadership board, one for external affairs, one for organizational upkeep, and a fun one for memes!

Use a cloud drive to hold your documents.

Do not use your communication platform to hold onto documents you are using for your projects; they can easily get lost.

Whether it is Microsoft SharePoint, Google Drive, or Dropbox, using a cloud service to store any documents you develop throughout a project's lifetime is best.

At FCI, we use Google Drive to store all our documentation. As students and volunteers join us, we share our organizational folder, which holds all documents associated with FCI and its projects within it, with them. Each FCI project has its own subfolder within this main folder.

Sharing the organizational folder allows our team members to easily access and work on projects. Google Drive is effective since most people have a Gmail account or can easily create one for FCI (see note about organizational email addresses below).

Our policy requires new documents to be created in the designated team folders within the FCI folder to ensure proper storage and accessibility, minimizing the risk of losing important files and having to dig around for them. **Documentation is important throughout the project's lifetime and having ready access to them is essential.**

Additionally, our policy prohibits teams from deleting any documents. Instead, we move unneeded documents to an archived folder to preserve them for potential future use.

Regular maintenance is essential for keeping the drive organized. Since documents are often created quickly and can be misplaced or unorganized, we recommend assigning someone to audit and organize the drive quarterly.

Establish an organizational email address(es).

Another practice that can hold your team accountable and on the same page regarding communication is creating an email inbox specifically for your team's external emails. We got some help from UC Berkeley's cybersecurity team on this recently.

We've established email inboxes for all of the projects we run, to streamline communications and make sure that we don't accidentally ghost our partners and lose community trust.

This ensures that specific emails are in their relevant inboxes and we don't lose sight of any external communications.

Supporting the Project Manager

Project managers at FCI set up meetings and arrange agendas to maintain communication with community partners and other project managers. This ensures that progress is made each week.

We recommend establishing a regular meeting schedule between project managers and the Executive Director. This experience should be fun for the PM, who is likely a student or volunteer, while making sure they're moving the project forward and serving communities.

Tools like a task tracker and Slack channel can support internal communication. This will help the PM support the students and volunteers working with them, as well as effectively on-board new people. An external webpage can be used to update stakeholders on the status of the project.

Intellectual Property

Additionally, it's a good idea to establish an IP agreement from the start. The PM should be able to move the project elsewhere and scale it, but if they used organizational resources, the social good org should still have access to it. Below is our template IP agreement.

TEMPLATE INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY AGREEMENT

This Intellectual Property Agreement ("Agreement") is by and between Florida Community Innovation (FCI), and the project manager of a social good project [insert name] ("you"). In consideration of FCI working with you, and other good and valuable consideration, the sufficiency and receipt of which you hereby acknowledge, you agree as follows:

1. Ownership. As used in this Agreement, "Inventions" means any inventions, discoveries, designs, developments, processes, improvements, copyrightable material, and trade secrets discovered or created by you in connection with your work at FCI, whether discovered or created alone or in conjunction with others, for the proposed [insert name] project. You retain the rights to all "Inventions," and can use them with any new organization, including for-profit activities, but agree to continue to allow FCI and its partners to use the Inventions in programs in perpetuity (providing reasonable services; for example, one license a year to use the Inventions, etc). This agreement is unique to you as the project manager; volunteers and other personnel from FCI who work on this project do not retain the IP, but rather FCI leadership retains the usage of the IP.

Print Your Name:

_____

Signature:

_____

Date: _____

FCI

Name: _____

By: _____

Literature Review/Research

Project Concept Development/Research

What is a literature review? What's research? Why do it? A literature review helps you grasp the current state of your project by showing what has already been done and what's ongoing. It's also just another word for "do your research." We keep our literature reviews broad – we look at all non-academic and academic work that has been done about an issue, and think about how it fits into a community context.

Try to read every news article, academic journal article, blog, legal documents etc. on the topic. Email some experts on the topic, and set up informational interviews! You don't want to reinvent the wheel, or accidentally cause harm to a community.

How to set up a Literature Review

Here are some basic questions for you to consider:

1. What organizations are currently working on this issue?
2. What academic articles have been published about it?
3. Are there webinars about it?
4. Who are the leading experts?
5. Do any tech products currently address it?
6. What gaps are left?
7. What are the historical developments of this issue?

8. What policies or regulations exist related to this issue?

Formatting your Literature Review

1. **Come Up with Your Question**
    - Think of the main question you want to answer.
2. **Find your sources**
    - Choose relevant academic databases (e.g., Google Scholar, JSTOR, PubMed) and gather information.
    - Find a range of sources, including academic articles, books, and credible websites.
    - Decide which types of studies or sources will be included or excluded from your review based on relevance and quality.
    - Make sure to review and organize your sources (ex: organize based on where the information is from, academic articles or blog posts).
3. **Evaluate your sources.**
    - Look for parts where information is lacking or where different sources don't agree with each other.
4. **Summarize your Findings**
    - Highlight major findings, trends, and insights from the literature.
    - Create a plan that brings together everything you've learned and answers the main question you're exploring.
5. **Write the Literature Review**
    - Discuss your sources based on themes and write in a way that is easy to understand.
    - Use a consistent citation style and add a reference list at the end of your literature review.
6. **Revise and Edit**
    - Ask others (internal or external) for feedback and make any needed changes.

Expert Consultations

What are Expert Consults?
Expert consultations involve talking with people who have specialized knowledge about the topic you're researching. As a volunteer working on a project or research, you don't need to become an expert yourself. Instead, you can rely on these experts to provide valuable advice and insights.

Why use consultants?
Consulting with an expert was incredibly useful for our gentrification assessment project. The expert helped us understand the best way to present our data without causing harm or discomfort to residents in gentrifying neighborhoods. They also gave great advice on which data sets would be most relevant to show on ArcGIS StoryMaps. Their advice made sure that our project will be both respectful and informative, without repeating common mistakes.

How to find expert consultants?

1. **Check LinkedIn and Freelance Websites:** Use LinkedIn or websites like UpWork and Freelancer to find experts.
2. **Ask for Recommendations:** Post about your needs on LinkedIn, contact local university professors, ask people you know from hobbies or community activities, reach out to nonprofits, and talk to your colleagues. Email a librarian who specializes in the issue!
3. **Find Experts at Events:** Look up upcoming or past conferences, workshops, or webinars to find contact information for experts.

Surveys & Interviews for Scoping a Project/Research

When scoping out a project/research, surveys and interviews can be used to gather valuable information and insights about existing research and gaps.

- **Surveys**: Use surveys to gather information from a wide range of researchers, community practitioners, policy experts, or academics about their knowledge and opinions on the topic you're researching.
- **Interviews**: Conduct interviews with experts, researchers, or key stakeholders to gain deeper insights to complement the literature you've reviewed. Interviews allow you to explore their views on important studies, emerging trends, and areas where the literature might be lacking. This can help you understand the context and nuances that might not be evident from written sources alone.

These interactions can give you avenues and ideas you haven't thought about, beef up your research with real-life experiences, and help you refine your focus by highlighting practical issues and perspectives that you might not have fully covered.

Community Listening

Community listening involves engaging directly with residents to understand their needs, concerns, and aspirations. This ensures projects are designed with and for the community, rather than being imposed without input. For the next few sections, we're going to use the **GRAT** and **GoBituary** as examples to illustrate different concepts!

Example: Gentrification Risk Assessment Tool (GRAT)

GRAT was developed to address the rapid gentrification of Gainesville's Porters Community, a historically Black neighborhood that has faced displacement pressures due to university expansion and rising property values. Recognizing the need for a data-driven tool to inform residents about these changes, University of Florida student Rhiannon O'Donnell led a team that

conducted listening sessions, collected oral histories, and analyzed property trends to shape GRAT.

The team held community meetings at Porters Community Farm, where residents expressed concerns about affordability and cultural preservation. These conversations directly informed how GRAT visualizes gentrification risks and provides accessible information for residents to advocate for policy changes.

Community Partner Recruitment

Building strong partnerships with local organizations ensures that projects remain community-centered and sustainable. Clear communication and in-person meetings are key to fostering these collaborations.

Example: GoBituary

GoBituary was developed in collaboration with Miami City Cemetery, Florida Humanities, and the City of Miami's Parks Department to highlight the rich history of Miami's diverse communities through digital storytelling. The project stemmed from the realization that many of Miami's historical figures, particularly from marginalized communities, remain largely unknown to the public.

The GoBituary team worked closely with historian Paul George from HistoryMiami Museum, as well as local student historians and city officials. Volunteers helped digitize records, collect oral histories, and research overlooked individuals. By participating in community foundation meetings and cemetery tours, the team ensured GoBituary served as a tool for education and historical preservation.

Funding

Civic tech projects require sustainable funding, which can come from community foundations, donations, and corporate sponsorships.

Example: GRAT

GRAT secured initial funding from the Bob Graham Center for Public Service, with additional support from the Gainesville Community Reinvestment Area. These funds allowed the team to

develop the platform, host public engagement events, and refine the tool based on community feedback.

Example: GoBituary

GoBituary received a $5,500 grant from Florida Humanities, which covered research, app development, and initial outreach. An additional grant funded Spanish-language translations, making the project accessible to a broader segment of Miami's population.

Project Stage 1: Launch and Iteration

Launching a civic tech project involves an iterative approach where feedback refines the product over time.

Example: GRAT

The GRAT will debut at Porters Community Farm, where residents engaged with the tool and provided live feedback. The event helped the team refine data visualizations and navigation, ensuring the tool was easy to use and provided meaningful insights. Regular check-ins with residents allow the tool to evolve in response to shifting community needs.

Example: GoBituary

GoBituary launched with a public event at Miami City Cemetery, featuring guided tours and live demonstrations of the app. By scanning QR codes at gravestones, attendees accessed multimedia stories about historical figures. Post-launch, user feedback led to adjustments in content organization and improvements in mobile accessibility.

Project Stage 2: Project Maintenance

Long-term sustainability requires ongoing research, updates, and engagement with stakeholders.

Example: GRAT

Following its launch, GRAT will remain an active project, with UF students continually updating datasets and engaging with the Porters Community. Regular check-ins ensure the tool remains relevant as gentrification patterns evolve.

Example: GoBituary

GoBituary continues to expand, with new historical figures being added and more multimedia content integrated. The team also focuses on community outreach, encouraging residents to contribute their own family histories to enrich Miami's historical record.

Project Concept Development

Developing a project concept requires defining the problem, engaging stakeholders, and designing a solution that is both scalable and sustainable.

Example: GRAT

The GRAT project began when Rhiannon O'Donnell noticed increased development pressures in Gainesville's Porters Community. Initial research involved mapping property value changes, conducting resident interviews, and consulting with urban planners. These efforts shaped GRAT into a publicly accessible tool that educates residents about gentrification risks and empowers them to take action.

Example: GoBituary

GoBituary was founded on the idea that local history is best told through the lives of individuals. Recognizing that many visitors to Miami City Cemetery lacked access to guided tours, the project sought to democratize historical learning by providing a self-guided digital experience. Through collaboration with historians and community members, GoBituary ensures that the stories of Miami's past remain accessible to all.

Stages of Project Concept Development

1. **Identifying the Issue** - Conduct research and engage with the community to define the problem.
2. **Engaging Stakeholders** - Collaborate with experts, local organizations, and residents to refine the project scope.
3. **Designing the Solution** - Develop prototypes, ensuring the product is user-friendly and meets community needs.
4. **Testing and Iteration** - Pilot the project, gather feedback, and refine features for better usability.

5. **Scaling and Sustainability** - Secure funding, expand partnerships, and establish long-term maintenance plans.

Both **GRAT** and **GoBituary** illustrate how civic tech projects can create meaningful change by centering community voices, leveraging technology, and iterating based on real-world feedback.

Conclusion

At Florida Community Innovation (FCI), we believe that technology has the power to create meaningful change when built in collaboration with communities, students, and organizations dedicated to public good. Through our experiences with projects like the Florida Resource Map, SHINE, GoBituary, and the Gentrification Risk Assessment Tool (GRAT), we have developed an approach that prioritizes community listening, ethical research, and iterative design to create impactful and sustainable solutions.

This document has outlined our core processes for scoping and scaling civic tech projects—from identifying a community need to engaging stakeholders, conducting research, supporting volunteer teams, and ensuring long-term project sustainability. By sharing our lessons learned, we hope to inspire others who are interested in using technology to address social challenges in their own communities.

We also recognize that our work is ongoing, and we welcome collaboration, feedback, and new ideas from those who share our mission. Civic tech is most effective when it is inclusive, adaptable, and built with—not just for—the communities it serves. If you're interested in joining us, partnering on a project, or supporting our initiatives, we invite you to connect with us at floridainnovation.org.

Together, we can continue to innovate for a more connected, informed, and empowered Florida.