

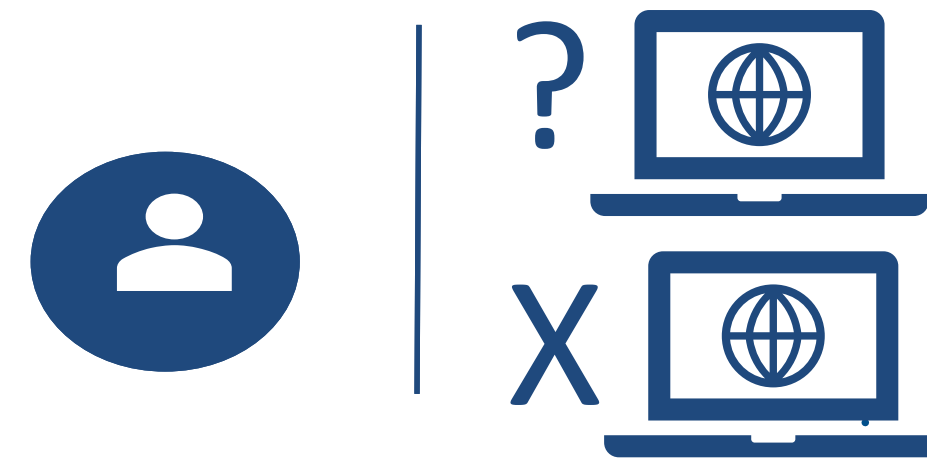
SSC-IRG Track 2: Smart Social Connector: An Interdisciplinary, Collaborative Approach to Foster Social Connectedness in Underserved Senior Populations

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In a strategic partnership among The University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso Community College, and the City of El Paso, the Smart Social Connector project is driven by integrative and interdisciplinary research among social sciences, computer science, engineering, and scholarship of engagement to foster **social connectedness** of seniors in El Paso, Texas.

Problem. Technology can foster social connectedness through online services and mobile applications. However, several factors, including lack of technological skills, limited awareness, and accessibility issues hinder seniors' use of technology-enabled services and resources, creating a generational digital divide that may contribute to social isolation ^{1,2}.



Intellectual merit. The Smart Social Connector aims to develop and sustain social connectedness (i.e., physical and technology-enabled social relations) of seniors to improve their quality of life through the intersection of technology, community engagement, and social sciences. In collaboration with community stakeholders, this community-based participatory research project will: (i) advance knowledge on the systemic and behavioral factors that increase social connectedness and bridge the generational digital divide in seniors; and (ii) increase social and technological connectedness for seniors through Smart City solutions.

¹Friemel, 2016; ²Gitlow, 2014

Activities to Date

- Building the foundation for the integrative and interdisciplinary research with community partners:
 - Establishing a synergistic collaborative environment and partnerships
 - Engaging with additional potential collaborators
 - Forming the Community Advisory Board



- Investigating factors that contribute to the learning and adoption of new technologies among seniors - design of a study to elicit information from instructors working with seniors.
- Student training with the technical skills and knowledge required to address societal problems, specifically those relevant to senior populations.

Broader Impact - (short term)

- Addressing the fundamental need to connect seniors who are isolated by promoting a sense of belonging to their community through the learning and adoption of technology, advancing their health and welfare.
- Supporting seniors in strengthening their social connectedness and increasing their technology self-efficacy.



(long term)

- Contributing to the shift of attitudes and behaviors toward seniors by restoring their visibility and participation in their community.
- The outcomes and lessons learned from the project have the potential to be applied in other cities that need to address the generational digital divide to improve seniors' quality of life.

Next steps (in the next 12 months) include:

- Engaging seniors and understanding how they learn and adopt new technologies.
- Growing our network of community partners.
- Analyzing seniors' social networks and supporting them through tailored high-performance teams' practices.
- Designing the Living Lab infrastructure.



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