Smart Social Connector: An Interdisciplinary, Collaborative Approach to Foster Social Connectedness in Underserved Senior Populations
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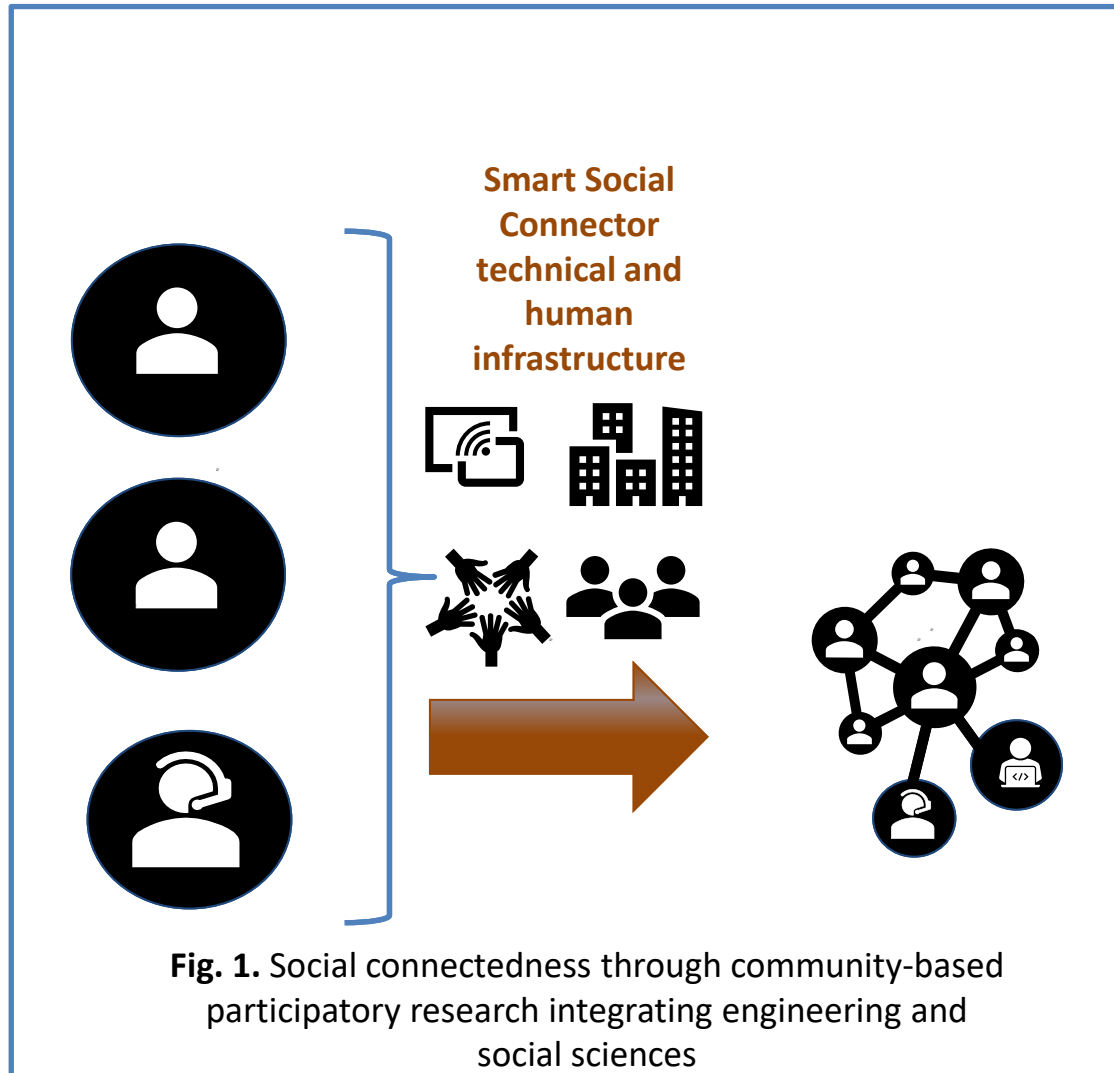**IRG, FY2020**

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Project Overview

Fig. 1. Social connectedness through community-based participatory research integrating engineering and social sciences

Problem

Several factors, including lack of technological skills and 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].

Project Vision

The Smart Social Connector (SSC) aims to develop and sustain social connectedness of seniors to improve their quality of life through the intersection of technology, community engagement, and social sciences.

[1] Friemel, 2016; [2] Gitlow, 2014

Project Overview

Use-Inspired Research

- The SSC addresses **social isolation among seniors** by creating informed strategies for learning and adopting technology and by aligning resources with community needs.

- The SSC promotes **meaningful social connectedness** among seniors that creates a sense of belonging within their community, advancing their health and welfare.

- The SSC is a **community-based participatory research** project leveraging partnerships with the City of El Paso and El Paso Community College.

Fundamental Research Contributions

- Advance knowledge on **the systemic and behavioral factors** that increase **social connectedness and bridge the generational digital** divide in seniors; and

- Increase social and technological connectedness for seniors through **Smart City solutions**.

Project Update

- **Building the foundation** for the SCC integrative and interdisciplinary research with community partners.

- Investigating what **factors contribute to the learning and adoption of new technologies** among seniors.

- Student training.

- Future activities include analyzing characteristics of **seniors' social networks** that contribute to **meaningful connections,** further studying individual and social factors for **learning and adopting technology,** and designing **Smart City** solutions.

Project Evolution

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a shift to online teaching and learning and provided a unique opportunity for researchers to elicit information from El Paso Community College instructors working with seniors.

The research team identified that the use of technology for teaching a wide range of topics (e.g., arts, computer skills) online offers a wealth of knowledge to analyze the effectiveness of different strategies to virtually engage seniors that will inform our Smart City solutions design.
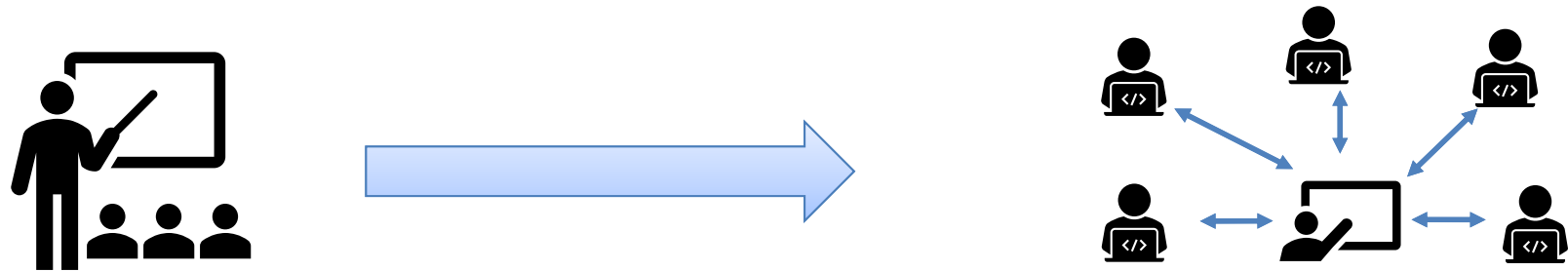

Fig 2. Shift to online teaching and learning.

Anticipated outcomes & success measures for next year

Activities for the next 12 months include:

Advance knowledge on systemic and behavioral factors that increase connectedness and bridge the generational digital divide in seniors

- Growing our network of community partners.
- Engaging seniors in further understanding how they learn and adopt new technologies.
- Analyzing senior's social networks and supporting them through tailored high-performance teams' practices.

Increase social and technological connectedness for seniors through Smart City solutions

- Design of Living Lab infrastructure.

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