

Experiential Learning Opportunities with Social Impact



Experiential Learning Opportunities with Social Impact

Experiential learning—sometimes known as hands-on or action learning—is a high-impact educational practice that has long been part of MIT’s ethos of “mens et manus.” More than 90% of MIT undergraduates participate in an experiential learning opportunity (ELO), most commonly through the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP) or the MIT International Science and Technology Initiatives (MISTI) but also through a wide range of other MIT programs such as the Sandbox Innovation Fund Program, D-Lab, and makerspaces.

Student engagement

Today’s MIT students are deeply concerned about the world’s most challenging problems such as climate change, health equity, and racial justice, but very few have the opportunity to engage in social impact work through experiential learning while attending MIT. In fact, a recent MIT task force report noted that, in recent years, the Priscilla King Gray Public Service Center (PKG Center) could fund only one of every five applicants for a social impact internship or project. Furthermore, just 7% of summer placements for MIT students take place at a nonprofit or public sector organization.

Barriers to entry

Most MIT students need to earn money during school breaks, so pursuing unpaid or low-paying summer social impact work isn’t usually an option. This creates troubling financial barriers to participation for low- and middle-income students, who make up the majority of the student population at MIT. In addition, as MIT students are in great demand for lucrative internships in the private sector, nonprofit organizations that would benefit greatly from MIT student talent can’t afford to compete for interns, losing out on valuable capacity building.

Currently, social impact internships and independent projects funded through the PKG Center not only pay less than private sector equivalents, they also pay less than nonprofit and public service opportunities at our peer institutions. The demand for mission-driven ELOs continues to grow, and immersive social impact ELOs should be equally accessible to all of our students.

Educating global change makers

MIT aims to produce active citizens, effective leaders, and innovative problem solvers who work to build a better world after graduation. Social impact ELOs allow MIT students to learn from and work alongside local and global partners, applying their unique skills and knowledge to complicated societal problems.

Immersive social impact ELOs help students build “change-making” skills such as communication, leadership, and ethical decision making. These mission-driven experiential learning opportunities will help students to better understand the real-world implications of their academic skills and to approach solutions with community perspectives, while adding valuable capacity to community partners. In addition, research suggests that participation in immersive social impact ELOs can contribute positively to students’ future engagement in the workplace and their long-term well-being.



The solution

MIT seeks additional funding to catalyze, promote, and support social impact ELOs across a wide range of issues (e.g., tech for good, climate change, racial justice, and health equity) and embedded across existing programs such as the PKG Center, UROP, and MISTI.

Much to offer

Community partners are eager to collaborate with MIT students on thorny challenges. MIT students brim with sophisticated technical skills, creative problem-solving talent, and a drive to tackle complexity that is invaluable to community partners who often operate with limited resources. They bring these valuable skills to their work with civic and community partner organizations in areas such as:

- Climate-focused projects
- Community-engaged participatory action research (working within a community to develop workable solutions to social challenges)
- Data analytics and visualization
- Ethical use of artificial intelligence
- Policy research
- Qualitative and quantitative analysis of technology
- Software and web development

Building on existing resources

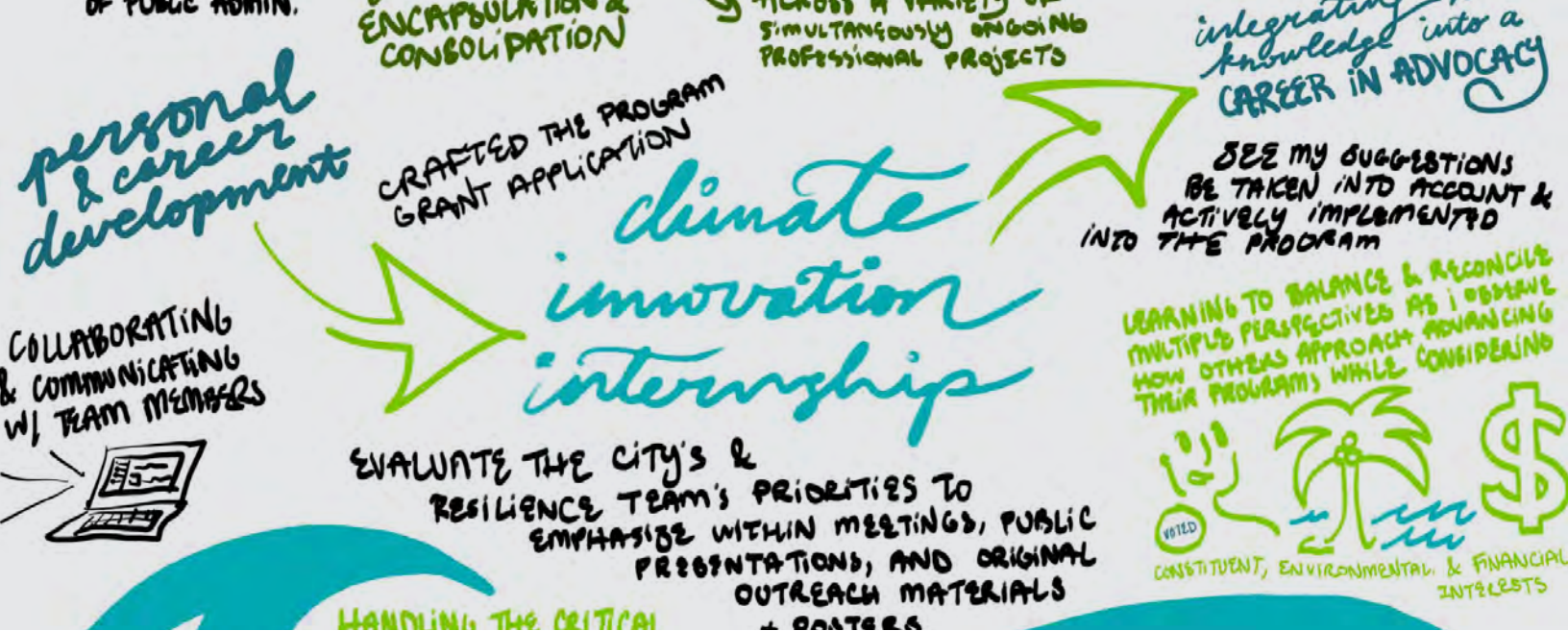
Some MIT programs (PKG Center, D-Lab, Environmental Solutions Initiative) already offer rigorous social impact programming that is primed for expansion; others (UROP, MISTI, MIT Office for Minority Education, and many more) could create new opportunities for students with dedicated funding and partnerships with nonprofit or public sector organizations.

The goal

Annual funding for 750 experiential learning opportunities annually would allow roughly 25 to 30 % of MIT undergraduates to have immersive learning experiences with ethical, political, social, and community dimensions. These ELOs will build upon the PKG Center's partnerships with nonprofits and social enterprises, the MIT Washington office, global immersion programs through MISTI and D-Lab, and independent capstone projects or fellowships. The PKG Center will provide technical support to MIT's departments, labs, and centers about best practices for mutually beneficial engagement with external partners.

Above left: MIT students taking the immersive and experiential class 4.s23 Biodiversity and Cities: A Perspective in Colombian Cities conduct field research in Quibdo, Colombia.

Above right: MIT D-Lab students display a biomass-powered fruit dryer they helped build to aid food preservation and reduce food insecurity in Uganda.



Urgency

This generation of college students will graduate in a world facing complex, seemingly intractable challenges such as the pandemic, climate change, poverty, and dangerous misinformation exacerbated by the proliferation of technology. MIT can and must do more to inspire, prepare, and engage our students to play a critical role in solving these problems.

Making it happen

New funding for ELOs will be dispersed across a wide range of MIT departments, labs, and centers to help scale existing programs and create new opportunities. A new funding process—including a request for proposals, clear criteria, and a diverse selection committee composed of faculty, staff, and students—will be established. MIT faculty members will contribute by serving as sponsors and supervisors of UROP projects and by leveraging their own networks and connections with nonprofit organizations and public agencies to source internship opportunities and social impact research supervised by non-faculty members.

Impact

With your support, we can harness the extraordinary talent of MIT students and train the next generation of ethical leaders. By expanding the number of social impact ELOs at MIT, we can also help to build critical capacity in mission-driven organizations and agencies around the world to make lasting change in their communities.

Above: Arianna Peró '25 created this visual representation of her PKG social impact internship with the government of Miami Beach, FL.

Cover: Through PKG Connect, MIT students assist DigDeep, a nonprofit working for greater access to running water on the Navajo Nation.

By the Numbers

6500+
ANNUAL UROP AND
MISTI OPPORTUNITIES

100
ANNUAL PKG SOCIAL
IMPACT INTERNSHIPS

7%
OF UNDERGRADUATE SUMMER
EXPERIENCES ARE FOCUSED
ON SOCIAL IMPACT

We call upon MIT's alumni, friends, and supporters to join us in creating social impact opportunities for MIT undergraduates to build a better world.

For more information, contact:

Kate Trimble
Senior Associate Dean + Director
MIT Office of Experiential Learning
617.324.5176 | ktrimble@mit.edu