

Experiential Learning Opportunities for Social Impact

MIT Office of Experiential Learning

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Today's MIT students are deeply concerned about the world's most challenging problems— issues like climate change, health equity, and racial justice, among others. They are eager to roll up their sleeves and bring their sophisticated technical skills, creative problem-solving talent, and comfort with complexity to mission-driven organizations that often operate with limited resources.

Unfortunately, too few MIT students have the opportunity to engage in social impact work through experiential learning opportunities (ELOs). Limited financial resources (within MIT and the potential host organizations) have meant that **we're not meeting the current demand for social impact ELOs**. For instance, in recent years, the PKG Center has offered a wide variety of social impact ELOs but has had to turn away four of every five applicants due to a lack of funding. (For IAP 2023, PKG received 733 applications for 53 Social Impact Internship positions!)

MIT has recognized this problem in several recent strategic plans. [Task Force 2021 and Beyond](#) explicitly recommended fundraising to increase the number of social impact internships to meet rising student demand. MIT's [Strategic Action Plan for Belonging, Achievement, and Composition](#) highlights the need to incorporate more diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, and ethics concepts into research and education at MIT and to identify and address any disparities in access to and outcomes of experiential learning. And in [Fast Forward: MIT's Climate Action Plan for the Decade](#), MIT promises to "make a climate or clean-energy research opportunity or experiential learning opportunity available to every undergraduate who wants one."

Achieving these goals will require a substantial investment, but the result will be more equitable, accessible, and impactful experiences for our students. New investments in social impact ELOs will:

- Help mission-driven, social impact organizations— non-profits, NGOs, social ventures, and public agencies— compete for MIT student talent.
- Create more equitable access to social impact ELOs, especially for students with financial need.
- Inspire and prepare more MIT students to take on the most urgent challenges of the 21st century.

The [Social Impact ELO initiative](#), led by MIT's Office of Experiential Learning (OEL) and implemented across MIT, is the ambitious and achievable plan to do just that, and we're well on our way as the rest of this document describes.

Pilot Funding Round

In October 2022, OEL announced a pilot funding round to support the creation of new social impact-focused ELOs in IAP, spring, and/or summer of 2023. The call for proposals was distributed widely and included targeted outreach to experiential program leaders and a message from Vice Chancellor Ian Waitz to all MIT faculty.

Available funding for the pilot round totaled roughly \$500K and came from multiple sources: 20% from donor gifts, 40% from recurring internal sources, and 40% from one-time OEL funding.

Competitive RFP Process

Applicants were asked to submit proposals with a budget and narrative outlining:

- how their project met the criteria for an experiential learning opportunity;
- the social or environmental impact of the project; and
- the near-term applications of the project for communities, policies, or practices.

Eligible expenses included student stipends/wages, travel, supplies and materials, and other student-related costs directly relevant to the program learning outcomes. Funding was not available to support program staffing.

In our first year, **OEL received 20 proposals totaling \$1,380,846 in requests.** All proposals were read and reviewed by a funding committee consisting of two faculty members, two OEL staff members, one UROP staff member, one undergraduate student, and one postdoctoral scholar. The faculty members and postdoctoral scholar were selected for their scholarship related to ethics, policy, and community organizing as well as their commitment to experiential education at MIT. After an initial reading and rating process, the committee met to discuss the proposals and decide on the funding awards.

Committee members included:

- **Marion Boulicault**, Distinguished Postdoctoral Fellow in Ethics and Technology at the MIT Schwarzman College of Computing
- **Fotini Christia**, Ford International Professor of the Social Sciences in the Department of Political Science
- **Alexis Huang**, Undergraduate Student, Experiential Learning Student Ambassador
- **Melissa Martin-Greene**, Assistant Director, UROP
- **Cesar McDowell**, Professor of the Practice of Civic Design at MIT and Associate Head of the Department of Urban Studies and Planning
- **Kate Trimble**, Senior Associate Dean and Director, Office of Experiential Learning
- **Kate Weishaar**, Senior Program Coordinator, Office of Experiential Learning

Given the limited funding available and the desire for pilot programs to serve as models for future programs, the committee prioritized the highest quality learning experiences that involved students directly in high-impact work with a clear near-term benefit.

Proposals Selected

Of the 20 proposals that we received, **8 projects were awarded funding totaling \$491,128** (some projects were funded at lower levels than requested). The funded projects are listed in the table below.

Proposal Title	Department/Program	Primary Contact/Sponsor
PKG Social Impact Internship Program	PKG	Alison Hynd
Equitable Design in Action - Forging Partnerships for Students at MIT D-Lab	D-Lab	Libby Hsu
RealTalk in Communities	Center for Constructive Communication and Department of Urban Studies and Planning	Prof. Dimitra Dimitrakopoulou
Anthro-Engineering Million-Person Decarbonization in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia	Departments of Anthropology and Nuclear Science and Engineering	Prof. Manduhai Buyandelger and Prof. Michael Short
MIT Superfund Research Program Social Impact ELOs	Department of Biological Engineering	Prof. Bevin P. Engelward
MIT App Inventor Veterans Prison Education Project	CSAIL	Selim Tezel, Prof. Hal Abelson, and Marisol Diaz
MISTI Global Social Impact Internships and MIT-Ukraine Pilot Program	MISTI	April Julich Perez
Living Machines for Women's Health Research	NEET	Mehdi Salek

These 8 projects will support up to 112 undergraduate student experiences that would not otherwise be possible, including travel and direct community engagement, either in the United States and abroad. The experiences focus on urgent social and environmental challenges ranging from applying cutting-edge technologies to address common but underresearched gynecological disorders to helping communities use research-proven practices to address toxic social and political polarization. All of the ELOs will be offered at no cost to students, and most will provide stipends or wages to compensate students for their time and effort.

Next Steps

Preparing our students to tackle the world's most pressing problems is a mission-critical priority for MIT. MIT's new values statement sums it up: "Together we possess uncommon strengths, and we shoulder the responsibility to use them with wisdom and care for humanity and the natural world."

The proposals funded in the pilot round answered this challenge with a variety of disciplines, formats, sponsors, locations, partners, and types of impact. There are many more potential opportunities to match the unique skillsets of MIT students with the urgent needs of communities across the globe.

In the future, with modest additional funding, existing MIT programs can expand their offerings to reach more students. With more substantial new investments, more programs and faculty can develop the capacity to engage in rigorous social impact work, broadening the types of opportunities available to students as well as the types of impact that MIT can have on the world.

We look forward to the work— and impact— ahead!

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¹ Task Force 2021 and Beyond: Student Journey group

² Task Force 2021 and Beyond: RIC 2 on Social Equity and Civic Responsibility

³ Social Impact ELO Funding Review Committee