Responsible scholarship, teaching, and collaboration across the disciplines can turn knowledge into action with demonstrable impact. At Penn Arts & Sciences, the Making a Difference in Diverse Communities initiative encourages faculty to work with students, explore innovative ways of applying their expertise, and address broad societal challenges.

Making a Difference draws on the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences to improve our understanding of the causes, character, and consequences of diversity and inequality in a global context. These projects use coursework, research, and service to address inequities in areas as wide-ranging as education, gender, socioeconomic mobility, health care, and political representation, as well as the grand challenges of climate change, migration, and immigration.
The program offers grants of up to $100,000 to interdisciplinary teams of faculty who engage students in projects in communities at the local, national, and international level. Grants support a range of activities including course development, pre-departure training, domestic and international travel, lodging, stipends, and dissemination of findings. Funds may be used, for example, to develop a service-learning course that takes place at Penn during the spring semester, followed by a fieldwork experience during the summer where students partner with community residents to develop solutions to pressing issues.

Making a Difference creates opportunities for students across the University to engage in immersive, interdisciplinary, and experiential learning. Projects address a range of questions and methodologies but share a focus on impact and a commitment to local and global engagement. Funding for Making a Difference supports student inquiry and community-oriented solutions and strengthens the School’s commitment to advance research and teaching around issues of diversity, inequality, and human well-being.

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**Philosophy for the Young**

Young minds have the capacity for philosophical thought. The problem is, there isn’t much room for philosophical exploration in traditional curricula. This project encouraged children to think philosophically by building on existing partnerships and cultivating new relationships with schools across Philadelphia and students in kindergarten through 12th grade.

Penn undergraduates worked alongside graduate students in dedicated philosophy classes and clubs and in classrooms where teachers worked to integrate the subject into existing lessons. Karen Detlefsen, Professor of Philosophy and Education and project leader, views the work as a social and educational justice project, giving students the chance to think freely and explore topics including personal values, character, and social systems.
Using Virtual Reality and Digital Video to Document the Post-Hurricane Maria Recovery Efforts in Puerto Rico

Hurricane Maria had devastating effects on Puerto Rico when it struck in 2017. Puerto Ricans responded and recovered in many ways, including through art and creative expression. This project brought Penn students to the island in summer 2018 to partner with local artists and capture the performances, sculptures, paintings, and music that emerged in response the hurricane and its aftermath.

The Penn students used virtual reality and traditional video to film the art and artists, as well as interviews with community members and Ricardo Rosselló, Governor of Puerto Rico. The result was an immersive video experience that used cutting-edge technology to tell a story and highlighted the work and lives of people on the ground in Puerto Rico.

Project leader Peter Decherney, Professor of Cinema Studies and English, hopes the project communicates the need for ongoing aid and attention to post-Maria Puerto Rico. This project continues the film and advocacy work of his previous Making a Difference grant for his project, Reclaiming Refugee Stories: Virtual Reality and Participatory Video in an African Refugee Camp.

Penn undergraduate students and alumni teamed up with professionals on the summer film project in Puerto Rico to create virtual reality videos about the response of artists to Hurricane Maria.
Reducing Lead Exposure: Testing a Nationally Replicable University-Municipal-Community Partnership

Concerns over lead poisoning were heightened in the U.S. after the contamination of a city water supply in Flint, Michigan. In Philadelphia and southeastern Pennsylvania, rates of lead exposure in children are high—especially in low-income communities. This project, which began in spring 2017, involved students and faculty working with key stakeholders in municipal government, local schools, and community groups to develop and implement a program to eliminate lead exposure through lead service line replacement.

Under the direction of Reto Gieré, Chair and Professor of Earth and Environmental Science, undergrads collaborated with Penn faculty, public school students and teachers, and community. Students used GIS mapping skills to prepare maps that identified properties with lead lines, promoted lead screenings for children in affected neighborhoods, and developed curricula to raise awareness about lead service lines, health risks, and community action.

Tabeen Hosain, C’17, (R) worked with community members in West Philadelphia to test soil using an XRF analyzer.

“Different fields look at the world in different ways, and the methods and perspectives of many specialties are needed to address the complex challenges the world faces. With the support of our alumni, parents, and friends, we’ve been able to fund projects that engage our faculty and energize collaboration between disciplines to take on some big issues.”

Steven J. Fluharty
Dean and Thomas S. Gates, Jr. Professor of Psychology, Pharmacology, and Neuroscience

Opportunities to support Making a Difference in Diverse Communities exist at many levels. Support may fund course development, training, and travel, among other possibilities. To learn more about supporting this initiative, please contact Deb Rhebergen, Vice Dean for Advancement, at 215-898-9942 or drheberg@sas.upenn.edu.