Building A Better World
The Future of Public Service at MIT

PKG
PRISCILLA KING GRAY
PUBLIC SERVICE CENTER
From its founding in 1861 to today, MIT’s mission has been to develop in each member of the MIT community the ability to work wisely, creatively, and effectively for the betterment of humankind.
Our Past and Present

In 1988, three MIT visionaries—Dean of Student Affairs Shirley McBay, first lady Priscilla King Gray, and Professor Robert Mann ’50—recognized that, although public service activities were widespread across the Institute, MIT needed a central resource to support and expand such efforts. Together, they created the MIT Public Service Center. True to the Institute’s culture of innovation and leadership, MIT’s center was one of the first established in the U.S.

Since that time, much has changed: MIT has evolved and grown exponentially as a global leader in science and engineering research and teaching, even as the immense challenges facing humanity stubbornly persist and emerge in new forms (e.g., the threat of climate change, water scarcity and quality issues, rising healthcare costs, and age-related disorders).

The practice of public service in higher education has evolved as well. Today, almost every college and university has a center dedicated to helping students participate in service. And what constitutes “service” has become more sophisticated, building upon a foundation of direct service volunteering with a new and expansive focus on rigorous curricular integration, reciprocal community partnerships, and measurable student learning outcomes.

Over the past 30 years, the Public Service Center has developed and launched more than 20 innovative service programs for MIT students, some of which—like the PKG Fellowships (created in 1990) and IDEAS Global Challenge (created in 2001)—endure to this day. As we enter our fourth decade, the Center is examining our role within the Institute and how we can continue to inspire and support MIT students to contribute their talents and energies to solve the world’s greatest problems.

OUR FOUNDER

Priscilla King Gray has been a steadfast and invaluable friend of the Center since her instrumental role in its founding in 1988. She continues to contribute her wisdom, humanitarian spirit, and deep caring for MIT students to our work as a member of our Leadership Council. In 2015, in honor of her commitment and leadership, the Center was renamed the Priscilla King Gray Public Service Center (PKG Center).
The PKG Center is at a pivotal point in its nearly 30-year history.
Planning Process

Under new leadership in the Division of Student Life (Dean Suzy Nelson and Senior Associate Dean Gustavo Burkett) and the PKG Center itself (Associate Dean Kate Trimble), the Center embarked on a strategic planning process to chart our course for the next 3-5 years. We officially launched this process in January 2017. As we conclude this planning, we are transitioning to a new organizational home within the Institute: the PKG Center will be part of a new Office of Experiential Learning under Vice Chancellor Ian Waitz.

PKG staff conducted a thorough and critical review of our existing programs including analyses of programmatic costs and benefits and indicators of student demand and selectivity. We had face-to-face conversations with dozens of students, faculty members, campus colleagues, and community partners; we used survey instruments to reach even more stakeholders. The Center staff, along with other MIT colleagues and students, visited peer institutions to learn about best practices in the field. Finally, we presented preliminary directions and concepts to—and solicited valuable feedback from—the PKG Leadership Council, the Division of Student Life, Resource Development, the Alumni Association and MIT Club of Boston, and others.
**Strengths**

**PUBLIC SERVICE AT MIT:** MIT is home to a wide range of public service, social innovation, and civic engagement efforts—from FSILG service projects and philanthropy initiatives to community-based or participatory action research within DUSP to the Institute’s Community Giving initiative and Community Service Fund.

**MIT STUDENTS:** MIT students are unique: they both shape and are shaped by MIT’s cultural mix of boldness and humility. They are relentless, pushing themselves to their intellectual and creative limits, and restless, never satisfied with their last achievement. MIT students are quintessential problem solvers who crave tough challenges—the tougher the better—and bring highly specialized and technical skill sets to local and global problems.

**CENTER STAFF AND PROGRAMS:** The PKG Center is home to committed and creative staff members with deep knowledge of and commitment to MIT students and community-based social justice work. The Center has catalyzed and supported strong and sustained student-led public service projects through our IDEAS Global Challenge and PKG Fellowships programs.

**INSTITUTE COLLEAGUES AND COLLABORATIONS:** Senior administrators are well-informed about and value public service in higher education; the PKG Center also has strong alumni champions on its Leadership Council. The Center has enthusiastic and influential connections/collaborations with many other related MIT centers and initiatives, and a handful of courses and faculty. PKG is actively engaged in campus networks around social innovation, international travel, and risk management.

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**Weaknesses**

**STUDENT ENGAGEMENT:** The Center did a good job of serving students already inclined to service (and relatively sophisticated in their approach), but was “preaching to the converted” rather than inspiring an interest in a broader group of students. Overall, reported participation in service was relatively low: recent student and alumni surveys indicate that only 31% of undergraduates, 35% of Masters students, and 37% of Ph.D. students actively participated in public service during their time at MIT.

**PROGRAM DESIGN:** PKG programs did not consistently offer a clear sequence or pathway of experiences, connections to academic or topical subjects, formal leadership opportunities, and/or community building experiences. Programs were not designed to encourage sustained student engagement, and explicit educational elements and goals were not present in all programs.

**EXTERNAL COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS:** Local partnerships have often been based on PKG program needs, not student interest or partner “fit.” PKG programs have supported student engagement with strong community partners elsewhere in the U.S. and globally, but these have often been student-identified and not longer-term partners.

**OPERATIONS:** PKG Center communications lacked a clear strategy and compelling message. Much of our outreach to students was relatively passive (posters, hosting info sessions) rather than meeting students where they are. Administrative tasks were time-sinks for student-facing program staff, despite significant Center-wide administrative staff capacity.
UNMET STUDENT DEMAND FOR PUBLIC SERVICE: In recent years, student demand has increased across the board for PKG programs. For instance, we received nearly 150 applications for our PKG Fellowships last year and could fund just 62 students. Similarly, there were four times as many applications for our new IAP program with Boston Medical Center as spots for students.

NEW CONNECTIONS WITHIN MIT: MIT is a large and diverse institution, and there are many more opportunities for collaborations with other MIT staff, centers, initiatives, departments, and faculty. With greater outreach and new student advising models, the PKG Center can better support and enhance student service initiatives that it does not “own and operate” (such as FSILG service projects, student organizations like Amphibious Achievement and Code for Good, etc.).

CAMPUS POLITICAL CLIMATE: Across the nation and across MIT’s campus, there is a renewed interest in civic engagement that spans the political spectrum and is seen in the MIT community’s participation in events like the faculty-led Day of Action and local and national marches for women and science.

DEEP BUT UNTAPPED EXPERTISE: The broader perspectives and experiences of faculty, alumni, and community practitioners could be more effectively brought to bear on PKG Center activities. New program models can spark faculty and alumni involvement that is structural and sustained, rather than sporadic, and better serve faculty teaching and/or research interests.

IMAGE PROBLEM: “Public service” has a wide variety of meanings to different people, but is too often synonymous with occasional volunteering and “days of service.” Public service is not widely perceived as rigorous and relevant to the central academic mission of the Institute.

FUNDING: The Center’s annual budget is heavily reliant on expendable gifts that must be raised each year, requiring extensive staff capacity to secure funds and steward donors. While Institute support and our modest endowment funds cover about half of our $1.4 million annual operating budget, we must raise the other 50 percent, or $700,000, each year just to maintain our current programming levels.

CROWDED FIELD: Outside of their demanding course schedules, students have a head-spinning number of options for their limited free time: more than 500 student organizations, athletic teams, etc. This creates intense competition for student participants. Even within the public service and social innovation arenas, experiential and co-curricular offerings are disjointed and difficult for students to navigate.
We believe that every MIT student should have the opportunity to participate in—and learn through—at least one immersive service experience.
Our Students

Like virtually all students accepted to highly selective colleges and universities, MIT students arrive on campus having participated in some form of public service as high school students. Many contributed their free time to worthy organizations and causes, volunteering as tutors or mentors in under-resourced public schools or working in homeless shelters or food banks. These types of involvement, while admirable, do not always fully engage MIT students’ intellectual and academic talents and skills.

At the PKG Center, we believe that a student’s involvement in public service should both reflect their unique talents and abilities and evolve with them. Public service should not be an extracurricular activity done solely to “give back” to the less fortunate; it should be a rigorous pursuit that helps students learn about the world in ways that their physics class or chemistry laboratory doesn’t teach them.

Participation in public service or service learning is a well-documented “high impact practice” in higher education\(^1\). When students engage with real-world problems in real-world contexts and have opportunities to reflect on these experiences with peers and mentors, studies have shown positive correlations with outcomes in civic engagement and ethical reasoning, academic skills, and leadership\(^2\).

Students’ engagement in public service should be aligned to their academic strengths and interests, intentionally designed to allow them to apply their unique skills, and tailored to how MIT students will most effectively invest in causes and organizations that they care about, now and in the future. Students’ engagement in service should become more challenging as they grow and develop and learn. MIT students don’t expect that their math or physics courses at MIT are going to be the same as their classes in high school—and their MIT public service activities should be no different.

We believe that every MIT student should have the opportunity to participate in—and learn through—at least one immersive service experience. Undergraduates, for instance, have 4 IAPs, 4 spring breaks, and 3 summer breaks. We aim to realign and scale our offerings so that all MIT students will want and be able to spend at least one of those break periods doing intensive, rigorous, and impactful public service.

Our ambition is to make “PKG” an acronym on par with “UROP” and “MISTI”—universally recognized and respected by students and considered a “must-do” experience at MIT. These programs complement and complicate what students are learning in the classroom and prepare them for success in future careers. Ninety percent of undergraduates participate in a UROP, and 50 percent participate in an international experience like MISTI before they graduate.

To meet this goal, the PKG Center must redefine public service at MIT, looking beyond direct service volunteering toward educating students on how to effectively engage in policy, philanthropy, social entrepreneurship, nonprofit governance, and more. We should cultivate the skills and knowledge that

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will serve our students—and equip them to serve their own communities and the wider society—long after their time at MIT.

While skill development and career preparation are certainly part of the benefit for students participating in public service, our end goal is not necessarily for students to pursue professional careers in the nonprofit or public sectors. While fewer than 5 percent of MIT undergraduates accept jobs in the non-profit/ government/ K-12 education sectors right out of college, more than one-third (37 percent) of MIT alumni have served on a nonprofit board of directors. Many alumni are actively involved in personal philanthropy, sit on public boards and commissions, and are engaged in other forms of public service. We must prepare students to be effective public servants in whatever shape that takes in their lives after graduation.

The Institute

The PKG Center does not have a monopoly on service at MIT. Excellent public service and social/environmental change work are happening across campus in a variety of places: student organizations, D-Lab, Edgerton Center, Terrascope, the Office of Engineering Outreach Programs, Office of Sustainability, and many more. Collaborating with these partners strengthens the culture and practice of service across the Institute. In addition to opportunities to expand PKG’s program offerings and scale, we also want to help students understand and navigate intentional pathways through curricular, co-
curricular, and experiential service offerings at MIT; better recognize and reward their participation; and layer service experiences or projects into non-service-oriented MIT programs like MISTI and the Student/Alumni Externship program.

Poorly-designed or -executed service activities can leave MIT student participants with a view of public service that is disorganized, lacking in rigor, or not impactful—negative perspectives that have implications for how or whether alumni engage later in life. The PKG Center must be a resource for students and student groups that are pursuing service projects but don’t always have the expertise or the connections to make the most of those experiences.

We must better support existing efforts and reach students where they are—in their residence halls, in their clubs, and in their classrooms. We must ask ourselves: How can we inject service elements or offer public service experiences to students participating in other broadly popular MIT programs? How can we serve the entire campus, not just programs that we “own and operate”?

Our Partners

MIT students aren’t garden-variety university students, and garden-variety public service experiences won’t satisfy their intense drive and unparalleled ability to solve difficult technical and scientific problems. We need specialized partners—nonprofit and public agencies, and for-profit companies, at home and abroad—to get them engaged and keep them coming.
The PKG Center taps and expands MIT students’ unique skills and interests to prepare them to explore and address complex social and environmental challenges. We educate students to collaborate ethically and effectively with community partners to engage in meaningful public service, today and in their lives beyond MIT.

**Mission**

**Values**

**RESPECT AND RECIPROCITY:** We recognize and value the knowledge that exists in communities, and strive to treat all of our partners with respect. Public service projects should be driven by community-identified needs, developed through open communication and shared decision-making, and mutually beneficial.

**RIGOR AND REFLECTION:** Public service should be undertaken with the same careful preparation and critical thinking that MIT students bring to their academic endeavors. Reflection—on one’s motivation to serve, on the communities being served, and on one’s positionality within that community—is essential to ethical and effective service.

**DIVERSITY AND DIFFERENCE:** Communities are not merely one-dimensional repositories of need or homes to “problems” to be solved by MIT students. They are complex places, full of assets, stories, and knowledge. We practice and encourage openness to new ideas because we see diversity as a strength. We embrace differences where we find them through respectful curiosity, careful listening, and humility.
Goals

The PKG Center will advance MIT’s mission by:

• Reinforcing the educational purpose, rigor, and value of public service at MIT; and

• Preparing MIT students to be actively and effectively engaged in public service now and in the future.

Strategies

**STUDENTS:** Offer experiential and co-curricular student programming that is rigorous, progressively challenging, and academically aligned, and that helps students develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for effective social change.

**INSTITUTE:** Coordinate and support public service initiatives across the Institute; provide guidance and resources to expand capacity and improve outcomes for students and communities.

**PARTNERS:** Work with key non-profit and public agencies, and for-profit companies, at home and abroad, that can benefit from MIT’s distinctive strengths and provide high-quality student experiences.

**OPERATIONS:** Scale our programs, streamline our systems, and refine our practices to devote more time to students, faculty, and communities without sacrificing operational excellence.
back for more. We must identify and cultivate rigorous and academically aligned opportunities—especially those with technical, scientific, and engineering project elements—where MIT students can make uniquely valuable contributions and gain critical skills.

Importantly, our partnerships must be reciprocal, with partner organizations owning, defining, and ultimately benefiting from their collaborations with MIT. Engagement with MIT students shouldn’t be one-sided or a burden to already strapped nonprofits and public agencies. Partner organizations should have sufficient capacity to host MIT students in meaningful work (including staff supervision, training/orientation, space, etc.), and offer the types of projects that MIT students will find challenging and relevant to their courses of study and skill sets; they should also realize substantial benefits from their investments in MIT students.

**Operations**

Developing new programs and services, deepening campus collaborations, and cultivating new external partners will require new resources, systems, and capacity within the PKG Center.

At the most basic level, students participating in public service projects—whether they are launching a social venture or interning with a well-established NGO—often require financial support to offset the opportunity cost of paid employment. Unlike private sector employers that can and do pay significant sums to host MIT students, public service employers are
generally unable to (fully) cover the cost of student engagement.

Recently, as we’ve seen student demand increase across the board for our programs, we have struggled with the staff and financial capacity to meet this demand with a high-quality and educationally-enriching experience. Of the 142 students who applied to be PKG Fellows last year, only 44 percent were selected for the program. The pilot of our PKG IAP: Healthcare program saw an even higher rate of selectivity with only 24 percent of applicants accepted. Our newest program, PKG Explore, accepted only 38 percent of applicants. As we look ahead, balancing selectivity (choosing the best students for a given program or partner) with scale (providing meaningful experiences for all students who wish to participate) will be critical.

Given the anticipated increase in demand and the inherent need for subsidy, the ability to scale service opportunities to more MIT students will require new resources and creative strategies to underwrite these costs. Adding to the direct student costs is the need for adequate professional staff capacity to educate and advise students, cultivate collaborations with MIT colleagues, and develop and maintain reciprocal external partnerships. We must work to grow and align the Center’s resources—human and financial—toward the goals and strategies outlined in this plan.
MIT students are quintessential problem solvers who crave tough challenges—the tougher the better—and bring highly specialized and technical skill sets to local and global problems.
Students

Offer experiential and co-curricular student programming that is rigorous, progressively challenging, and academically aligned; and that helps students develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for effective social change.

1. Expand and transform outdated or limited notions of “public service,” broaden experiential opportunities for students, and connect them with relevant academic content and career skills.

1.1. Offer programs that allow students to explore and experience a wider range of modes of social change (policy/politics, philanthropy, social entrepreneurship, non-profit management/governance).

1.2. Develop programmatic depth in 2-4 topical or thematic issues (climate change, health/medicine, humanitarian response) through strong and sustained partnerships with campus and community experts.

Social Change Wheel

Each of these strategies contributes to social change. MIT students can access public service in multiple ways depending on their interests.

Source: Minnesota Campus Compact/University of Chicago.
1.3. Expose students to hands-on, active learning experiences that build personal and professional skills and abilities (ethics, communication, social context, and understanding of contemporary issues) and help inform and expand career exploration.

2. Develop a comprehensive ecosystem of learning and doing that intentionally integrates experiential opportunities (interning or volunteering with nonprofits and public agencies, developing and launching social ventures); co-curricular learning (workshops and trainings that build the skills and contextual knowledge necessary for effective service); and MIT’s exceptional academic curriculum (disciplinary knowledge and skills base).

2.1. Offer multiple entry points and clear pathways through all three areas that encourage and allow students to build upon previous work through progressively challenging experiences, e.g., initial exposure at a training or lecture leading to more immersive but exploratory experiences (spring break, summer internships, courses), culminating
in sophisticated projects (independent research fellowships, capstones, or leadership positions in a student organization).

2.2. Design programs to be flexible and diverse: support for both “plug-and-play” projects and student-initiated proposals; options for course credit or pay; opportunities throughout the academic year and break periods.

2.3. Create modular opportunities for students to “layer” service experiences into existing programs like MISTI, UROP, and externships, e.g., a 2-week immersive international service project at the end of an 8-week MISTI internship.

3. Define and track learning and developmental outcomes for all participants; recognize and reward achievement/mastery (e.g., certificate in public service).

4. Instill a strong sense of community among MIT student participants with new peer-to-peer connections, leadership roles, and more.

5. Ensure that our programs are accessible and appealing to all MIT students, regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, field of study, or undergraduate/graduate status.
Institute

Coordinate and support public service initiatives across the Institute; provide guidance and resources to expand capacity and improve outcomes for students and communities.

1. Connect, coordinate, and inform public service initiatives across the Institute and amplify their impact (Together in Service, Day of Action, Community Service Fund Board, etc.).

2. Meet students where they are through regular, strategic outreach and better serve student programs that we do not “own and operate” with training, advising, and other support.

3. Grow existing campus collaborations (PKG-MISTI and PKG-DUSP Fellowships) and develop new ones that leverage existing programmatic platforms (GECD externships, UROP, Terrascope).

4. Add value to MIT faculty and staff members engaged or interested in public service activities (service learning courses, research projects) by hosting events to share ideas and best practices, inviting national experts in the field of service learning and engaged scholarship to campus, providing seed grants for course development/ modification, and recognizing and celebrating excellence.

5. Thoughtfully and meaningfully engage and celebrate alumni expertise and leadership in service.

(Top) IDEAS winner Emily Lindemer, ’17, shares her experience co-founding Hey,Charlie at an IDEAS Generator Dinner. (Bottom) Students explore volunteer opportunities and meet representatives from government and community organizations at the annual PKG Social Action Fair.
Partners

Work with key non-profit and public agencies, and for-profit companies, at home and abroad, that can benefit from MIT’s distinctive strengths and provide high-quality student experiences.

1. Cultivate and sustain deep, reciprocal partnerships with a diverse set of organizations that can:
   1.1. Engage MIT students in ways that are defined by the partners themselves, build partner capacity, and yield significant community impact;
   1.2. Support MIT student learning and development through thoughtfully-designed, well-supervised real-world experiences that are relevant to MIT students’ talents and interests; and
   1.3. Offer opportunities across the entire calendar year (semester, IAP, and summer), via multiple channels (course involvement, on-campus speaking engagements, student placements) and in a variety of geographic locations (greater Boston, US/domestic, and international).

2. Identify new ways to thoughtfully and meaningfully engage practitioner expertise (e.g., practitioners-in-residence, “office hours” for student advising and mentoring).

3. Establish clear processes to regularly solicit and vet new partnerships, orient incoming partners, ensure open communication and candid feedback, and recognize and thank partners for their contributions to student learning and the MIT community.

Operations

Scale our programs, streamline our systems, and refine our practices to devote more time to students and communities without sacrificing operational excellence.

1. Align existing resources and secure new resources to expand students’ access to, engagement in, and benefit from meaningful public service.
   1.1. Diversify and grow PKG financial support; systematize and streamline financial functions.
      I. Increase expendable gifts to support near-term program innovation and, in the longer-term, grow endowment support to provide permanent funding for core functions and programs.
      II. Pursue support from new sources including private foundations and corporations.
   1.2. Re-examine and adjust program staff responsibilities and job descriptions to reflect new priorities and directions; centralize administrative, financial, and communications functions with appropriate staff members.

2. Refine Center messaging and visual identity and refresh communications outlets including website, social media, newsletters, etc.

3. Invest in technology that increases engagement and efficiency including software that: manages and tracks student participation; allows community partners to post and promote service opportunities; and facilitates remote contributions to student programs (e.g., online review of student applications, mentoring, interviewing).
Conclusion

This is a uniquely generative moment for the PKG Center and for public service at MIT. We are working hard to both sustain the best of our core programming and rapidly innovate with new program designs and partners.

We have already made strategic changes to prioritize programming that is rigorous, progressively challenging, and academically aligned. We discontinued or found new homes for several programs (one-time volunteer opportunities, holiday donation drive); doubled-down on long-standing programs that support sophisticated student engagement and service (Fellowships and IDEAS); and created new offerings that give students the real-world experiences that build personal and professional skills and abilities.

This year is an especially exciting time for the PKG Center, as we transition into a new organizational home under the Office of the Vice Chancellor. As part of the Office of Experiential Learning, we will help chart a new course for hands-on, active education that continues the tradition of Mens et Manus (mind and hand). The potential for new and innovative service programs and partnerships both on campus and off can have a significant and transformative effect on MIT’s educational ecosystem.

The implementation of a new and ambitious agenda for public service at MIT will undoubtedly require the realignment of current resources and the attraction of new financial support. Peer institutions—notably Cornell, Duke, and Harvard—have recently and publicly committed significant resources to public service on their campuses. This plan aims to frame a similarly transformative vision for service, one that builds upon MIT’s unique assets and culture. With a creative student body, world-class faculty, and problem-solving culture, MIT has tremendous potential to build programs, forge partnerships, and spark social innovations that are transformative for students and communities—in the Institute’s own backyard and beyond.

We’re deeply grateful for the generous support of so many who have helped make the PKG Center an integral part of MIT’s community. We’re proud of our history and what we’ve accomplished thus far and invigorated by the opportunities on the horizon. We hope you share our excitement about what lies ahead for the PKG Center and for public service at MIT. We look forward to working together to help educate MIT students to build a better world.
Special Thanks

Special thanks to our wide range of stakeholders whose input helped shape the strategic plan for our future.

STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS
Amphibious Achievement
Code for Good
Effective Altruism
Fossil Free MIT
Graduate Student Council
(External Affairs Board)
iHouse
Inter-Fraternal Council
McCormick Hall
PKG program participants
Science Policy Initiative
Sloan Serves
Undergraduate Association

MIT STAFF COLLEAGUES
Admissions/SFS
Alumni Association
Co-Lab
DAPER
Division of Student Life
D-Lab
Edgerton Center
ESG
FSILG
GECID
Global Theme Team
J-PAL
MISTI
MIT Governance Lab
Office of Government and Community Relations
Office of Undergraduate Education
Office of Sustainability
Residential Life
Resource Development
Student Activities Office
Student Support Services
Terrascope
Title IX Office

COMMUNITY AGENCIES + NGOS
Cambridge Community Center
Cambridge Community Television
Charles River Community Health
City of Boston
Community Arts Center
East End House
Just A Start
Margaret Fuller House
Massachusetts Campus Compact
Response Innovation Lab

Social Venture Partners
Tutoring Plus
UNICEF

FACULTY
Brain and Cognitive Sciences
DUSP
EAPS
Electrical Engineering
Political Science
Women and Gender Studies

ALUMNI
FSILG Community Relations Committee
MIT Club of Boston
PKG Leadership Council

PEER INSTITUTIONS
Brown University
Cornell University Dartmouth College
Georgetown University
Harvard University Hampshire College
Harvard University
Notre Dame University
Princeton University
Stanford University
Tufts University (Tisch College)
University of California, Los Angeles
University of Chicago
“Because the world needs people like MIT students. It’s that simple.”
– Priscilla King Gray