The DifferenceMaker Program
THE UMASS LOWELL DIFFERENCEMAKER PROGRAM

The DifferenceMaker program engages students in launching sustainable new products, services and ventures that solve problems that matter. DifferenceMaker provides students with a skill set that complements their education and prepares them for the demands of the 21st century workplace. Creative thinking, global awareness, interdisciplinary problem-solving and applied learning are each examples of the learning outcomes addressed through the extra and co-curricular activities sponsored by the program.

The program has served over 20,000 university students and provided over $153,000 in funds to 52 different student ventures. During the 2015-16 academic year, 143 events were hosted for 6,300 students, including pitch competitions across all academic colleges (Business; Engineering; Education; Fine Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; Health Sciences; and Sciences) and a regional hackathon.

DifferenceMaker engages students, faculty, alumni and the community in extra- and co-curricular activities that address problem-solving, opportunity assessment, team development and business model construction. Before they take their first class on campus, first-year students are initiated into the university’s culture of innovation and entrepreneurship by participating in Freshman Orientation hosted by DifferenceMaker. This session includes ideation and creative problemsolving activities that culminate in a Pitch Contest in which students vote to award $3,000 in cash to peers with the best ideas.

DifferenceMaker Process and Activities

DifferenceMaker is guided by a three-phase process: raise awareness, build skills and concepts, and launch ventures. Freshman Orientation, Convocation Pitch Contest, the DifferenceMaker Living-Learning Community and classroom visits raise awareness among students regarding both the potential for entrepreneurial thinking to assist in solving problems, and demonstrate the university’s commitment to supporting students in solving these problems through entrepreneurship.

Idea Challenge workshops, college-based pitch events, rocket pitch coaching and mentoring provide students with skills needed to develop an idea into a venture plan, including understanding of markets, opportunities, customers, business models and business planning. Whether they propose a low-cost, adjustable prosthetic limb; a social service organization to address student hunger; or 3-D printed dentures – all teams are schooled in the basics of venture development.

Broad Cross-campus Reach

In addition to classroom visits and co-curricular workshops, DifferenceMaker engages over 60 faculty, alumni and entrepreneurs as judges, coaches and mentors throughout the year. To
facilitate the participation of students from all six academic schools, faculty fellows are recruited from each college. Fellows advise DifferenceMaker in how to connect with students, faculty and alumni from their college. They provide mentoring and program support to DifferenceMaker teams. The opportunity to serve as a DifferenceMaker Fellow has become a prestigious role for faculty, with deans of each school making the appointment.

The engagement of alumni and external entrepreneurs is critical to the success of DifferenceMaker. First, our alumni and sponsors provide much of the funding for awards and student staff. DifferenceMaker staff work closely with the university’s development office to raise approximately $100,000 per year from alumni and corporate sponsors. Digital Credit Union, Enterprise Bank, Facebook and Hewlett Packard Enterprise, along with alumni and other supporters, contribute annually to support DifferenceMaker activities.

Alumni and entrepreneurs serve as judges and mentors in our competitions. The DifferenceMaker Preliminary Pitch event, which narrows the field for the 10 Idea Challenge finalist teams, is an annual event that includes 30 student teams pitching across five to six judging rooms to panels of three to six judges. BAE Systems, a local defense contractor and home to many UMass Lowell engineering alumni, sent a team of employees to campus to judge the Engineering Prototype Competition. Later, these same judges were invited to Demo Day, where DifferenceMaker helps to match alumni mentors to student teams. As teams mature, DifferenceMaker helps to refresh mentors to team needs.

Curricular Penetration

While DifferenceMaker started as an extra- and co-curricular program, it has begun to integrate into various college curricula. Deans from business, education, engineering, health sciences and fine arts and social sciences work with DifferenceMaker staff to develop course assignments, activities and visits that engage students in creative problem solving and entrepreneurship. The Manning School of Business introduced a one-credit Intro to DifferenceMaker course for all business school freshmen. The Francis College of Engineering developed a joint engineering and entrepreneurship course for seniors that integrates DifferenceMaker. This past summer, DifferenceMaker participated in programs hosted by the College of Engineering for high school seniors. When students in the Kennedy College of Sciences wanted to start a hackathon, the college deans introduced them to DifferenceMaker – which successfully partnered to host a 24-hour event attracting students from across the region.

Global Engagement

DifferenceMaker helps expand engagement on an international level. Working closely with the Manning School of Business, DifferenceMaker staff assist in offering a Global Entrepreneurship Experience course, which hosts students from abroad. This two-week course is hosted on campus in Lowell, where DifferenceMaker staff teach and also link international student teams with our
own DifferenceMaker startup teams. DifferenceMaker staff travel to Hubli, India to teach KGE University faculty how to integrate DifferenceMaker activities into their business and engineering curriculum.

The Bottom Line: A Study Body that is Work Ready

DifferenceMaker has proven to be transformational for UMass Lowell. What started as an extracurricular program has grown into a multi-faceted effort engaging thousands of students, faculty and alumni in utilizing entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial thinking to solve problems that matter to communities. While DifferenceMaker has provided important lessons and support for students pursuing an entrepreneurial path, it has helped to distinguish UMass Lowell as an institution that extends learning well beyond the classroom.

Like our co-op experience, DifferenceMaker provides an opportunity for students to apply what they learn to building solutions to problems they care about. DifferenceMaker utilizes creative problem-solving and entrepreneurship to engage students early in their academic careers and provides a valuable skill set that adds to the education they receive. The result is a graduating class with skills and knowledge needed to add value in today’s workforce. Given the career results of the previous year’s class (94 percent were employed or continuing their education by the end of 2014,) they can do so with confidence.