



CICEP

INNOVATION AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY UNIVERSITIES  
AWARDS PROGRAM

CASE  
STUDY  
2014

## DifferenceMaker

The DifferenceMaker program contributes to UMass Lowell's entrepreneurial ecosystem and supports growth of new businesses and industries by allowing students to apply their education through experiential learning. The DifferenceMaker program<sup>1</sup> was launched in June 2012, under the auspices of the Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship at UMass Lowell. The goal of the program is to introduce students to creative problem solving, innovation, and entrepreneurship, as well as accelerate purpose in their education, connect them to experienced alumni, and encourage an ethos of social responsibility.

DifferenceMaker presents a range of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities that span disciplines to undergraduate and graduate students. These activities are meant to engage students in creative entrepreneurial action by developing sustainable solutions, products, services, organizations, and businesses to problems that affect our community, our region, and our world. The program helps students develop an understanding of how their UMass Lowell education will assist them in *making a difference in the world*.

**DifferenceMaker**<sup>TM</sup>

EXPLORE PROBLEMS • CREATE SOLUTIONS • MAKE A DIFFERENCE

DifferenceMaker is a vital resource for UMass Lowell's creative problem-solving students. It would be challenging to host the DifferenceMaker program without the university; the university provides the ideal setting for access to students, staff, faculty, alumni, and external organizations. The classroom setting allows for intellectual, creative, and business ideas to flourish into action.

DifferenceMaker events commence in the summer for freshman orientation sessions that introduce the program and problem-solving process to student teams during a 50-minute rapid ideation activity. This initial program is meant to provoke interest and set the tone for their next four years at UMass Lowell. The result of this activity has empowered them to further their projects by applying to the Idea Challenge. This year, Anna Henson, a freshman marketing major, worked on a project called "Support Our Students" (SOS).<sup>2</sup> SOS is a food donation service at UMass Lowell that assists students in need of meals. This team won the grand prize of \$7,000 and the title Campus-wide DifferenceMaker.

In the fall semester, DifferenceMaker staff conducts a series of classroom visits to introductory courses (e.g., Intro. to Engineering, Intro. to Business, FAHSS Freshman Seminar). DifferenceMaker staff re-introduce the program and engage students across academic disciplines. These classroom visits are accompanied by an invitation to participate in college and community based idea challenges and pitch contests. DifferenceMaker encourages UMass Lowell students to get involved inside, and outside of the classroom, but also provides them with coaching and mentoring support.

1. See [www.uml.edu/differencemaker](http://www.uml.edu/differencemaker) for more information

2. See <http://www.uml.edu/News/stories/2014/Differencemakers-2014.aspx> for more information.

As the academic year progresses, DifferenceMaker recruits student teams for the DifferenceMaker Annual Idea Challenge. The goal of this signature event is to identify student teams that have developed a project idea that implements a sustainable solution to a challenging problem. DifferenceMaker collaborates with various campus departments to engage faculty, alumni, and community members to connect with students and help them further their projects. A series of workshops offered to DifferenceMaker students each spring encourages the formation of interdisciplinary teams. These activities prepare teams for the Preliminary Pitch-off and Final DifferenceMaker Idea Challenge events in April, where teams present their problem, opportunity, solution, and resource request to a panel of alumni judges. In the 2nd Annual 2014 DifferenceMaker Idea Challenge, 72 teams applied, of which 42 entered into the Preliminary Pitch-off and 14 received a share of the \$35,000 in prize funding to move their projects forward. These teams were allocated space in DifferenceMaker Central located in Lydon Library and were given access to mentors and additional resources.



*Freshman Students embrace DifferenceMaker Program at Orientation*

*DifferenceMaker Metrics*

Funds awarded to 14 Idea Challenge Finalist Teams	\$35,000
Number of Students participating in 2014 Idea Challenge	198
Number of Academic Departments represented at 2014 Idea Challenge	32
Number of Cross-Discipline Relationships noted between students among Idea Challenge Teams	20
Number of Student Teams participating in the 2014 Idea Challenge	72
Number of Students participating in rapid ideation sessions	1,303
Number of students who participated in various DifferenceMaker events	5,528

DifferenceMaker developed a four-stage methodology that is utilized to help engage students across all disciplines in the entrepreneurial thinking process: Identify a Problem; Research the Opportunity; Develop a Solution; and Demonstrate needed Resources.

The DifferenceMaker program advanced four specific skills sets among the 5,000+ students who participated this past year. Faculty and administrators who analyzed student portfolios through

an e-portfolio platform under the guidance of the Vice-Provost, Charlotte Mandell, reported that students displayed educational attainment of entrepreneurial skills, twenty-first century soft skills, and traditional academic skills, as well as a sense of blending social consciousness with career trajectory. Students also exhibited skills in significant problem-solving, collaboration, creative thinking, research, leadership, communication, reading, writing, presenting, public speaking, planning, organization, marketing, executive functioning, global learning, and multi/cross-disciplinary thinking.

Winners of the Idea Challenge continue on to further the success and sustainability of their innovative ideas. At the 2013 1st Annual DifferenceMaker Idea Challenge, student team Nonspec<sup>3</sup> won the title “Campus-wide DifferenceMaker” which came with a \$5,000 prize.

Nonspec produces low cost, high functionality replacement limbs with an acceptable amount of customization for children in developing nations. Since winning the 2013 Idea Challenge Nonspec has gone on to win eight additional competitions<sup>4</sup>, raised \$65,000 dollars<sup>5</sup>, filed a patent and received significant regional recognition and publicity.<sup>6</sup>

Other winning teams have sustained, thrived, and redeveloped where needed. The Robotic Feeding Arm has redeveloped into a team called Mr. Meds, now including engineering and business majors; a partnership has been formed between Lowell Sprouts and SOS because both teams are focused on food insecurity and education; and Fresh Beets and @That have been accepted to Hawk Hatch for crowd funding support. Teams have shown that they must grow and adapt their ideas with entrepreneurial skills and resources in order to discover a pathway to sustainable economics.



*Nonspec Founders discuss prosthetic limb with UMass Lowell Mentor*

3. See Profile: <http://www.uml.edu/Innovation-Entrepreneurship/DifferenceMaker/Meet-the-DifferenceMakers/DM-Nonspec.aspx>.

4. See UMass Lowell article: <http://www.uml.edu/News/stories/2014/Nonspec-award-winner.aspx>.

5. See [http://alumni.uml.edu/s/1355/lowell/riverhawkclub/index\\_hybrid.aspx?sid=1355&gid=4&pgid=1562](http://alumni.uml.edu/s/1355/lowell/riverhawkclub/index_hybrid.aspx?sid=1355&gid=4&pgid=1562).

6. See Telegram and Gazette: <http://www.telegram.com/article/20140706/NEWS/307069948/1237>, The Groton Line: [http://www.thegrotonline.com/2014/07/05/nonspecs-revolutionary-tech-promises-to-change-lives-around-the-world/?utm\\_source=&utm\\_medium=&utm\\_campaign](http://www.thegrotonline.com/2014/07/05/nonspecs-revolutionary-tech-promises-to-change-lives-around-the-world/?utm_source=&utm_medium=&utm_campaign), Young Entrepreneurs Give a Hand, Change a Life: <http://www.uml.edu/News/stories/2013/DifferenceMakers-Prosthetics.aspx>.

*Comparison of DifferenceMaker Activity from 2012–2014*

Type of Activity	2013--2014		2012–2013	
	No of Events	No of Student Contacts	No of Events	No of Student Contacts
<b>Awareness Raising &amp; Entrepreneurial Orientation</b>				
Class-room visits/Presentation	49	1,285	10	222
Convocation/Johnny Cupcake/Fall festival	3	1,500	2	1,200
DM program introduction events	4	89	4	36
DM Living Learning Community	5	17	3	22
Freshman Summer Orientation Sessions	15	1,303	10	1,265
Freshman Seminars	6	630	10	600
Freshman: Problem solving with Lego	15	292	9	180
UML Club Meeting Visit	2	35	1	30
<b>Building Basic Skills &amp; Concept Development</b>				
College Competitive Events	2	58		
DM Course Credit Project	5	117		
Idea Challenge Workshops	4	63	4	75
Reverse Pitch	1	25		
Rocket Pitch Coaching	33	52	21	35
<b>Supporting Business Formation</b>				
2014 Idea Challenge Kick-off	2	57	2	60
2014 Idea Challenge Events	2	198	2	112
<b>Total</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>5,721</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>3,837</b>