

# MIT MANAGEMENT SLOAN SCHOOL

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## USA Lab: MIT graduate students to work with rural community groups to foster economic prosperity

**Cambridge, Mass., March 20, 2019**— What are the sources of resilience and renewal in America’s small towns and rural areas?

[USA Lab](#), a course offered at the [MIT Sloan School of Management](#), aims to answer this question while deepening students’ understanding of America’s diverse economic, cultural, and social characteristics. Student teams will be tackling eight projects located in Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, Oregon, South Carolina, and West Virginia.

Now in its second year, USA Lab was developed through a collaboration involving MIT Sloan’s [Good Companies, Good Jobs Initiative](#) and [Action Learning program](#); and the [MIT Mens et Manus America Initiative](#). USA Lab is available to students enrolled at MIT Sloan and graduate students from across the broader Institute.

“This class is designed to benefit both MIT students and the community organizations that host them,” says [Barbara Dyer](#), a Senior Lecturer at MIT Sloan and Executive Director of the School’s Good Companies, Good Jobs Initiative. “The host organizations gain fresh insights on pressing issues facing their communities, and students hone critical skills such as market analysis, strategy development, and impact investing along with empathetic listening, all of which make them better business leaders. Students in last year’s class reported that working with these remarkable community leaders was eye-opening and gave them a deeper appreciation for the strengths and challenges that define the American experience.”

In the semester-long course, students explore the historical and modern-day complexities of this country’s economic and social challenges through readings, interviews, and discussion. For two weeks in late March, students work on-site with local community groups—including economic development organizations, community finance institutions, and family foundations—on projects relevant to particular regions.

One of three returning host organizations is the [Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque](#).

“Working with the students from MIT added both depth and breadth to our understanding of a thorny regional problem: that of increasing access to affordable, quality childcare,” says Nancy Van Milligen, President and CEO.

“Being on the ground in our communities, in both rural and urban areas, allowed them to conduct interviews with dozens of stakeholders, including business owners, educators, childcare providers, parents, elected officials, and community agencies. They combined this qualitative research with substantial data analysis to provide us with solutions that were relevant and tailored to our specific needs, including case studies from around the country that reinforced the potential outcomes we could see with successful implementation. The students not only compiled research and data on Iowa’s system, they provided a formula that would positively impact families, with little impact on government revenue. Our foundation now has the analysis, data, and tools to drive change in our region.”

This year, the MIT team will work with the Community Foundation to explore how to build effective career pipelines for low-income and minority residents in this region. Students will have the opportunity to interview workers from a variety of backgrounds, along with a wide range of employers and executives.

This year’s host organizations also include:

**Coastal Enterprises, Inc.** (Maine)

CEI promotes good jobs, environmentally sustainable businesses, and shared prosperity in Maine by integrating financing, business and industry expertise, and policy solutions. The student team will analyze food production business models in Maine and other national and global food manufacturing clusters to identify models that facilitate high-quality jobs.

**Fahe** (Kentucky)

Fahe is a community development financial institution that integrates a network of more than 50 nonprofit organizations across six states in Appalachia. Fahe strives to build resilient communities through its financial products. The MIT team will focus on analyzing barriers to greater penetration of mortgage lending and other community development tools in areas of persistent poverty and identifying innovative options for overcoming those barriers.

**Fremont Area Community Foundation** (Michigan)

Fremont Area Community Foundation, in partnership with TrueNorth Community Services and other community organizations, concentrates on combating poverty in Newaygo County western Michigan. TrueNorth’s Circles Newaygo County program, which is funded by the foundation, works with families in creating stability and self-sufficiency through its community-driven, volunteer-powered approach. The MIT team will be conducting research on the lack of childcare’s impact on local families and to determine suggested next steps.

**Natural Capital Investment Fund** (West Virginia and nine-state region)

The Natural Capital Investment Fund, a community development financial institution located in Shepherdstown WV, encompasses nine states in Appalachia. NCIFund promotes environmentally sustainable development in economically distressed areas through affordable, flexible capital and advisory services to small and emerging businesses. The MIT team will focus on West Virginia’s downtowns, which have seen substantial disinvestment due to changing economic conditions. Students will analyze various markets to determine priorities for community finance organizations to re-energize downtowns.

### **Northern Kentucky Chamber Foundation**

GROW NKY (Growing Regional Outcomes through Workforce) is a workforce development/talent strategy initiative focusing on building a collaborative network to align the needs of employers with the interests of a diverse workforce. The students will concentrate on reporting mechanisms and analytics that will enable the regional participants to mark progress and determine whether their goals for a system-wide approach to quality jobs are being achieved.

### **Rural Development Initiatives and Ecotrust** (Oregon)

Rural Development Initiatives (RDI) and Ecotrust are private nonprofit organizations dedicated to sustainable development in Oregon and the greater Northwest. In this project they are focused on small fishing enterprises in Oregon and on expanding opportunities for fishermen and others in the seafood value chain. One of the organizations' goals is to improve livelihoods for seafood processing workers, and they are interested in the potential for alternative business models to create independent, stable, and higher-wage opportunities for such workers. MIT students will conduct a feasibility assessment of cooperative business models in fisheries and the seafood supply chain in Oregon.

### **South Carolina Association for Community Economic Development** (South Carolina)

The South Carolina Association for Community Development is a coalition of individuals and organizations who support the development of healthy and economically sustainable communities throughout South Carolina. They are exploring the potential for linking the approximately 300 African-American cultural destinations in South Carolina to establish a "heritage trail" affiliated with a new African-American museum to open in Charleston. The MIT team will help to shape and assess the feasibility of a prototype site in Orangeburg, SC.

*The **MIT Sloan School of Management** is where smart, independent leaders come together to solve problems, create new organizations, and improve the world.*

*The **Good Companies, Good Jobs Initiative** at the MIT Sloan School of Management seeks to discover, demonstrate, and disseminate practices that both measurably improve the quality of work and enhance long-term business value. The Initiative supports practice-driven research that illuminates factors that foster or hinder the creation of good-quality jobs, and it brings scholars, business leaders, policy makers, and students together in the spirit of inquiry and pursuit of knowledge.*

*The **MIT Mens et Manus America Initiative** is a non-partisan MIT initiative that convenes research-informed lectures and discussions to explore major long-term social, political, and economic issues in the U.S.*