STORIES OF OUR IMPACT

“Nova enables research questions to be funded and supported and nurtured that would not be funded through traditional means. These are projects on the leading edge that we may not see NIH fund. You get people from different disciplines with different perspectives, who get the opportunity to contribute and collaborate. It helps take larger leaps forward than you may get with more traditional funding bodies taking incremental approaches.”

— Nova Fellow Dr. Chris D’Adamo, Director, Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine

The Nova Institute goes beyond the research and ideas of our Scholars and Fellows to develop and test new models and approaches for health and healing. These include scalable, replicable demonstration projects founded on rigorous research and explorations of new models that influence our understanding of flourishing. Our successful projects don’t just live in a classroom or in the pages of a journal; they offer real-life impact.

We also work with artists, researchers, and community leaders to share information and bring people together to foster new ways of thinking and promote a healthier world. Over time, this has included hosting national and global forums of scientists, practitioners, community leaders, funders, advocates, and policymakers to engage in rich dialogue and facilitate the exchange of ideas and potential solutions to pressing challenges—the “sticky issues” that are ripe for discussion.

Following are a few highlights of the impact the Nova Institute’s demonstration projects, forums, and outreach have had over the past 15 years.
For years, the Nova Institute has focused in myriad ways on the role of food as medicine—from teaching high school students about growing food and how to make healthy and tasty meals to training future physicians about the importance of diet and nutrition.

Working in the community, we developed Five Times a Feast, a free, multi-week cooking program designed to address the common challenges associated with maintaining a healthy lifestyle, such as food costs, time constraints, comfort in the kitchen, and an understanding of nutrition. Employing a “train the trainers” approach, the initiative also empowered participants to carry on the educational efforts as leaders in their communities.

The organization also collaborated with the Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine to launch a culinary medicine training curriculum. This became a core requirement for first- and second-year medical students—the first of its kind in the nation. The program has given hundreds of medical students an experiential nutrition education through practical instruction and healthy cooking. Research we published in 2021 showed it is possible and practical to teach medical students a more complete perspective on food and health that will immediately benefit them and their patients. Other medical schools across the country have approached our team about replicating the program, and it is now expanding to students in schools of pharmacy, nursing, law, social work, and dentistry.

Spice MyPlate recognizes that improving eating habits is easier when healthful food tastes great. The program, piloted at Patterson High School in Baltimore, engages students by showing them how to make wholesome—and flavorful—versions of their favorite dishes. Participants in the pilot learned the profiles of 12 core spices and herbs, including their origins, health-promoting properties, scientific and historical facts, and common applications in cooking. Then they applied that knowledge—while honing their teamwork and kitchen skills—in making dishes like cozy spiced beef and zesty jerk three-bean chili. Research found that Spice MyPlate improved diet quality and healthy eating attitudes among students who participated compared with a control group of students who did not. The success of Spice MyPlate led to another pilot project to increase vegetable intake through flavor enhancement by working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National School Lunch Program at a local high school, and it is now being tested to improve nutrition for service members at Naval Support Activity Bethesda military base.
A Reflection on Community Healing

A Beautiful Ghetto

After the 2015 police killing of Freddie Gray, a young Black man, many in Baltimore felt new waves of pain and frustration over long-standing problems with policing as well as deep-seated social inequities. As part of the effort to reflect on the unrest and promote community healing, the Nova Institute partnered with the Gordon Parks Foundation on an exhibition and program series, A Beautiful Ghetto, showcasing Baltimore social justice photographer Devin Allen’s documentation of the city and its people. The exhibit and programs sparked conversation and action promoting healing among individuals and the city community.

“We always spend so much time on the pain. We measure how strong we are by how much pain we can take. Can we, for once, focus on how we can address our issues, get educated, and start the healing process? I want this show to be a platform to address our pain freely and heal together.”

— Photographer Devin Allen
A multidisciplinary research team consisting of nurse/researcher and Nova Scholar Judy Rollins, an art therapist/social worker, and two professional artists attempted to answer this question. The team asked a group of children with chronic medical conditions to write a poem about themselves and the artists conducted one-on-one interviews, then returned to their studios to create a painting and accompanying narrative based on what they heard.

Upon completion, the nurse/researcher and art therapist revealed the painting to the child, asking for thoughts and feelings about the painting and narrative, while the child created a watercolor print, and then presented a blanket with the image of the artist’s painting to the child. The Being Heard exhibition shared the resulting paintings, poems, and children’s responses.

Truu, a 17-year-old African-American boy who has undergone multiple organ transplants, said this about “his” painting:

“It feels true.

I am not what my chart says.

It feels like me.”
Building a Green Road to Healing

Wounded service members receiving medical care at Naval Support Activity Bethesda—home of Walter Reed National Military Medical Center—are fighting to overcome debilitating injuries, like PTSD and traumatic brain injury. To ease their journey, Nova Institute leaders and Scholar Fred Foote, along with partners including Nature Sacred, created the Green Road, a woodland garden where service members and their families find respite amid forest and wildlife.

This award-winning project preserves and restores the natural environment while facilitating psychosocial-spiritual healing for wounded warriors and their caregivers. Research has documented the healing effects of spending time on the Green Road. Since its opening, more than 12,000 service members and families and medical staff have found respite and sustenance there.

Building Bridges, Defining Metrics

Social and economic factors can define health outcomes, especially for urban and disadvantaged youth. In 2016, we convened the Building Bridges, Defining Metrics forum to envision a new, integrative framework for creating and evaluating community-based programs that improve the health of this population. During two days of interactive sessions, more than 40 professionals from across the country, including researchers, funders, educators, government leaders, and community program experts, exchanged ideas and views. They also developed recommendations for creating robust community-based programs that integrate diverse stakeholder priorities and use appropriate metrics for evaluating outcomes in real-world settings. We later published a report of ideas and strategies from the forum to inform new partnerships and programming.