

Reimagining downtown

Ten UI students selected to help reshape downtown Las Vegas

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Ten University of Iowa undergraduate students have been selected to participate in a unique pilot course for the spring 2013 semester. The course will allow the students to apply their education and creativity to help Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh and others transform downtown Las Vegas. Photo courtesy of the Downtown Project.

This spring and summer, ten University of Iowa undergraduate students will be putting a twist on the familiar phrase “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas” with the help of Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh.

The students—chosen through a competitive application process—will participate in a unique pilot course, Reimagining Downtown, during the spring 2013 semester.

The course was created by David Gould, associate director for professional student development and faculty member in the UI College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS). The semester-long course was designed to assist the students in applying their education and creativity toward a specific initiative—the Downtown Project.

Spearheaded by Hsieh, the Downtown Project is a group of people committed to transforming downtown Las Vegas into the “most community-focused large city in the world.” Downtown Las Vegas is where the original casinos were built, before the more famous Las Vegas Strip existed.

To accomplish their objective, Hsieh and a few partners plan to spend \$350 million to develop and build a small city in the roughly 1.5-square mile downtown area around the Fremont East and Arts District areas. Hsieh’s group is investing \$100 million in real estate, \$100 million in residential development, \$50 million in small businesses, \$50 million in education, and \$50 million in tech startups through the VegasTech Fund. The Downtown Project’s “big bet” is that accelerating community, learning, and serendipity will lead to accelerating happiness, innovation, and productivity.

“More than 249 million Americans, or two-thirds of the U.S. population, live in cities. With high poverty rates, crumbling infrastructure, and abandoned buildings, many cities are in desperate need of reinvention,” Gould says. “The Downtown Project Fellowship is designed to help develop young talent to meet these challenges by creating a bridge between academic coursework and real world application.”

The UI students will work in teams to develop and present project proposals designed to enrich lives in the Fremont East and Arts District areas. The students will visit the City’s Fremont East entertainment district during Spring Break, observe the Downtown Project initiative directly, and present their proposal ideas to Hsieh and the Downtown Project staff. Along with the standard forms of academic evaluation, the proposals will be competitively judged. One proposal will be selected for development in Las Vegas and awarded \$50,000. Students will be staggered over the summer to facilitate the project’s implementation during June and July.

Over the length of the semester, in addition to the project proposal development, the course will present concepts of economic development and introduce social entrepreneurship. Community leaders and entrepreneurs will visit the class to present on various topics. Visitors include Andy Stoll, social entrepreneur, media producer, and co-founder of Seed Here Studio; Nate Staniforth, magician; Mike Draper, CEO of RAYGUN; Bill Arent, director of economic and urban development department, Las Vegas, Nev.; Justin Ahrens and Bob Davidson, principal and creative producer, respectively, at Rule29; and Sean Lewis, Working Group Theatre.

“What excited me about this course is that it is a fantastic learning opportunity for all of us. Dave has put together a fantastic team, and we look forward to learning alongside the students,” says Ken Brown, professor of management and organizations in the Tippie College of Business and a course mentor.

Other course mentors include Bob Kirby, associate director of the UI Honors Program; Joe Cilek, undergraduate academic adviser in the UI Department of Health and Human Physiology in CLAS; and Stoll.

Graduate assistants include Elizabeth Bledsoe, graduate student in higher education and student affairs in the UI College of Education; Adam Plagge, graduate student in urban and regional planning in the UI Graduate College and the M.B.A. program in the Tippie College of Business; and Charlie Nichols, graduate student in urban and regional planning.

On campus, the project is a collaboration between CLAS, the Tippie College of Business, the Honors Program, and the Pomerantz Career Center.

The students who will participate in the pilot year of the Downtown Project are:

- Natalie Conlon, senior psychology major (CLAS) from Dubuque, Iowa
- William Dunn, senior finance major (Tippie) from Eldora, Iowa
- Chelsea Gaylord, junior psychology and health and human physiology major (CLAS) from Center Point, Iowa
- Mike Greeby, junior marketing and finance major (Tippie) from Long Grove, Ill.
- Philip Monfils, senior economics and marketing major (Tippie) from La Grange, Ill.
- Andrew O'Bleness, senior health and human physiology major (CLAS) from Keokuk, Iowa
- Sevy Perez, sophomore interdepartmental studies major (CLAS) from Dyer, Ind.
- Ashley Pettit, junior theatre and psychology major (CLAS) from Iowa City, Iowa
- Amanda Troidahl, senior international studies and dance major (CLAS) from Eden Prairie, Minn.
- Storm Vaske, junior management information systems major (Tippie) from West Des Moines, Iowa

Four alternates were also selected for the pilot year:

- Laura Cyrek, senior marketing major (Tippie) from Glen Ellyn, Ill.
- Allanda Hageman, junior psychology major (CLAS) from Ossian, Iowa
- Kelsey Hastings, junior marketing major (Tippie) from Gurnee, Ill.
- Nicholas Sueppel, junior political science major (CLAS) from Grimes, Iowa

For more information, visit www.uiowa.edu/~plugin/.

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