University of Arizona FORGEs ahead on entrepreneurship

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Arizona FORGE officially opens its doors on March 3 as the first of several planned centers designed to build bridges between academia and industry while fostering entrepreneurial thinking among University of Arizona students.

With significant support from the University and donors, FORGE's 24,000-square-foot building located in the Roy Place Building in downtown Tucson, at East Pennington Street and North Stone Avenue will be home to startup incubation, corporate innovation and experiential learning.

"The fundamental mission of Arizona FORGE is to develop an entrepreneurial mindset among students and to provide opportunities for hands-on learning and real-world opportunities," said Brian Ellerman, founding director and longtime member of the Tucson startup community.

With over 25 years of experience in the biopharmaceutical industry, Ellerman has traveled the globe connecting incubators, accelerators, startups and venture capital firms to address complex business challenges.

"I've come to recognize that one of the most important mandates we at the University of Arizona have is to shape the workforce of the future and prepare students to succeed in a world influenced by the Fourth Industrial Revolution," Ellerman said. "As an 'entrepreneurial ecosystem,' Arizona FORGE will put students at the nexus of startup businesses and corporate projects."

The first startups to move into the FORGE space will be selected by their peers from a group of 12 companies competing in FORGE's Accelerated Entry Program. The program consists of six weeks of in-person intensive programming covering fundamentals essential to building a scalable business.

Two of the companies competing in the first cohort are from Mexico, fulfilling one of FORGE's goals of reaching beyond Tucson to build partnerships throughout the region.

Once selected, the companies will work closely with business experts, corporate innovation partners and other high-performing startup teams for a period of up to three years, contingent upon hitting rigorous, preset milestones.

Every step of the way, students will be working alongside the startup founders.

Anna Darian, FORGE's incubator services coordinator, is passionate about FORGE's mission. The third-generation University of Arizona alumna founded a coaching business that uses the principles of storytelling to help entrepreneurs better communicate their business ideas.
"Organizations large and small need people who understand how to communicate and execute on their ideas," she said. "I'm excited to be working with startups and students to foster an entrepreneurial mindset that offers the tools to communicate better, work within a team more effectively, test ideas, implement them, learn from both failure and success, and move on to the next idea."

Looking to the future, the Arizona FORGE team plans to open new locations to provide opportunities for summer internships where students live. With an eye on the University's Phoenix biomedical campus and Maricopa County Cooperative Extension program, Ellerman hopes to bring students, entrepreneurs and faculty subject matter experts together on multidisciplinary projects involving biomedical devices and agricultural technology.

"We hope to have a FORGE footprint that both serves our existing student population and attracts new students," Ellerman said.

From Phoenix to the Bay Area to Mexico and beyond, the Arizona FORGE team intends to forge ahead on putting University students, graduates, faculty and entrepreneurs on the map.

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