Using the Power of Student Voices, Interns Tackle Real UA Challenges

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The primary goal of nearly every entity on the University of Arizona campus can be boiled down to one simple question: How can we improve the student experience?

The question might take different forms, but the idea within them is easy to understand. Coming up with the right answer, however, can be complicated.

"Much of administrator outreach toward students ? not just on our campus, but throughout higher education ? begins and ends with a traditional online survey. We tend to see a great deal of apathy in providing feedback within that model," said Carly Croman, coordinator of innovation and applied learning with the Student Engagement and Career Development office.

A program known as the UA design lab hopes to put an end to this kind of apathy, while opening up new avenues of thinking that shift this flow of information from simply transactional into something transformational.

As part of the program, a dozen enterprising undergraduate students are taking part in an internship that seeks to bridge the gaps among students, faculty and staff with one of campus's most valuable resources ? rich, detailed and authentic student feedback.

In return, these students gain real-world experience with working professionals while developing the kinds of flexible, creative problem-solving skills that will set them apart in the eyes of potential employers.

The UA design lab is the logical extension of the former InnovateUA program, which was housed within Student Affairs and Enrollment Management from 2015-18. InnovateUA was primarily responsible for Startup Weekend, Hack Arizona, TEDxUofA, Accelerator, Pitchfest and many other like-minded events.

When the program transitioned to Student Engagement and Career Development, it was reimagined as something that would continue to foster a student-driven culture of innovation, while seeking to apply those innovations toward solving problems on the UA campus.

"We felt very strongly the mission and vision of InnovateUA should stay in place, while broadening its scope in terms of applied learning," said Annie Kurtin, associate director of student engagement. "We want our students to see the tangible impacts from all their hard work and dedication."

Croman was brought on board in October to help establish the UA design lab program.
"It was clear from the very start this needed to be a formal internship experience and that these students needed to be financially compensated for their efforts, due to the scope of the work they were going to be asked to perform," Croman said.

A purposefully vague description of the program was posted in Handshake in the fall and was met with 36 applications from students with a variety of backgrounds, majors and career ambitions. After an intense and unpredictable group interview that tested the applicants' learning agility, situational and self-awareness, internal motivation and ability to clearly communicate, 12 were chosen.

"I was drawn to this opportunity specifically because the posting was so ambiguous," said Caitlin Hooker, a freshman majoring in creative writing. "The opportunity to design my own internship felt a little like a choose-your-own-adventure book. It was very appealing to me."

"For me, I liked that the program specifically sought out students with different backgrounds and perspectives. It felt like a genuine opportunity to encounter a truly new way of thinking," said Vanessa Ojeda, a sophomore majoring in law and Mexican American studies.

The group secured two clients in need of high-quality student feedback: University Information Technology Services and UA Global.

Group No. 1, known as 6Dev, is charged with generating student feedback regarding a new customer relationship management platform and with addressing the importance of student connectivity and accessibility, focusing particularly on freshmen and whether they interact with various campus support services.

"Before this program, I thought of things in a more results-oriented way ? how to quickly solve a problem from point A to point B. But this process has me thinking a lot more about the research that goes into making informed decisions," said Patrick Kimrarungu, a sophomore psychology major.

"Things are a lot less linear when you're dealing with stories and narratives, as opposed to raw numeric data," said Brisa Tzintzun, a junior majoring in fine arts.

Group No. 2, called La Mariposa, or "the butterfly" in Spanish, is looking at how UA Global can more effectively reach all student populations, while understanding the unique experiences of international and study abroad students. UA Global also is in the process of consolidating its vast array of resources in the Park Student Union and is seeking student feedback.

La Mariposa has embarked upon a variety of outreach initiatives, ranging from social media to face-to-face meetups, while recording their data on everything from digital platforms to old-fashioned sticky notes.

"It's interesting: The kinds of questions our groups have started asking have naturally shifted toward more qualitative, philosophical explorations. 'How accurately are we representing audiences we're researching? Can the quality of our data be more robust? Can it more accurately represent our clients' interests?'" Croman said. "The more they learn, the more questions they ask and the more enthusiastic they become to reframe the conversation. It's remarkable to watch."
Both groups have started to see patterns emerge from their intense data collection and are in the process of synthesizing that data in order to extract key insights they can deliver to their clients in a presentation on April 26.

Croman and Kurtin hope to see this program evolve into a data-informed conduit that allows student voices to have an even bigger presence in the UA's decision-making processes.

"After all, who better to find out how a student feels about something than another student?" Croman said.

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