



## UA students seek to better peers' perception of area

Carol Ann Alaimo Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Sunday, November 20, 2011 12:00 am

The Downtown Office of Public Perception sounds like something George Orwell dreamed up.

And its logo, done in black and gray, seems suited to Oceania, the fictional nation in Orwell's classic novel "1984."

These local creations aren't a tribute to the late author, though. They're part of a downtown awareness effort aimed at University of Arizona students.

The UA crowd tends to shun downtown in favor of haunts on North Fourth Avenue or East University Boulevard, said Bill Mackey, a local architect and artist teaching a nontraditional elective in the UA's Honors College.

"When they get to the end of Fourth Avenue, it's like, 'What's the point of going further?' They have no interest."

Mackey challenged his students to find out why. After surveying 200 or so classmates, they came up with a list of common impressions.

Some students described downtown as fun, unique, artsy, cultured.

Others use far less flattering terms: grungy, sketchy, a haven for bums.

Mackey's class set out to investigate perception versus reality. With a shoestring budget of \$500, they created an interactive exhibit that goes on display in early December.

Among the unconventional offerings: a map of public toilets downtown with ratings of their cleanliness and a site where students can search for downtown venues based on their romantic status - for example, the best places to take a date for dinner or the best pickup bars.

"It's almost like a mock tourism office for downtown that is geared toward students," Mackey said.

Katie Dolan, a UA junior and Phoenix native involved with the effort, said it's given her a better feel for what downtown Tucson offers.

"It made me think about what draws people to places and how they interact with their environment," said Dolan, 20, who is majoring in English and creative writing.

Tellingly, the Downtown Office of Public Perception, which will house the exhibit, isn't located downtown.

It's in a former yogurt shop outside UA's Main Gate.

"The students thought that if we had the exhibit downtown," Mackey said, "no one would come."

Project tests college crowd's downtown savvy

If you go

What: "YOU ARE HERE: Downtown & UA!," an interactive exhibit.

When: Dec. 1 and 2, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5 to 8 p.m. each day.

Where: "Downtown Office of Public Perception," 825 E. University Blvd. (former Malibu yogurt shop)

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