

ASU students collaborate on project for centennial of Mickey Mouse

Sun Devils from different majors visit Disney studios, archive for creative inspiration

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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It started with a mysterious email.

"It was like a cryptic, too-good-to-be-true kind of email, like, 'Hey, are you available during these dates to go to an undisclosed location? Fully paid for? Are you in?'" said Nina Pearl Hamel, an industrial design major at Arizona State University.

After several more emails, 20 students met on a pre-departure Zoom call.

"And that's when they officially announced who the partner was. And as you can imagine, we were all really thrilled because none of us knew that it was Disney," Hamel said.

"It was one of those 'pinch me' moments because I grew up with Disney. I was reading Disney books, watching Disney movies and the Disney logo has been in my house ever since I can remember," she said.

On May 11, the students met at Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix at 4:30 in the morning before being whisked to California, where they spent four intense days working on a top-secret project related to the 100th anniversary of Mickey Mouse, in 2028.

The 20 students were hand-picked from across the university to participate in a four-day Impact Studio, created by the [J. Orin Edson Entrepreneurship + Innovation Institute](#) at ASU with the goal of boosting students' employability by immersing them in real-world collaborations.

Students in previous Impact Studios worked on health and sports business projects, but the Edson Institute wanted to go in a creative direction this time, according to Eric Heimbecker, assistant director for special projects in the institute. Twelve of the students were from the [Herberger](#)

[Institute for Design and the Arts](#) and eight were from other majors across ASU.

The students spent two days at Disney Studios in Burbank and the Disney Creative Campus in Glendale, where they toured the archives, saw a presentation on the history of Mickey Mouse and met with the Disney Consumer Products team.

“It was like going in a time machine and traveling to all the Mickey decades,” Hamel said.

“He’s been around since 1928, and getting to see the original Mickey, the first one that was ever drawn by Walt himself, was such a special opportunity. We also got to hold Walt Disney’s Oscar, which was really fun.”

The students split into teams and spent two days prototyping ideas and delivering preliminary pitches to Disney executives. The teams then returned to ASU, incorporated the feedback, refined their projects and did a final presentation via Zoom to Disney executives on May 22.

The experience inspired Hamel.

“We had three industrial designers from our cohort get selected for this project, and for the three of us, it was really inspiring and motivating to see that this is a major that can lead you to really cool places,” she said.

“They made sure to show us behind the scenes, where they work, where they collaborate, what goes on and how they make the magic happen. It was a really cool window into their universe. Everyone is so passionate about what they do.”

It’s not yet known if Disney will proceed with the students’ proposals, but the executives were interested in working with the young people, according to Jennifer Janicki, director of special initiatives in the Herberger Institute and one of the faculty team mentors.

“Disney executives were intrigued to hear what this generation thinks,” she said.

“They are actively engaged with all generations but they really want to know what Generation Alpha and Generation Z are interested in.”

The visit also included talks with Los Angeles-based ASU faculty: [Maria Rosario Jackson](#) of The Design School, [Stephanie Barish](#) of The GAME School, [Nicole Craig](#) of ASU FIDM and [Peter Murrieta](#) of The Sidney Poitier New American Film School. Murrieta is a TV writer and producer, and was the show runner for the Disney Channel show “The Wizards of Waverly Place.”

The students also met Tracy Thurman, an ASU alum with a degree in industrial design who is vice president of product design at Disney Parks, Experiences and Products. She helped to facilitate the students’ experience.

Janicki said that gathering students from different majors enriched the creative process.

“What was really great about this experience that Edson put together is that by making the teams multidisciplinary, it was a great example of what it’s like in the work world. You don’t just work exclusively in one area,” Janicki said.

“The whole program was an immersive sprint — pulling together ideas, timeline, budget, feasibility. It’s great for them to see what it’s like using creativity within tight time challenges.”

The Impact Studio is designed that way, Heimbecker said.

“We take students, professionals, experts and faculty and put them together in teams, and they leverage design-thinking principles, lean startup methodology and all the underpinnings of entrepreneurship and innovation to work in a real environment solving real problems,” he said.

Scarlett Chavez, a project management major, said the experience was “fast-moving, exciting and unexpected,” and that the Disney execs were enthusiastic.

“A lot of it was really positive feedback. Nobody was shooting down ideas. They were very big on, ‘We don’t want to give you guys any constraints. We want you to imagine anything that comes to mind for this specific objective.’”

The experience expanded her career views.

“It took me on such a whirlwind of ideas of what I wanted for my future,” said Chavez, who is now interning in investment management.

“It pushed me into a creative design area and made me more curious.”

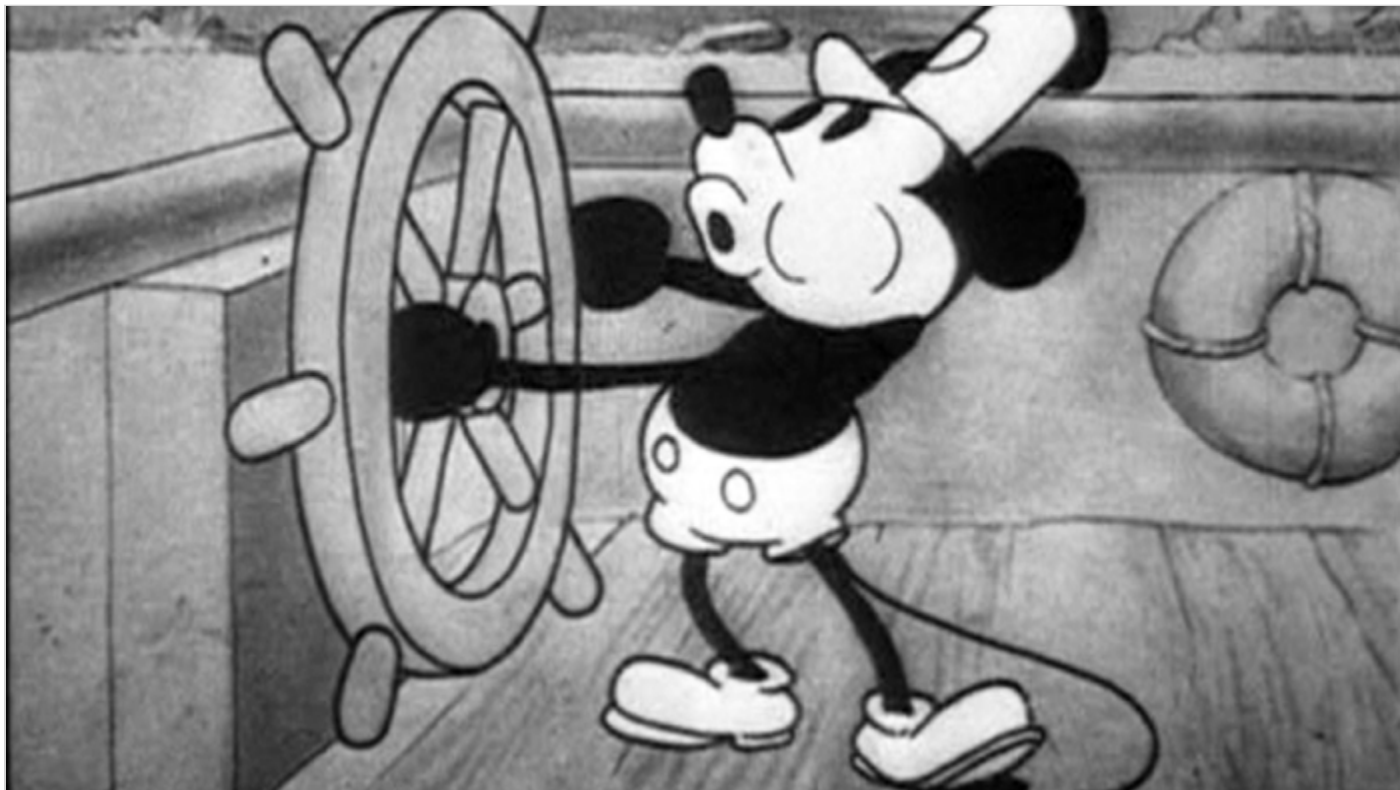
That’s the Disney ethos, the students discovered.

“They want you to open your mind to the impossible,” Chavez said.

“They want you to dream big.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



ASU students spent four intense days working on a top-secret project related to the 100th anniversary of Mickey Mouse, which falls in 2028. Mickey debuted in the animated short film "Steamboat Willie" in 1928. Image from Wikimedia Commons

Text image(s)



ASU students spent two days at Disney Studios in Burbank and the Disney Creative Campus in Glendale, where they toured the archives, saw a presentation on the history of Mickey Mouse and met with the Disney Consumer Products team. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Janicki