Discover Chicago Awakens Students to Diverse Experiences
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Vibrant murals with bold, Aztec-inspired designs greet students as they alight the Pink Line at 18th Street, surrounding them with the rich culture of Pilsen even before they leave the train station. Pilsen is often called the Heart of Chicago, but many wide-eyed freshmen have never heard of this West Side neighborhood located a mere five miles from downtown.

“I had this very predetermined idea of what Chicago would be like,” explains sophomore Kyla Patterson. Pilsen, with its eclectic mix of old Chicago architecture and lively street art, did not fit Patterson’s expectations, but after her Discover Chicago course, she came to cherish the community. “Pilsen was my favorite neighborhood—it was just so lively and its residents were so welcoming,” she enthuses.

For 20 years, Discover Chicago has encouraged students to step out of their comfort zone to explore the city’s geographic and cultural landscape beyond the Loop and Lincoln Park campuses. “Our first-year students chose to go to a university in an urban setting,” explains Doug Long, director of the First-Year Program, the liberal studies component in which Discover Chicago is housed. “What we don’t want is for them to spend four years just on campus, beautiful as it is. We look at the city as an extended classroom. This pushes them out into it and instructs them how they can use the city in addition to enjoying it.”
A unique experiential learning opportunity

At the heart of DePaul’s freshman experience is the First-Year-Program, which includes the Chicago Quarter, the Focal Point Seminar, and courses in quantitative reasoning, technological literacy and writing. The Chicago Quarter comprises Discover Chicago and Explore Chicago, experiential learning courses that bring students into conversation with a faculty member, a staff professional and a peer mentor to examine diverse topics stemming from a single Chicago-related theme.

“The transition into college is a big one,” says Long. “Our students want to succeed, and through these courses, we are giving them the tools and confidence to do so.” From academics to financial aid to navigating the city, the three-person teaching team is prepared to address any issue a new student might face. “We have the privilege of being with students so early in their careers that we are really modeling what it is to be in college for them,” says Mark Pohlad, associate dean, associate professor of history of art and architecture, and former First-Year-Program director. “Each student’s DePaul career will be entwined with the city, so we have to teach our students to be awake to the whole city.”

Nearly 75 percent of the course content covers the specific Chicago-related topic. The remaining time is spent in common hour, an unofficial college life 101 session taught by the staff professional and student mentor. “These sessions cover the student success skills, things like a sense of belonging, financial fitness, university mission and diversity,” says Long. Patterson, who is in her first year as a Chicago Quarter mentor, believes students value her presence. “As a program, we stress that this is your peer,” she says. “They can ask any question, and we will try to help them. Students are genuinely engaged. They like to talk. They like to explain what’s going on in their lives and see if they can be doing something better.”

While Discover and Explore courses are similar in nature, Discover Chicago meets one week prior to the start of the fall quarter to provide students with a more immersive experience. “They already feel like they belong by the time autumn quarter starts because they got to know more than 20 students, faculty and staff,” Long says. This sense of community lingers long after the quarter ends. “I see my students after this course, and in some ways, they are special to me because I had these experiences out on the street with them,” Pohlad says. Long seconds that sentiment. “The faculty and staff get to know our students in a way we don’t in a regular class,” he says. “We’re traveling on trains and buses with them, we’re eating with them. It’s just a more casual way to get to know our students.”

This is exactly what Charles “Chuck” Suchar (LAS ’67), former dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, hoped to foster when he first envisioned Discover Chicago. “I was at a conference on experiential learning in Washington, D.C., and there was a person there from a university in Sydney who said that they took their freshmen into the Outback as part of a bonding experience,” he remembers. Struck with inspiration, Suchar thought he could appropriate this idea at DePaul by using the city and its vast resources. “I’m an urban sociologist,” he says. “For me, this was something that came naturally.” After a year of meticulous planning, Suchar launched six Discover Chicago pilot sessions in 1995. Later, he initiated Explore Chicago, and the Chicago Quarter has been growing ever since.

Offerings reflect Chicago’s multifaceted identity

There are more than 100 Discover and Explore Chicago offerings available with content ranging from serious issues like race, ethnicity and gender to popular culture topics like film, music and literature. “We cover the gamut of possible topics,” Suchar says. “There’s not an area of Chicago that’s not tackled in some way. It’s fascinating to see how widespread the topics are and where students go and what they are interested in.” The exact number of offerings varies each year based on enrollment, but professors relish the opportunity to lend their expertise to incoming students. “What
students don’t realize is that they are getting topics that their instructors love that aren’t based on the needs of the department,” Long explains. “We love the variety.”

Matthew Ragas, assistant professor and academic director of the master’s in public relations and advertising program in the College of Communication, enjoys the freedom of teaching Discover Chicago courses. Drawing on personal experiences in addition to academics, Ragas takes his students into the community to learn about corporate social responsibility for his Chicago Business and Society course. “We look at it from a very Vincentian approach, so, whether it’s a small mom-and-pop business or a large, multinational corporation, what are the roles, obligations and responsibilities of business to society?” Ragas, who sits on the Chicago Quarter domain committee, which is in charge of programming, encourages his students to see the value in all types of organizations.

“We don’t just focus on large businesses,” he explains. “It’s important for students to understand that a lot of small businesses and entrepreneurs really help make Chicago run.”

Ragas’ class made such an impact on Patterson that she decided to return as his Chicago Quarter mentor the following year. “This course is a great way for students to start thinking more deeply about corporations,” Ragas says. “Businesses are very powerful actors in society, and we need to get students thinking beyond simply how much money they can make one day ... I’ve done my job if my course gets students thinking more broadly about what it really means to be a businessperson in the future.”

English Instructor Brian Niro’s formal academic interests lie in Modernist British literature, but later in life, he became enthralled with the Chicago writing community. “I look at how Chicago authors like Carl Sandburg and Mike Royko shape the sense that the city has of itself,” he explains. Niro brings his students to Daley Plaza to sit below the Picasso sculpture as they read Royko’s piece that described its unveiling. “To be sitting under that statue while reading that piece and hearing the traffic and thinking about these people nearly 50 years ago who experienced something that happened exactly where you are sitting—I think that changes the way in which you use literature,” he says. Other activities include a walking tour of literary monuments in Lincoln Park and a poetry open mic night. “Sometimes classes can be very theoretical, but this class makes the abstract touch your day-to-day life,” Niro says. “That to me is really compelling.”

SNL faculty member Joseph Cunniff ensures his students know not only where to find the best jazz, but also the history behind it. “There’s a certain way of absorbing the city,” Suchar says. “You can read about it, but to be on the street and get a feel for what the neighborhood is like, it’s just a very different experience. It’s a very different way of understanding a community, neighborhood, people and culture.”

Beyond the freshman experience

A strong entry point into the university is integral for future student success. “If students are not enthused in that first year, it causes difficulties and some will drop out,” explains Suchar. Yet, for 20 years, Discover Chicago and the First-Year Program as a whole have been successfully engaging students from the moment they step onto campus. “We’re giving them that very first impression of who we are as a university,” says Suchar. “These are the first courses they encounter, and it sets the stage for what’s to follow in terms of skill, curiosity and intellectual development.” It also encourages students to take an active interest in Chicago and beyond. “As you look closer, you can see what makes Chicago so interesting to study,” Pohlad says. “Just by going a little deeper into neighborhoods and places where the tourists don’t go, students see these huge forces of internationalization, globalization, poverty and privilege at play. The idea is that you’re looking at the world through Chicago.”

Patterson’s Discover Chicago experience opened her eyes to the multitude of opportunities DePaul and the Chicago area have to offer. “If I didn’t start my relationship with DePaul this way, I’m not sure I would have had the same experience,” she asserts. “Discover Chicago is one of the most special experiences I’ve had as a student. It was completely unlike any college class I ever expected to take.”