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MBA candidates test skills in New Orleans

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 + Enlarge By Sean Gardner for USA TODAY

DePaul student Lucas Weingarten, second from right, and assistant professor Patrick Murphy, right, lend a hand Tuesday.

 By [Rick Jervis](#), USA TODAY

NEW ORLEANS — Just a year ago, students at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business would be elbowing for an internship at a Wall Street investment firm.

Instead, this week eight of them are spending Spring Break in New Orleans helping a local entrepreneur develop a business strategy for selling his eco-friendly flip-flops.

Wall Street's troubles have master's degree candidates rethinking life after graduation, said Matt Nas of the Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship at Duke University.

One of the main benefactors of this trend has been New Orleans, a city nearly destroyed by the 2005 floods. The Idea Village, a non-profit created in 2000 to help businesses get on their feet, launched II is a business-oriented Peace Corps concept that pairs MBA candidates with local entrepreneurs, said president and co-founder.

"Other communities will be going through what New Orleans has went through the past three years,"

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The initiative has grown from five students in 2006 to 40 last year. This year, it has attracted 50 students from Stanford, DePaul University, the University of California Berkeley, Northwestern University and others.

At a meeting of minds Monday between Stanford students and the owner of Feelgoodz, the eco-friendly flip-flop maker, ideas for new business models were shared. Not far from the Stanford gathering, the team from DePaul University bantered around ideas to help grow Naked Pizza, an all-natural conscious pizzeria.

More MBA candidates are venturing into impact-conscious roles, and they could end up solving the economic crisis, said Lucas Weingarten, 32, a DePaul University student.

"I recognize that it's business and unrestricted free-market capitalism that has caused a lot of the problems we have today," he said. "But they're also going to be part of the solution."

One of the goals of the program is persuading the visiting students to move to New Orleans, said Bob Brown, head of the Business Council of New Orleans Region, a non-profit group of area CEOs.

"If we become a mecca for smart entrepreneurs, it could have an enormous impact on recovery," Brown said.

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