They learn on the job

THE FLATS | Loyola undergrads run boutique hotel

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They're like a small legion of Donald Trumps, but younger and with much better hair.

Seven Loyola University Chicago juniors and seniors are running a new boutique hotel on the city's North Side, a first step in what they hope will be a series of student-managed small businesses in Rogers Park.

The 20- and 21-year-olds furnished the 10 one- and two-bedroom suites, contracted with a cleaning crew and tested the beds and showers in the units, called the Flats at Loyola Station, 1216 W. Arthur Ave.

They guarantee one of them is always on call and manage the reservations, website and security.

And they all bought new suits for the dozens of meetings and presentations required to open their project.

"We were freaked at the beginning about how we would fill [the rooms]," said Jonathan Ferrera, a junior from Colorado who is the project's chief accounting officer. "Now our problem is we only have 10 units."

The Flats is part a long-term project by the university to create a "university town center" for both students and neighborhood residents, said Michael Brosko, Loyola's associate director for capital planning.

The students, headed by senior international business major John Adorno, proposed the boutique hotel for a small parcel of property that the university owned but had not figured out how to use.

A class in the university's MBA program produced a viability study on the proposed undergraduate student-operated guesthouse.

"They came back with a resounding 'yes,' and the CEO and chief of staff said run with it," Brosko said. "All the stars aligned."

The project was approved in February and is now open for customers.

The Flats at Loyola Station is meant to be its own profit-loss center within the university. With any profits, the students are planning on funding guest speakers on campus and eventually reinvesting into new student-managed business ventures in the community.

"Coffee shops, a new yogurt shop — they've got some ideas brewing," Brosko said.

In five years, after they have graduated, they hope to have 60 Loyola students working on a number of different, self-sustaining local businesses.

Michael Bovill, a junior who works as the director of operations, let his family know their project was working in the toughest possible terms. "My dad tried to get a room," the political science and criminal justice student said. "But we're booked."