

# Global Focus S**peaking**

The first students are completing the newest alliance-based, globally coordinated business degree programs. Their most important lesson? That communicating among culturally diverse groups is not a matter of language, but understanding.

Competition is fierce in the global marketplace, as corporations maintain international offices, hire overseas contractors, and expand into developing markets. As the corporate world broadens its global horizons, so, too, must business students at all levels, from undergraduates to executives. More students are realizing they must be able to communicate across cultures to compete with their peers. As a result, many are turning to business schools to find degree programs with the global reach to help them do just that.

Take, for example, David Urquiza, an international area sales manager for Prolec GE, a Mexican manufacturer of electrical transformers and part of a joint venture with General Electric. In 2001, Urquiza was nearing completion of his MBA at The Monterrey Tech Graduate School of Business Administration and Leadership (ITESM) in Mexico. During one of his last courses, his professor approached him about applying to a new program about to be launched by the Global e-Management alliance.

A collaborative effort of seven schools worldwide, GeM would combine courses in e-management with a global education.

Urquiza immediately agreed and entered GeM's first cohort in 2002. His job involves the need for both technological skills and international insight, something an alliance-based program such as GeM promised to offer. In addition, it offered him the chance to study at seven schools around the world and receive an introduction to a variety of cross-cultural perspectives.

"I worked with a team of five people to complete a course project. We developed a tech business and then presented it to real venture capitalists. I worked with an entrepreneur from the Netherlands, a historian and Web page developer from Spain, an English bio-

by **Tricia Bisoux**

illustration by J. W. Stewart

менеджмент

كلية التجارة

escuela del negocio

全球性商業

mondialisation

Commercio globale

commerce mondiale

Welthandel

negocio internacional

全球化

تجارة عالمية

economische faculteit

международное

бизнес

chemist from Denmark, and a director of airline cargo operations from Iceland,” says Urquiza. “What we found was that we were really more alike than different. We had differences of opinion and different approaches, but that was more a product of our occupations than our nationalities.”

Although the content of globally coordinated degree programs varies, participants make remarkably similar points about what made their experiences in the programs valuable. Yes, they were able to interact with culturally diverse groups

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—David Urquiza, Prolec GE, Mexico



of people. But perhaps more important, they could do so in an environment where cultural missteps and faux pas were both welcomed and encouraged. The opportunity to make their mistakes in the experimental boundaries of a physical or virtual classroom, they say, better prepared them for international interactions in the real world of business.

### Art of Translation

Rod Cheatham, a director of materials management for Boeing’s division in Wichita, Kansas, discovered the OneMBA program through the Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Now more than one-third of the way through the program, Cheatham says that a program that allowed him to study business on five continents was just what he was looking for to help him better interact with contractors overseas and prepare him for Boeing’s ongoing international expansion.

“Boeing believes that the old business model of essentially being an exporter to other countries is no longer a sound business model. The company wants a piece of the economic pie in developing countries and wants our division to help provide an infrastructure within developing economies,” says Cheatham. “I knew I needed an opportunity to practice working with people in other countries and cultures, for whom English was not their native language.”

In the program, Cheatham works with a team of four other students—face-to-face during two-week modules at

each school’s campus and remotely at other times. The coursework is invaluable, he says. But the experience he finds most memorable did not occur during a work project, but at an introductory dinner during the program’s first module.

“I was sitting next to one of my classmates who lived near São Paulo, Brazil. I asked him how far his home was from São Paulo, and he answered, ‘About 30 miles.’ It occurred to me he had said miles, not kilometers. I thanked him for converting the distance,” Cheatham recalls. “I could tell right away that he didn’t even expect me to catch it. He was so pleased that I had recognized his effort to communicate with me, that since then, it has been our private joke. I’ll throw out a measurement, and he’ll try to convert it to feet or gallons.”

Although the interaction was so simple, says Cheatham, it taught a key lesson: Trying to communicate is just as important to global relationships as the communication itself. With that in mind, Cheatham has taught his own classmates the intricacies of American slang.

“I grew up in the South, and occasionally I slip into Southern dialect. I once used ‘y’all’ in conversation with my classmates and they were very curious about what that meant,” says Cheatham. “I explained that it was a Southern construction meaning ‘you all,’ and told them I would try to avoid slang in the future to make it easier to communicate. But they all said, no, they wanted to learn slang to improve their English fluency. So now they’ll send me an e-mail saying, ‘What up, dog?’”

Cheatham has already put to work the communication skills he has acquired in the OneMBA program. For instance, he recently entertained representatives of a company from Turkey that was a potential supplier to Boeing. Of his five guests, only two were fluent in English. Cheatham was able to pick up a few Turkish words from them, and he attempted to use them with the other three guests.

“I tried to carry on a brief conversation with an older man in the group, and I know I butchered the language.



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I'm not even sure what I said to him," jokes Cheatham. "But he grabbed both my hands, pumped my arm, and said 'Thank you!' Before taking part in OneMBA, I wouldn't have been unpleasant, but I don't think I would have tried to use the language. I now realize that it's important to at least make the effort."

### A World in Microcosm

As an attorney and managing partner for the international law firm Kremer Associates & Clifford Chance in Luxembourg, Christian Kremer was looking for an MBA that fulfilled a number of different criteria. "I wanted something really global, but I wanted to continue my work without interruption. I wanted a program that included perspectives from the U.S., Europe, Asia, and South America. As an attorney, I also wanted something that went further than a traditional MBA in terms of the global issues surrounding the global political economy."

Kremer decided to enter the TRIUM degree program, which had been developed by New York University's Stern School of Business, HEC-Paris, and the London School of Economics. Through TRIUM, Kremer was able to study for two weeks at each campus, as well as visit two other campuses in Asia and Latin America.

After completing one half of the program, Kremer has found it surprising just how quickly individuals from different backgrounds can blend their experiences into a single, successful project. His team includes a Russian engineer, a Dutch investor, and a marketing professional and a human resources manager from the U.S. As a lawyer, Kremer finds himself more concerned with the governmental regulations that affect their work, while the engineer more often focuses on strategy and the investor on potential opportunities.

The class is really a microcosm of the real world, Kremer adds. "All of us asked different questions and approached the problem differently, but we came together to create a solution," he says. "The class, with its variety of origins and backgrounds, is a living example of the global economy."

Perhaps the greatest strength of the program, he adds, is that it demonstrates to students how well people with different cultural backgrounds can work together. "During the London module, we were given only an hour to prepare a PowerPoint presentation with people we hardly knew. But after an hour, we had something pretty good," says Kremer. "We found that people from totally different backgrounds, cultures, and companies can work together in dynamic fashion. We were able to draw on each other's experience to create something I would call 'unity in diversity.' We really learned as much from each other as we learned from the course, which gives the program a double dimension."

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Kremer also notes that global friendships are already forming in his class and with the faculty. In addition, TRIUM has in place a network of contacts that allows TRIUM alumni to take advantage of the alumni network of all three schools. "It's really a global web," he says. "It's just beginning to develop."

### The Language of Business

Two years ago, Ariel Brooks completed the "2+2" program through the seven-school TransAtlantic Business School Alliance. Through the program, Brooks spent two years of study at her home university, the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, and two years at her host school, the Centre d'Etudes Supérieures Européennes de Management in Marseilles, France. In the process, she says that she learned what it takes to assimilate into a culture other than her own. That experience, as much as her coursework, gave her a greater understanding of the context of business in France.

"If I had been in a program in Paris, it would not have been as difficult," says Brooks. "But I was in Marseilles, where few people spoke English. It was terrifying at times." Because of the length of her stay, Brooks also had to learn everything about daily living in France from scratch—from opening a



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bank account, to leasing an apartment, to having her telephone turned on.

Even more difficult, Brooks took business courses conducted entirely in French. In France, Brooks explained, the courses are driven largely by professors' lectures, rather than by reading as they are in the U.S. Therefore, students base most of their learning on their class notes, not textbooks, and take oral rather than written exams. The pressure of learning the language while keeping up with the pace of her courses was intense, says Brooks.

"Someone took a picture of me sitting in class my first year in France," says Brooks. "I had lost 20 pounds and I had dark circles under my eyes. I was shocked to see the picture—having to concentrate 100 percent 24/7 really takes a lot out of you."

What Brooks gained in return, however, was an international perspective on business that is both French and European. She now works as a financial analyst for Federal Express in Paris and is fluent in French. There has been an unexpected side effect to her experience. Because she learned her finance specialty in French, she often does not know the English translation for financial terms.

"That was one of the things that surprised me," says Brooks. "But if you learn something for the first time in your life in French, you won't have the English translation. Most of my day is in English, and sometimes, when I'm talking about business to someone in, say, Memphis, Tennessee, I may not understand some of the conversation."

Brooks plans to return to the United States and has been interviewing with several companies. She holds two degrees—one from each school she attended—but she has found that, because such global degrees are somewhat new, employers are still not quite sure what to make of her dual-degree status.

"I find it difficult to explain this program to U.S. employers. They ask, 'Why did you spend two years in Europe, how are the programs equivalent, and how do your grades translate?' I've been to two interviews where they were concerned about my academic career. Now, I try to

avoid saying I spent two years in America and two years in France. I simply say I have two degrees. It's been harder to explain than I thought it would be!"

### **New Attitudes**

A former participant in the CaMexUS undergraduate program, Julia Heredia Bruin of San Diego, California, agrees that her total-immersion experience in three separate cultures has been one of the most valuable assets on her resume. After completing the three-year program—in which students spend a year each studying at San Diego State University in the U.S., Universidad Autónoma de Baja California in Mexico, and Université du Québec à Chicoutimi in Canada—Bruin was truly trilingual and multicultural. And although transitioning from one culture and language to another was difficult, the difficulties were far outweighed by the experience she acquired in the process.

"My proudest moment was when I was able to deliver half of a 50-minute professional presentation entirely in French," says Bruin, who is now considering pursuing an MBA or a law degree with an emphasis on international studies. "I have learned so much about the three different cultures. In the process, I've gained a much more open view of the business world."

As Bruin and her counterparts have found, navigating the landscape of international education is a challenge for both the students who pursue it and business schools that offer it. They are, in many ways, the pioneers in a newly developing system of global education.



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As international, alliance-based curricula make inroads into the educational marketplace, such multicultural educational experiences promise to become more commonplace. In the end, such attention to cross-cultural communication may go far to connect students, faculty, and business schools worldwide in a common learning experience, changing attitudes toward cultural differences and lessening the perceived distance between them. **■**