



An ambitious reboot of Olin's full-time MBA program launched students around the globe, immersed them in international business and gave them a head start in their career growth.

Global immersion, now departing.

By Kurt Greenbaum



On a pristine Thursday in July, a group of WashU Olin MBA students sipped two varieties of Spanish sparkling wine and sampled *pan con tomate* in the main house of the 500-year-old Barcelona winery where they'd spent two afternoons collecting data.

The students had strolled among the knotty vineyards, smelled the soil and ducked into dark cellars lined with bottles of aging cava. They'd heard about the wine-making process and the family values that drive the latest generation of vintners at the Raventos i Blanc winery 40 minutes from the city's center.

By 9:15 that evening, the sights, sounds, aromas and flavors had become another data point. Students clustered on sofas and barstools around the lobby of the Pulitzer Hotel in downtown Barcelona. Melding their research data with the culture and values they'd absorbed firsthand, they prepared team presentations for class the next day while three Olin professors milled about, offering insights and answering questions.

The scene was emblematic of WashU Olin's newly rebooted full-time MBA program and its crown jewel: a 'round-the-globe immersion in international business designed to set students up for a richer business school education and set them apart from their peers. Students absorbed a rigorous schedule of classroom work, course-driven field excursions and presentations in Washington, DC, Barcelona and Shanghai.

By the time they returned to St. Louis 38 days after they left, the verdict was clear: The new MBA program was a success.

"I was prepared to feel like a student on this trip and to take incredible classes from amazing professors," said Kendra Kelly, MBA '21. "But I wasn't prepared to see myself as a working professional in these places. In six weeks, I feel like I'm leaps and bounds beyond where I would have been had I not participated in this."



Eighteen months in development

At a faculty meeting on May 23, 2018, Dean Mark P. Taylor challenged instructors to consider a bold new plan for the full-time MBA program. By then, a team of staff and faculty had already completed several months of behind-the-scenes work. New courses had been conceived. International locations had been chosen. Partner institutions were identified.

With faculty approval, the race was on to implement the new program in time for the arrival of first-year MBA students in late June 2019. The newly rebooted program would include options for MBA students to accelerate their education and graduate a semester early by foregoing a summer internship.

It would also offer students the option to pair their MBA with a concurrent specialized master's degree in about 23 months.

But the real meat of the new program would be its biggest challenge, drawing dozens of instructors and scores of staff members into the planning process. The required global immersion would be an enormous logistical feat as WashU Olin arranged travel, meals, lodging, coursework—and prepared for inevitable surprises—for nearly 100 students across three continents.

Planners piloted the program over spring break in March 2019, taking 70 first- and second-year students to Shanghai and 35 to Barcelona for a compressed version of classes and excursions. Organizers returned with insights on how to manage transportation logistics, how to engage weary travelers and how to pace the coursework.

The goals were clear: Build the global mobility of Olin's latest cohort. Set the tone for a program rooted in values-based, data-driven decision-making. Establish a baseline in international business for students with varying levels of business experience. Provide perspective on how business is done across different cultures, countries and economies when students begin core classes.

REBOOTING THE FULL-TIME MBA

Elements of the redesigned program for full-time MBA students at WashU Olin

A required global immersion for all students entering the program, including a 38-day 'round-the-world trip with coursework and excursions at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC; in Barcelona; and in Shanghai.

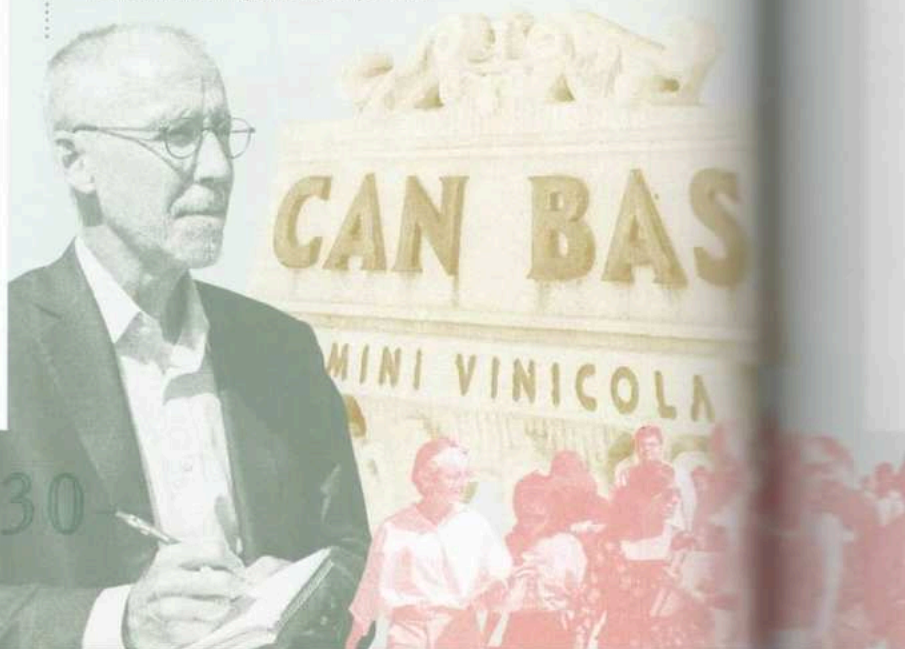
An option to accelerate the MBA experience and finish a semester early by foregoing the traditional summer internship between years one and two.

An option to earn a specialized master's degree concurrently with the MBA.



“
These students were absorbing and engaging with the environment in ways we've never seen before.”

Patrick Moreton, *professor of practice*





^ Peter Boumgarden, professor of practice in strategy and organizations, teaches at Barcelona's ESADE campus.

< Jennifer Lanas makes a point in a Barcelona classroom discussion during the Global Management Practices course.

v Maria Walsh and Vidur Bhatnagar participate as teammates in an iPad-driven scavenger hunt in Barcelona to get familiar with the culture and geography.

By the end of the trip, Professor of Practice Patrick Moreton—the faculty director and chief organizer of the global immersion's academic experience—was confident it had met the goals.

"These students were absorbing and engaging with the environment in ways we've never seen before," Moreton said, citing the papers, presentations and simulation results students had submitted throughout their journey.

The student presentations, designed to solve market entry questions and operational problems for real companies in the United States and abroad, incorporated rich learnings from their own field observations and data collected from financial documents and company research.

"They did a great job," Moreton said, acknowledging that the students were deliberately challenged to use business concepts they hadn't yet formally learned. "The experiential design of the courses lets students see the value of these concepts in action and achieved great learning outcomes."





▲ First-year MBA teams gather in Barcelona's Hotel Regina to work on projects. Similar scenes occurred often throughout the 38-day journey.

Bonds for life

Faculty members were also impressed with the quality of the cohort. From the beginning, program leaders acknowledged the new program would attract a certain type of student—a student prepared to touch down in St. Louis and depart almost immediately for faraway lands. With the highest yield rate in Olin's MBA history, it was clear prospective students made Olin their top choice—specifically for the global experience.

Meanwhile, those nearly six weeks of global travel also fulfilled another goal: Organizers expected the program to create deep bonds among members of the cohort. And bond they did.

Sixteen students celebrated birthdays during the 38 days of travel. Four students formed an impromptu band using idle instruments in a DC pub. Another took a long weekend away from Shanghai to get married—and was showered with classmates' well wishes when he shared wedding pictures on WeChat, the Chinese social media platform everyone used to stay connected. Ten students rented a yacht in Barcelona

for a water-borne city tour and an afternoon swim. Students visited karaoke bars in Beijing, walked on the Great Wall, toured DC monuments and gazed into the soaring ceiling of Barcelona's Sagrada Família basilica.

"We spent a lot of time together. We had meals together. It really helped us inside the classroom because we are really comfortable talking to each other, asking each other questions," said Benjamin Gaffney, MBA '21. "It helped the academic conversations as well."

Ashley Macrander, assistant dean and director of student affairs for graduate programs, said students frequently cited the deeper cultural competency they'd gained as an important takeaway of the program.

"This experience has given our students an even stronger start than they've ever had before," Macrander said. "They care about each other as colleagues and friends. They've formed tighter bonds with Olin. It's made them even more engaged students and that's going to make them more engaged alumni."

FACULTY AND COURSES

These were new courses developed for the global immersion, and the faculty members who taught them.

IN ST. LOUIS

Values-Based, Data-Driven Decision-Making

Stuart Bunderson, Director, Bauer Leadership Center and George and Carol Bauer Professor of Organizational Ethics and Governance

Seethu Seetharaman, Director, Center for Analytics and Business Insights and W. Patrick McGinnis Professor of Marketing

IN WASHINGTON, DC

Global Institutions and Values

Tarek Ghani, assistant professor of strategy

Lamar Pierce, professor of organization and strategy and associate dean for the Olin-Brookings Partnership

IN BARCELONA

Global Management Practices

Sam Chun, assistant dean and director of executive education, professor of management practice

Peter Boumgarden, professor of practice, strategy and organizations

IN SHANGHAI

Understanding Business Models in a Global Context

Daniel Elfenbein, associate professor of strategy

Anne Marie Knott, Robert and Barbara Frick Professor of Business

Implementing Strategy through Global Operations

Lingxiu Dong, professor of operations and manufacturing management

Fuqiang Zhang, professor of operations and manufacturing management

THROUGHOUT

Foundations of Impactful Teamwork

Andrew Knight, professor of organizational behavior

Effective Communication for Business Leaders

Cathy Dunkin, lecturer in business communications



▲ Lungile Tshuma and Dani Tanaka explore Shanghai's Old City the day after arriving as they get accustomed to navigating in a new country.

One after another, students praised the strength they drew from one another through the trip, a strength derived from the bond they'd created—and the understanding they'd gained of each person's ethnic, professional and social backgrounds.

"People from different backgrounds, different industries, different countries, different life experiences—and when we work in teams, we get to share all our different ideas and see how they come together," said Abhinav Gabbeta, MBA '21. "All these different perspectives fill the different gaps you have."

Students drew on one another as they worked on a series of projects that began in St. Louis, continued at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC, extended to the cava producers in Barcelona and finished with garment manufacturing plants on the outskirts of Shanghai.



Rigorous coursework around the globe

It's Friday morning in early August and the mercury creeps toward a high in the upper 90s. Four first-year WashU MBA students dodge other commuters in Shanghai's People's Square subway station and squeeze aboard the No. 2 train, standing chin-to-shoulder for a quick ride two stops to the west.

Susie Bonwich, Zach Frantz, Duckenson Joseph and Linh Nguyen—joined by two Chinese-speaking guides—have scattered into the city seeking insights about the coffee shops and confectioners doing business in Shanghai. Their classmates have gone in other directions, visiting other stores.

Before departing WashU in late June, all the students visited Strange Donuts, a St. Louis-based chain of shops with locations around the region and in Mexico City. Jason Bockman, the owner and a former Olin student, had been invited to consider opening a doughnut shop in Shanghai. The question for the students: Should he?

"I'm really excited about this project," said Bonwich, who joked about her previous experience as a corporate trainer for a premium global burger restaurant chain. "I feel like shaking fries will actually have some value in this program."

The four students visited four different shops, including a simple coffee shop, a high-end bakery and a patisserie. Their mission: Gain competitive insights. Evaluate square footage. Compare what Chinese diners prefer—their values—against the US palate. That work would merge with data from Bockman's business and lessons they'd learned in their course on business models in a global environment, taught in a Shanghai hotel ballroom.

"For sure, I'm looking at all of this very differently. Before, I'd try to look at a business model and see how a company made money," Frantz said. "But this is giving me a framework to see more about why decisions are made. I have a much more data-driven framework."

Throughout the trip, students blended on-the-ground experiences with in-the-classroom lessons. The business models course invited students to contrast retail strategies across a variety of industries—including hardware, cosmetics and apparel—among retailers on three continents.

In the hardware industry, for example, contrasting values came to the forefront as students noted less of a do-it-yourself mentality among Chinese homeowners compared to Americans. That's largely thanks to the lower cost of labor—they can more easily afford a plumber—and the lack of space to store and work with home improvement supplies.

Meanwhile, their Global Management Practices course in Barcelona included student visits to three wineries as they developed strategies for expanding cava in the US market. Their business and policy course at the Brookings Institution included detailed briefings on global economies in Europe, South America, Asia and Africa. With visits to Chinese garment makers and global distribution centers, students explored the role of operations strategy in their global business operations course.

Threaded throughout, students trained on effective teamwork, received communication coaching to hone their presentation skills and met with counselors from the Weston Career Center.



◀ Ella Bitton and Alleia Pluymers focus on adjusting data in a computer simulation as convenience store managers in their business models class.



Left: Students contrasted Chinese pastries with the American palate in a project involving St. Louis's Strange Donuts. Right: Abhinav Gabbeta gathers information in a Shanghai pastry shop for his business models class.



▲ Olin's Anne Marie Knott teaches in Shanghai before students leave for another field excursion to gather data for their projects.

"I didn't think the global immersion would add so much to my experience, but I feel like I'm so much ahead," Joseph said. "I have a lot of stories I'll be able to tell an interviewer."



Changes, differences, similarities

Throughout the experience, faculty and staff watched and learned as the class of 2021 served as the vanguard for Olin's new full-time MBA. They provided social and political insights to help students assimilate across three unique cultures. They prepared for the inevitable upset stomachs and ear infections that would interrupt any group of 100 adults over six weeks. They noted—and will adjust for—the time it takes to secure visas for a large group of students attempting to traverse the globe.

And they tweaked schedules along the way in an effort to preserve a rigorous academic experience alongside the rigor of international travel—with all the demands of border crossings, jet lag and laundry.

"The faculty has had to adapt the schedule to students' needs," Gaffney said. "We very much appreciate those changes, but also, you just need to learn: While this is the plan, it may change."

In the end, students appreciated the opportunity to contrast the cultures and values across so many stops, integrating that perspective into their work. They noted the late-morning, late-evening routines among Spanish businesses—and their preference to begin meetings with more small talk and a personal connection. They recognized that the Chinese palate doesn't favor sweets to the degree Americans do. They saw the ways Chinese manufacturing conditions contrast with Americans' preconceived notions.

"Honestly, the thing I've seen most powerfully is the similarities," Gabbeta said. "It's all about the human connection we're making. We've gotten to know the people. There may be a lot of differences, but at the end of the day, as long as we share that human connection, we can make some really powerful differences in the world."

Amy Shiller Brown, Molly Cruitt, Sarah Gibbs, Judy Milanovits, Gabe Watson and Katie Roth Wools contributed to this report.