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Managing; Global Issues in Every Classroom

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Starting this month, 135 business students at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School-- about one-sixth of the entering M.B.A. class -- will become guinea pigs for a new way of teaching global business skills. They will forgo all international courses. Instead, their marketing professor will discuss the pros and cons of having one brand name worldwide. Their operations course will explore foreign distribution systems. In finance, they'll learn to plan for currency fluctuations. The program will culminate in a four-week trip abroad.

"There are no purely domestic or purely international decisions anymore," said David J. Reibstein, a Wharton vice dean, who expects the experimental curriculum to become de rigueur in a few years. "Even a brand manager who never leaves Cincinnati deals with global issues these days."

Throughout the 80's, business schools scurried to devise international courses that would bring dynamite marketers, accountants and such up to speed on the intricacies of a global environment. Now that the basic consciousness-raising is done, deans are telling their faculties to weave global material into core courses, despite objections by many professors that tinkering with their courses is an assault on their intellectual autonomy.

Examples of the new strategy abound. The curriculum committee at the University of Maryland's business school, which has for several years required professors to make 25 percent of their core course material international, recently raised that percentage to half. At the Columbia Business School, Alberto Giovannini, chairman of the international program, is developing international case studies, reviewing class outlines and trying to insure that core M.B.A. courses have been internationalized. He is even meddling in the sacrosanct area of faculty hiring.

"We expect departments to adjust their hiring plans to Alberto's guidelines for the type of international expertise professors should have," said Meyer Feldberg, the school's dean.

The University of Pittsburgh's business school has sent many professors to do teaching stints in Eastern Europe, with the expectation that they will introduce international ideas into their courses when they return. H. J. Zoffer, the school's dean, predicts that, within a year or two, enough professors will have been internationalized to enable the school to abolish its five-year-old required course in international business.

"A separate international course is at best a Band-Aid," Mr. Zoffer said.

Corporate trainers are reaching similar conclusions. The Digital Equipment Corporation is deliberately eschewing international business courses in the comprehensive, multi-level training program that it is now designing. "It makes more sense to incorporate case studies of multinational companies, and to ask our foreign managers to make presentations," said John L. Alexanderson, vice president of sales training.

Similarly, the General Electric Company has canceled the two-week international management course it had offered since the early 80's. "We would rather weave the idea of cultural diversity through all of our courses," said Stephen R. Mercer, program manager for executive education at the G.E. Management Development Institute, which, although popularly called Crotonville because of its proximity to Croton-on-Hudson, is actually in Ossining, N.Y.

That desire is beginning to affect sales of commercial training programs, too. Louis J. DeGeorge Jr., president of the International Training Corporation, a North Canton, Ohio, company that sells training software, reports a slow buildup of requests for training programs that have an international flavor. "The really good companies want international factors to be part and parcel of regular training courses," he said.

Chad Cook, Rubbermaid Inc.'s manager of training, has been combing Berlitz and other schools for courses that middle managers might want. And he is encouraging vice presidents to visit other countries.

"We used to rely on alliances with foreign companies to supply international knowledge," Mr. Cook said. "Now we want to understand foreign cultures ourselves." **SCHOOLS THAT BUCK THE TREND**

Unanimity is pretty elusive in academia, so there are still schools that believe that solid lines of demarcation between international and functional courses are the way to go. But even they are insisting that students give neither area short shrift.

Starting in 1992, M.B.A. candidates at the University of Maryland will have to take at least one international business course to enable them to "get inside the complexities" of international finance, marketing or the like, explained Rudolph P. Lamone, dean of the College of Business and Management.

DePaul University's College of Commerce is taking a step that is the mirror image of Maryland's. It is about to require students specializing in international business to take five additional courses in disciplines like accounting. "We will no longer let people graduate with an international major alone," said Mark J. Sullivan, associate dean.

Dartmouth's Amos Tuck School is probably the farthest afield of the trend to merge global and domestic education. It just introduced a required course in international business environments, to be taught in tandem with business policy, a traditional corporate strategy course.

"You can't deal with the world's 150 nation states by expanding domestic marketing or accounting theories," said Anant Sundaram, one of the designers of the new course. "You need a separate course to analyze why governments subsidize industries, how tariffs come about, how to account for fluctuations in exchange rates in your siting decisions."

Photo: H. J. Zoffer is dean of the University of Pittsburgh's business school, which has sent many professors abroad. (The Pittsburgh Press)