MBA classes travel to Paris and Beijing

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The Freeman School isn't unique in having its MBA students read cases about multinational firms and global strategies. What is unique is having those students---*all* those students---travel overseas to visit the companies described in the cases and present their strategic recommendations directly to senior managers.

On March 21, the Freeman School sent its entire first-year MBA class to Paris and its entire second-year MBA class to Beijing for a week of lectures, company visits, case presentations and cultural activities as part of the program's Global Leadership module. It was the first time since Freeman added a travel component to the MBA program three years ago that both classes traveled abroad at the same time, creating a huge logistical challenge for Freeman School faculty and staff, but according to students who participated in the trips, the unique international experience more than justified the extra work.

"Instead of hearing how international business is conducted from a second-hand source, we were able to hear directly from successful executives in their country," says Eric Seling (MBA '10). "Spending time in France really exposed us to differences in the people and thus gave us context on why differences exist in the business world.

"Listening to business leaders themselves talk about the strategies they adopted for their companies is definitely more motivating and stimulating than just reading a case and discussing it among ourselves," adds Vamsi Illindala (MBA '10).

The first-year class--including 89 full-time MBAs and seven part-time Professional MBAs--spent a week in Paris that included lectures on European business culture and management of multinationals, talks from executives with companies including Schlumberger, L'Oreal and A Novo, and a case discussion with Richard Seurat, CEO of Alcatel-Lucent, followed by a visit to the headquarters of the Paris-based telecommunications company.

The Paris trip culminated with a presentation to the senior management of the Colas Group, one of the world's leading road construction firms.

Earlier in the semester, students read a case involving Colas and participated a videoconference with company executives. Student teams were asked to analyze the international road construction industry and develop expansion strategies for Colas in the U.S., Mexico and China.

During the trip to Paris, the students visited the company's headquarters and presented their recommendations directly to Colas Group CEO Hervé Lebouc and 11 senior executives of company.

"The highlight of the trip for me was watching my classmates present to the CEO and CFO of Colas," says Seling. "After each presentation, the executives asked some incredibly difficult questions, but my classmates did a wonderful job defending their positions and offering specific suggestions for ways the company could expand."

The second-year class--67 students-- spent a week in Beijing attending an academic program organized by Tsinghua University. The students' itinerary included lectures on China's economy and culture; visits to electronics manufacturer AIGO, software company Hanwang Technology Co. and sportswear manufacturer Li-Ning Co.; and a Q&A session with Yaokun Hu (MBA '99), an associate with Hopu Investment, the leading private equity firm in China. That session was followed by a reception at which students had a chance to network with Freeman alumni working in China.

Tsinghua University is sometimes referred to as the "Harvard of China," and the faculty members selected by the university to deliver lectures were among the leading academics in Asia.

"David Daokui Li, one of our guest lecturers, spoke to the G20 last week," says Will Donaldson (MBA '09). "It was definitely the highlight of the Global Leadership series of courses and had me thinking for several days. His insight was invaluable."

While each of the trips focused on lectures, meetings with executives and company visits, there were also cultural and social activities, such as tours and receptions, as well ample free time. According to some students, free time to explore is often just as valuable as classroom experiences.

"It's really the intangibles," says Eric Klein (MBA '09). "You can learn something in a book and a recite it, but it doesn't necessarily have any impact on your actions. But if you go and fumble through an interaction with someone, you can learn how to do things better and apply that knowledge in a real-world situation. I think that's really what we got by traveling to China."