Honors students are on the case

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It’s not that unusual for business students to read cases on companies like Google, General Electric and Time-Warner in their management classes. What is a little unusual is for the students themselves to write the cases.

Since last year, Freeman honors students have fulfilled their senior thesis requirement in a novel way: The students write Harvard Business School-style cases on companies or business issues—complete with teaching notes—and then present those cases to classmates.

“What we’re trying to do is identify our very best students—the ones who have the highest potential for future scholarship—and get them started now on their scholarly careers,” explains Jim Biteman, clinical professor of management, who co-teaches the thesis course with Michael Wilson, professor of practice in strategy, management and organizational behavior. “Part of it is teaching the case to the class and part of it is explaining the process of the research and how they came up with what they did.”

Business students had previously qualified to graduate with honors by maintaining a 3.60 GPA and completing four honors courses. To bring the Freeman School into line with Tulane’s other undergraduate schools and colleges, which require honors students to complete a senior thesis, Freeman’s undergraduate curriculum committee proposed the idea of having students research and write business cases, an approach that takes into account the specialized nature of business research.

“In business, each one of our disciplines—marketing, finance or whatever—has its own set of research methodologies,” explains Biteman. “Without having training in

the research methodologies, students were not going to be able to do a conventional thesis like those that are done in liberal arts and sciences. For cases, however, the research method is pretty simple: We have them search the available business literature and write a case and a teaching note assigned to it."

Students were free to write about any company or business issue that interested them. William Dougherty (BSM '10, MACCT '11), for example, wrote a case about Ford Motor Co. "During the financial crisis, I remember watching MSNBC and wondering how it was that the three major U.S. automakers were all nearing bankruptcy," Dougherty says. "Why can't U.S. automakers compete? That's what first caught my attention about Ford."

Among the other cases prepared by students in the inaugural class were "Google China: Searching for Growth," "eBay's Acquisition of Skype Technologies," "Ethical Branding," "JetBlue: Recovering a Brand Image," "State Farm Insurance: Hurricane Katrina Game Changer," "Blackrock: Growing Through Merger" and "Jeff Immelt: The New Direction of General Electric."

"Writing the case, the teaching note and especially doing the literature review taught me a lot and gave me the opportunity to really apply what I had already learned," says Jonathan Kartus (BSM '10, MACCT '11), who wrote a case on the AOL-Time Warner merger. "It was intensive but very rewarding."

Like all Tulane honors theses, the cases will be archived in the Howard-Tilton Library, making them available to future classes or even to faculty members.

"Our hope is that they get used in other courses," says Wilson. "They were really outstanding."