Students explore global innovation and sustainability in Southeast Asia

November 23, 2026



Global Entrepreneurial Ecosystems students pose with the over 300 kilograms of plastic waste they removed from an agricultural dumping area in Bali during their May 2026 class trip to Singapore and Indonesia.

Last spring, 15 undergraduate students spent two weeks in Southeast Asia exploring how entrepreneurial ecosystems and support organizations drive sustainable innovation.

The trip was part of Global Entrepreneurial Ecosystems (BUSG 4070), a new service-learning course taught by Alissa Bilfield that immerses students in the contrasting economic and cultural landscapes of Singapore and Bali, Indonesia.

Developed as an experiential learning capstone for the Entrepreneurial Business Minor program and fulfilling the Newcomb-Tulane College public service requirement, the course challenges students to look beyond individual startups and examine the broader networks that enable ventures to thrive.

“This kind of class allows students to get out of the primary reference of the entrepreneur and the startup and look across systems,” said Bilfield, professor of practice in management and executive director of the Freeman School’s Goldring Institute of International Business. “How are all of these different types of organizations there to support entrepreneurs as they grow?"

The cohort spent the first half of the trip in Singapore, studying how government coordination, private investment and academia support one of the world’s premier startup hubs. Students toured innovation centers like NUS Enterprise Block 71, met with venture capital and impact investors, and used public transit to conduct field research mapping neighborhood entrepreneurial assets.

“What stayed with me most from Singapore is the idea that entrepreneurship and purpose are not obstacles to one another,” said Leyat Teferra (BSM ’28), a Freeman School junior majoring in finance. “The organizations we met were living proof that building something profitable and building something meaningful can go hand in hand to create something truly beautiful.”

“Singapore is literally a unicorn across so many different areas,” said Bilfield. “It has this planned economy focus, a very collective orientation to governing and making decisions and really planning into the future. The goal of the course is not just to show this sort of unique example, but to have a compare-and-contrast example, and to also show how the resources from a place like Singapore extend into the region.”

The class next headed to Bali, which offered a counterpoint to Singapore’s highly developed ecosystem. Partnering with Sungai Watch, an environmental social

enterprise tackling plastic pollution in waterways, students participated in a community cleanup in an agricultural dumping area, recovering nearly 300 kilograms of discarded waste.

“Even though you think about it intellectually, doing that kind of work puts into perspective that every single product you use — every little film packet of plastic — matters,” Bilfield said. “Because if it ends up in agricultural land, it leads to all these other systems level problems.”

Students also visited local enterprises pioneering circular business models with recovered waste, including Sungai Design, which creates high-end furniture from plastic bags; Indosole, a footwear brand recycling discarded flip-flops into soles; and Kevala Ceramics, where students crafted ceramic coral modules to restore marine reefs. Bilfield said hearing the founders’ stories of overcoming years of operational hurdles gave students a more realistic understanding of social entrepreneurship.

“We hear all these stories about unicorn entrepreneurs being successful within a year,” Bilfield said. “That’s hardly ever the case. To hear about the struggle was really powerful, and also just how committed to their responsible business model that they are.”

“The organizations we partnered with are not just running sustainability initiatives,” added Teferra. “They are fighting to preserve something genuinely irreplaceable, and I hope their work keeps Bali as beautiful as the place I had the privilege of experiencing.”

The students also got to take part in a networking reception with Tulane alumni currently working in Singapore, giving them direct insights into global business careers.



In Indonesia, students immersed themselves in Balinese culture by dressing in traditional attire, visiting a local village temple and sharing a family-style meal with a local family at their compound.

“We fit so much into these two weeks,” Bilfield said. “It was such a powerful experience as an educator to get to watch the students go through the process.”

For the students themselves, the experience was just as powerful.

“Traveling to Asia for the first time and experiencing the contrast between Indonesia and Singapore was truly eye-opening,” said Daniel Zamora (BSM ’27), a Freeman School senior majoring in finance. “Witnessing the different approaches to innovation, entrepreneurship, sustainability, and economic development broadened

my perspective and deepened my appreciation for the opportunities and resources that shape societies in unique ways.”

This spring, Bilfield plans to bring a new group of students to Southeast Asia. The ‘Maymester’ course, which is set for May 21-June 3, will enable students to explore global entrepreneurial ecosystems in Singapore and apprentice with Makadaya Fellowship social venture entrepreneurs in Bali. Applications for the course are due by December 1.