■ M. Johnny Rungtusanatham, Feature Editor, Arizona State University

In this article, Dr. Joy Field of Boston College recounts her experiences in teaching a graduate-level course that involved a substantial amount of travel throughout Europe to visit European-based companies and organizations. Writing from a first-person narrative, Dr. Field provides a number of anecdotes from her experiences and concludes by highlighting key points to consider in the process of developing and teaching similar courses. For the next issue, be on the look-out for an article by Professor Arnoud de Meyer entitled "Strategic Issues Facing Business Schools."

Challenges and Rewards of MBA International Programs: The Boston College Experience

by Joy M. Field, Boston College

For the past two years, I have co-taught the International Management Experience (IME) Europe course in the Graduate School of Management (GSOM) at Boston College. I have been asked to share my experiences, both positive and negative, in conducting a course that involves international travel.

Background: The IME Program

First, some background information . . . . The IME program at Boston College consists of two optional MBA courses, IME Europe and IME Asia, that full-time students typically take between their first and second years, and part-time students take anytime after completing their first year. Students may only take one of the two courses for credit. The courses have been extremely popular with the students and are one of the selling points the GSOM uses when recruiting students. Each course has a maximum of 30 students and fills quickly, usually with a long waiting list. However, student numbers were down significantly this year due to hesitancy about traveling abroad following the events of September 11 and due to a downturn in the economy. The smaller numbers have both benefits and drawbacks, which I will discuss later.

Each of the two courses has a classroom and travel component, with the trip abroad lasting between 15 and 18 days immediately following the end of final exams in May. The content of the course, including arranging visits to companies and other organizations, is the responsibility of the instructors. Other travel arrangements such as plane tickets, hotels, and transportation are taken care of by a travel agent working with the instructors. Each course has two instructors, with an implicit two-year minimum commitment. The first year is for "learning the ropes," with primary responsibility for the course resting with the second-year instructor.

First Experience

For my first year of involvement with the IME program, both my co-instructor and I were novices because the intended second-year instructor left Boston College for a faculty position elsewhere. Despite the break in continuity (although the faculty member who left was very helpful), we were able to put together a trip that, as indicated by student and administration feedback, was both academically valuable and enjoyed by the students.

Because we were both new to the course, my co-instructor and I decided not to have a primary and secondary instructor but, rather, divide the course responsibilities more or less evenly according to our preferences and timing of the tasks. I handled all the trip planning, and he took care of the classroom preparation and student evaluation. This worked well for us, although after instructing the course for two years (with the same co-instructor), I believe the "rolling" two-year commitment better prepares instructors and promotes continuity.

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Getting Inside Companies in Foreign Countries

Preparation for the course begins in late fall by choosing the countries to go to and establishing contacts within each country to arrange for visits to firms and other organizations. Here's where resourcefulness—and persistence—really pays off. I used a variety of approaches for organizing business visits. Some examples include:

- Former students working abroad may be willing to either make a presentation themselves or direct you and/or provide an introduction to other companies.
- Colleagues at your university, either nationally or internationally, may have contacts with companies in the target countries. In-country colleagues are especially valuable resources because they will have more local business contacts and speak the language. Two years ago, an academic institution, the Czech Management Center, planned our entire itinerary in Prague for a very reasonable fee.
- Previous contacts may work if you are planning on being in one or more of the same cities as previous years. For large organizations that give frequent tours, it is not a problem to continue to visit them year after year. For business visits arranged through personal contacts, it is probably best to limit the number of times you use the same contact (not more than two years in a row), especially if the contact person is spending time arranging the visit and making a presentation.
- I have had very good luck working with trade/business organizations. For example, over the past two years, Creative Switzerland, a Boston-based organization promoting Swiss tourism and business, put us into contact with economic development groups in Geneva, Basel, and Zurich. This past May, our contact in Basel arranged visits to a number of different companies in the Basel area, as well as the Chamber of Commerce, cultural, and social events. She also accompanied us during the day, which was extremely helpful in terms of logistics and language. Not all such organizations are as helpful as the one in Basel, but they are usually at least willing to make introductions to the right people.
- Cold-calling is the lowest "yield" approach, but allows more freedom to choose companies you find especially interesting. The greatest challenge of cold-calling is that it is often difficult to identify the people in a company that both *can* and *will* arrange a business visit (especially without an introduction). For example, two years ago I tried unsuccessfully to arrange a visit to Disneyland Paris. This year a contact at the University of Bordeaux introduced me (via e-mail) to someone at Disneyland Paris Business Solutions who arranged for a fantastic presentation on the history of Disneyland Paris and the challenges and opportunities of marketing Disneyland in Europe, followed by a half day in the theme park. However, sometimes, but not often, cold-calling does work out, very well, in fact. Last fall I read an article in the *Boston Globe* about the Golden Arch Hotel, a hotel venture of McDonald's in Zurich and Geneva. I e-mailed the sales manager quoted in the article, and he arranged for a tour of the Zurich hotel and discussed their marketing and operations strategies and how the hotels fit within the overall strategy of McDonald's. The group also spent three nights at the hotel to experience the franchise's "brand extension" first-hand!

Types of Companies, Tour and/or Presentation, and Presentation Quality

When planning business visits, I try to achieve a mixture of manufacturing and service companies in a variety of industries, as well as visits to chambers of commerce and other economic development organizations. These visits provide an overview of the country's and region's economic, social, and political situation, while company visits focus on specific industries and the companies themselves. On weekdays, a two- to four-hour business visit in the morning and another one in the afternoon seem to provide the right ratio of academic content to free time, although depending on the length and availability of business visits, the actual number varies between one and four. Ideally, company presentations should be made by functional managers or executives because they provide a more strategic and comprehensive perspective on the company and industry. For manufacturing companies, I request both a tour of the facility and a presentation, especially if the tour is a standard one given to a wide range of visitors. The first time we visited BMW in Munich, we received a standard tour only, but this year we had a tour followed by a presentation on BMW's branding strategy. In fact, as part of the expanded visit this year, BMW also graciously provided lunch in the corporate lunchroom. While the tours were excellent both years, the addition of the presentation brought the visit to a much higher level by providing an in-depth understanding of this aspect of BMW's strategy. Furthermore, our students find manufacturing visits especially interesting because most of them have limited exposure to these types of firms.

While I was greatly appreciative that so many companies and organizations were willing to arrange visits and make presentations to our group, I found that the quality of the presentations varied. However, I also learned that providing certain information to the presenters does help to lower the variance and improve the presentation quality. First, I provided a list of about four "meaty" questions to help structure the presentation. Because one of the primary goals of the trips is to better understand how business is conducted in a European context, I have asked questions such as the one to SPEF Venture in Paris about how French laws and investors affect their investment strategies. Another example is the question to Disneyland Paris about how well the original American concept of Disneyland translates to the European market. Presenters, very often, appreciate a few questions to guide the level and content of their presentation, with a better result for both the students and presenters. Second, I provided brief biographies of each of the students to the presenters. This gives them a sense of the backgrounds and interests of the students, allowing them to better tailor their presentations to the group.

Student Preparation

Student preparation is also crucial for a successful business visit. We have several classroom sessions during the three months leading up to the trip. The classes cover material on the economic and political situation in the countries we plan to visit. In addition, each student is assigned to research one of the companies or organizations on the agenda. The research includes information on the company or organization itself (products, structure, history, etc.) and the industry and business environment in which it operates. Students prepare a presentation to the class and a brief write-up to be included in the trip booklet. All students in the class are then responsible for having a basic understanding of each of the companies and organizations and asking insightful questions of the presenters. In addition, we require a research paper on a broader topic (e.g., the effect of the conversion to the Euro on European commerce, the biotechnology industry in Europe, etc.) that incorporates information gained on the trip as well as a significant literature-based research component. The research paper, which is due about two weeks after we return from the trip, helps guide the specific questions students ask of the presenters. Because the presenters are giving their time to speak to the group, it is absolutely imperative that the students are knowledgeable about the companies and organizations we visit and that their questions and comments be well informed. Not only do the presenters appreciate an informed audience, but student learning is greatly enhanced by discussing more substantive issues rather than basic information.

Trip Management

When traveling with a group of students, expect the unexpected. Based on my experiences, I divide the potential "challenges" into three categories: travel related, business visit related, and student related.

Travel-related challenges. Working with a travel agent experienced in these types of trips helps to minimize glitches with hotels and transportation. However, even the best plans cannot ensure completely smooth traveling. For example, we traveled by bus within and between cities and countries. Both years we requested an English-speaking bus driver. The first year we had a French-speaking driver who also spoke a little English. The bus company contact spoke English, so everything worked out just fine. The second year, however, the bus driver spoke no English and, as far as we could tell, neither did anyone at the new bus company (the company from the previous year went out of business). This, of course, begs the question of how our travel agent was even able to contract with this bus company, but never mind . . . . Fortunately, one of the students on the trip was fluent in French, and she acted as translator. In addition, we had provided *specific* information to the bus company (e.g., hotel and business visit addresses, business visit appointment and duration times), which helped to minimize the impact of the language barrier. Although pre-trip planning can significantly reduce unexpected experiences, these types of challenges are bound to occur, so a combination of on-the-spot resourcefulness and flexibility are necessary.

Business-visit-related challenges. As I discussed earlier, instructor planning and student and presenter preparation are key success factors for business visits. Even so, last-minute cancellations and less-than-satisfactory business visits are still possibilities. It is important to be candid with the students about these possibilities so that they can put them in the proper perspective if they occur (i.e., disappointing, but not the end of the world). However, staying in touch with business contacts both before and during the trip should minimize last-minute cancellations. (We had no cancellations the first year and one the second year.) And expending more effort up-front to better prepare the presenters helped improve the quality of presentations and business visits in the second year.

Student-related challenges. In general, problems with group dynamics can be greatly reduced by managing expectations both before and during the trip. My co-instructor and I emphasized and re-emphasized the need for flexibility on the part of *all* trip participants. For example, the first year, we arrived at the Paris hotel around noon, but the rooms were not ready until after 3pm. We had flown all night from Boston and wanted to get to our rooms to change and rest. What exacerbated the situation was that our bus could not get down the narrow street in front of the hotel, so the driver parked two blocks away, and we had to carry our bags from the bus to the hotel (which also suggests the wisdom of keeping the amount and weight of luggage to a minimum). Tensions were running high, and we were barely two hours into our first city! We then decided to go on an impromptu tour of the city (after reiterating the need for flexibility and adaptability). It turned out to be a great hit with the students, and the second year we actually left for the tour directly from the airport, bypassing the hotel altogether.

Of course, there's the ever-present possibility of personality conflicts, especially with a group that's in constant contact for more than a two-week period. We were fortunate both years that such conflicts were kept to a minimum, partly due to the lucky composition of the group and partly due to a few simple policies and rules. Minor irritants can grow to be major issues in closed quarters, so we requested a spacious bus (allowing two seats per person), required headphones for students listening to music, and banned drinking of alcohol on the bus. Another policy that was very helpful was spending a minimum of two nights in each city (we found three nights to be ideal) to decrease the number of long stretches of inter-city/country travel and promote familiarity with each city we were in. Although the academic component of the trip is the first and foremost priority, experiencing the cultural and social aspects of the countries is an important part of the course as well.

Group Size Matters

As I mentioned previously, the number of students was down significantly from last year to this year (30 students last year versus 11 students this year). One important advantage of a larger group is the financial aspect. The students pay for course credits and the estimated cost of the trip, which covers both fixed (e.g., bus, instructor) and variable (e.g., airfare, hotel) costs. The amount charged is based on an enrollment of 25-30 students. With only 11 students this year, the GSOM took a significant financial hit. Other advantages of a larger group are related to the greater diversity in backgrounds and interests of the students. The number and types of issues and questions raised in the presentations increase, and the group can more readily break into subgroups during free periods and pursue a variety of different activities.

The disadvantages of a larger group are mostly a function of its size, including added complexity in managing the group and keeping track of everyone, as well as reticence by some companies and organizations to accommodate a group of 30. I found that it was much easier to arrange business visits with a smaller group, and companies were more likely to include "extras" such as lunch in the company cafeteria or corporate lunchroom. And, of course, the logistics with 11 students were much less complicated. However, despite any advantages of a smaller group, offering a course involving international travel at a reasonable cost to the students necessitates an enrollment of 25-30 students.

Measuring Success

How do we measure the success of the MBA international program? Although each university will have different criteria, "success" is evaluated at multiple levels—by the institution, the students, and relative to academic goals.

Measures at the institutional level might include the effects of having an international program on student recruitment, program profitability, and the international visibility for the MBA program. This year, instructors for the IME Asia trip scheduled press conferences in each of the countries they visited to increase the profile of Boston College and the GSOM in Asia. Articles on the IME Asia trip appeared in newspapers in China, Japan, Thailand, and Vietnam. The students tend to measure success on two primary dimensions—learning and enjoyment of the experience. From the instructors' perspective, academic outcomes are focused on the extent that the students come away from the course with a better understanding of the economic, social, and political situation in the countries we visited and how this international context affects companies' operations. Our key measures of success are the quality of the business visits and the students' performance—both before (e.g., the quality of their initial presentations and classroom participation), during (e.g., the quality of their questions and comments), and after the trip (e.g., the quality of their final papers). In particular, if their final papers indicate an insightful synthesis of the classroom material, experiences on the trip, and literature-based research, we consider the course highly successful. As these measures of success indicate, the potential rewards of an MBA international program are many—for the institution, students, and faculty alike.

Key Lessons

In summary, some of the important lessons I have learned over the past two years include:

- Use any and all resources available to establish contacts for organizing business visits. Keep your eyes and ears open for opportunities to make new contacts.
- Arrange to visit a variety of types of firms (in a number of industries) and business organizations. Try to arrange visits to chambers of commerce and economic development organizations to provide an overview of the country's and region's economic, social, and political situation. Be sure to include some manufacturing firms on the agenda. (Students are often less familiar with manufacturing firms and the plant tours provide a welcome contrast to presentations in conference rooms.)
- Find a local coordinator. If you are lucky, he or she will accompany you on business visits. At the least, he or she should be able to provide introductions to companies and organizations, which greatly increases the likelihood that they will agree to a business visit.
- Expect surprises—even with careful planning. Resourcefulness and flexibility are critical for adapting to, and even benefiting from, unanticipated events. ■

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BOARD OF DIRECTORS REPORT

President Thomas W. Jones (University of Arkansas) chaired the Board of Directors meeting that was held on Saturday, November 23, 2002, in San Diego, California. The following is a report of the actions taken by the Board and matters brought to its attention. The Executive Committee met on Friday, November 22, 2002. Its recommendations to the Board are included in the items reported below.

1. The minutes of the April 28, 2002 meeting of the Board of Directors were approved.
2. The audit report for FY 2001-2002 was accepted.
3. The financial statement for the period ended June 30, 2002, was approved.
4. The financial statement for the period ended October 28, 2002, was approved.
5. A revised article for *Decision Line* from the Editor of the *Decision Sciences Journal* was reviewed and accepted.
6. FY 2002-03 Midwest, Northeast, Southeast, Southwest and Western regional budgets were reviewed and accepted.
7. A proposal for the Institute's collaboration with the SAP 2003 Innovation Congress was reviewed and accepted.
8. Proposed changes to the Constitution and Bylaws of the Asia-Pacific Region were reviewed and approved.
9. A proposal for a membership management fee for APDSI was reviewed and accepted, effective through FY 2004.
10. A proposal for the Institute's 2007 Annual Meeting site in Phoenix, Arizona, was reviewed and accepted.
11. The following reports and information items were reviewed and accepted:
    a. 2002 Asia-Pacific and Midwest regional meetings
    b. Status of Marketing-related items
    c. Slate of nominees for the 2003 election of officers
    d. Schedules and locations of the 2003 Executive Committee and Board of Directors meetings
    e. Board representation at the 2003 annual regional meetings
    f. Report on the 2002 Annual Meeting (oral)
    g. Report on the 2003 Annual Meeting (oral)
    h. Notification of acceptance of the 2004 Annual Meeting Program Chair appointment
    i. Endorsement of IS 2002 ■