

November 2013

## The Global Competitive Challenge For EMBA Students

Thomas W. Sharkey

*The University of Toledo*, [thomas.sharkey@utoledo.edu](mailto:thomas.sharkey@utoledo.edu)

Don R. Beeman

*The University of Toledo*, [don.beeman@utoledo.edu](mailto:don.beeman@utoledo.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jee>

 Part of the [Business Commons](#), and the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sharkey, Thomas W. and Beeman, Don R. (2013) "The Global Competitive Challenge For EMBA Students," *Journal of Executive Education*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jee/vol4/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Executive Education by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu).

## **The Global Competitive Challenge for EMBA Students**

Thomas W. Sharkey, *The University of Toledo*  
Don R. Beeman, *The University of Toledo*

This article describes the birth and development of an innovative international business course called the Global Competitive Challenge. The paper highlights the process of developing the course and how the course is being updated to meet the requirements of current participants in an EMBA program.

The article describes the dynamic nature of the course, course objectives, and the various learning strategies employed. The course concept and many of the strategies used in the course run counter to the conventional wisdom of developing a course of this kind and, in fact, many have been developed as the needs of the participants were more fully understood. Each time the course has been offered new instructional materials have been added, replacing other materials.

The article also discusses how the course concept and strategies that are the basis of this course can be adapted to other EMBA courses. The learning journey is equally as important as the destination for the participants.

Finally, EMBA faculty members are urged to significantly differentiate their courses from other courses they have taught. The authors strongly endorse the notion that EMBA courses must be different in both content and delivery from other courses. This need to differentiate does not lend itself well to using prepackaged course materials, but rather, by its very nature, requires faculty to develop new approaches, exercises, and materials that facilitate learning for practicing executives.

This paper presents a detailed discussion of a unique global business course developed for the University of Toledo's EMBA program. In their 2003 article, Friga, Bettis, and Sullivan state that most MBA programs are in the early stages of responding to the demands of globalization (2003). If this is true, then the UT EMBA program was one of the earliest to respond to the demands of the global imperative. This program was designed in 1992 to have three foundations—global business, management of technology, and entrepreneurship—in addition to the common body of knowledge required of all MBA programs (Doll, Sharkey, and Beeman, 1996). In fact, the working title of the program during its development period was “The Global Management of Technology—EMBA.”

This article does not focus on the entire EMBA or even on the entire global business component of the program, but rather on one unique course that lays the foundation for the global business dimension of the program. This course is entitled the Global Competitive Challenge. The Challenge course is more than an introduction; it is essentially the focal lens for emphasizing the major forces that are reshaping the world of business.

### **The Global Launching Pad**

The Global Competitive Challenge course begins a sequence of global business courses and is anchored in the turbulent economic, political, and cultural trends that are shaping all business today. The sequence consists of the following courses:

- The Global Competitive Challenge,
- The Culture of Commerce,
- Foreign Business Practices, and
- The Global Competitive Response.

The final course, the Global Competitive Response, provides the logical and pedagogical conclusion to what was started in the Challenge course. This capstone course also includes an international trip. These four courses are linked to maximize planned overlap and minimize unplanned duplication.

### **Creating the Challenge Course**

From the beginning it was clear that the Challenge course needed to be conceptual. Since it was impossible to study the whole world, students needed to develop an attitude and a knowledge base that could be generalized to many different global settings. This would allow for the development and understanding of self-driven knowledge growth that is essential to any business person in this constantly changing environment.

This course had to have the following objectives:

- Foundations,
- Conceptual Understanding, and
- Learning how to learn.

This was definitely not going to be a “how to” skills course and, therefore, should not be taught using the traditional approach of lecturing and testing. The course was designed and developed in three stages and composed of three dimensions—overall objectives and philosophy, knowledge content, and the teaching or learning methods.

### **Course Objectives and Philosophy**

The philosophy that guided the development of this course was that the content was important for every person in the program regardless of background, career path, or personal philosophy, and students needed to buy into this quickly. This course had to be designed in such a manner that its importance would be obvious from day one. If many of the students felt that the course was not relevant for their careers, the entire global business dimension of the EMBA would be in jeopardy.

The first objective for this course was to introduce a highly diverse group of “executive students,” many of whom had never even traveled abroad, to the complexities of globalization. The participants in the program were a diverse group of students with backgrounds ranging from *Fortune* 100 manufacturers to small family-owned retailers and from medical doctors to research engineers. The students were intelligent but had very different levels of exposure to anything international much less to global business. Demographically, 73% of the students were male, and 24% were from various minority groups, but only 3% were international students. Over half of the students represented manufacturing and construction firms. (See Appendix 1 for a listing of industries.) Since a significant dimension of the challenge of global business is performing in a multicultural environment, this level of personal and organizational diversity was a positive dimension to be built upon and seemed to dictate a somewhat eclectic course design. A second objective was to justify the need for the course to the participants, many of whom could not imagine that they would ever participate in global business. We called this the objective of justified importance. To accomplish this objective, the course was heavily front end loaded with everything from political history to evolution of the contemporary global economy.

Another crucial objective for this course was to create functioning teams from a collection of individualists. One of the premises of many EMBA programs is reliance on team-based learning. The teams organized in the Challenge course would remain together for the entire program. Furthermore, it was important that

these teams become functioning, cohesive units early in the program. The teams had to bond quickly in order to handle the heavy work load associated with the weekend program since all class members continued to work full-time jobs.

### **Content**

The content challenge for the Challenge course was to provide the participants with differing views of history and economics at the conceptual level. For example, the economic debate between capitalism, socialism, and Marxism was presented. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Marxism was deemphasized. Similarly, we have stressed differences in political systems from democracy through autocracy. Whenever possible, videos or films were used to present this type of material. Selections have included *Commanding Heights*, *Globalization in Theory*, and *Globalization: Winners and Losers*. *Commanding Heights* is particularly useful as a teaching tool for presenting differences in economic theory because it vividly contrasts the evolution of the ideas of Keynes and Hayek during the twentieth century. This film illustrated Keynes's shift from being a strong proponent of free trade to an advocate of more government intervention; in contrast Hayek dabbled in socialism early on, but then moved to being arguably the most important proponent of market-based solutions. The impact of the ideas of these men and the influence of history upon them is critically important to understanding this second wave of globalization and the challenges it presents for firms today.

This course was also somewhat controversial in its content as it deemphasized academic research and made no effort to respect political correctness. It:

- challenged the trade practices of Japanese firms,
- argued against the mercantilist actions of the government of China, and
- identified the extreme dishonesty of the governments of Nigeria and Russia.

This "no holds barred" approach addressed such issues as dumping, pirating of intellectual property, manipulating exchange rates, and using prison labor to produce goods for export to the United States. This course also stated unabashedly that one of its objectives was to help American companies become more competitive in the globally interdependent world.

One of the keys to the course was to provide significant direct business content. This was provided largely through discussion with guest speakers. Since this course was offered in the first quarter of the program, it was critical that the professor be able to show specifically how businesses were affected both from a broad policy perspective and also from a specific perspective. For example, it was important to discuss international exchange rate determination using money supply, inflation, expectations, and interest rates, but it was also important to demonstrate the impact on individual transactions that firms were involved in

making. So it was important to participants to understand Purchasing Power Parity and at the same time have familiarity with letters of credit.

### **Pedagogy and Class Management**

Pedagogy created an even greater challenge than content in developing this course. Many have written about the need for administrative support when developing new programs due to organizational politics (Manuel, Shooshtari, Fleming, and Wallowork, 2001). The same holds true for the creation of pedagogically different courses. This course was particularly controversial since it did not look like most other college of business courses. This course was made to reflect the constantly changing environment of global business. Furthermore, this course needed to be created with pedagogy appropriate for Continuous Redesign. The course needed to mirror the continuously changing global environment. As a result, the pedagogy of this course largely rejected the common MBA approach of lectures coupled with cases or simulations.

The pedagogy adopted could be called immediate immersion. In this approach students were thrown directly into the complexities of the real world of global business. From the moment that they walked through the door on day one they were immersed in the complexities of the real world without a knowledge or theory foundation. Global complexities and the associated business challenges were presented in a manner that was fast paced and engaging, but with no phasing-in. In a sense the students were “tossed into the center of a global pool.”

The Global Competitive Challenge course was unlike anything most people had seen in an MBA class in content, style, and intensity. In the first two weeks students went from a 1960s black and white documentary on the Battle of the Bulge and classic books like Thurow's *The Future of Capitalism* to contemporary challenges to traditional capitalism. Within two weeks the table was set for the global business courses and in fact the entire EMBA. Anyone who came into this class expecting lists of five forms of counter-trade or a discussion of wheat and wool trade in the simplified world of absolute advantage was very surprised.

Students not only needed to learn that global business was important to everyone but also to develop a broad and deep knowledge of the implications of global business. This was accomplished in a variety of ways. First the assignment activities were difficult and diverse. Assignments included book reports, regional updates, negotiation exercises, presentations, role-playing, and application focused country/industry papers. This course was and is the quintessential example of classroom multitasking. Each class session was dynamic and eclectic. The class spent no more than thirty minutes on any one form of leaning—thus the nature of classroom activities would shift about seven or eight times during each of the four-hour class sessions.

### **Country / Industry Projects**

An example of how the diverse assignments can create a broad and deep, self-learning environment can be seen in the country/industry paper assignment. For this assignment, each student or student group researches:

- an industry,
- a country or region, and
- the industry in the country.

The paper requires participants to focus their attention on issues of culture, competitive rivalry, and business opportunity as early as possible in the program. The intention was for students to continue the research from the country/industry paper throughout the entire EMBA program.

This paper was to be the first step for students in being able to target the EMBA program toward their own personal career goals and objectives. This included producing a document that was relevant to the employer, who, in many cases, was paying for the program. Thus, students could select from a wide array of choices for their paper, such as commercial banking in Turkey or automotive parts manufacturing in Poland. The student could select any country except the United States; even foreign students could not pick the United States. Furthermore, foreign nationals were not allowed to select their home countries. In the paper students were required to provide an in-depth analysis of a selected industry in a particular country. It was expected that each student would utilize public record information. This paper included the following topic sections:

1. An introductory overview of an industry written for someone who does not work in the industry, including a brief discussion of the competitive dynamics of the selected industry from a global perspective.
2. An in-depth analysis of the selected country.
3. An in-depth analysis of the selected industry in the selected country, including an assessment of the key success factors for that industry in the selected country.

### **Corporate Responses To Globalization**

Another aspect of the Challenge course involved getting the participants to look at global competition from the individual firm perspective. Analysis was done in a variety of ways, including Porter's Five Forces Model. The emphasis on external competition allowed participants to see the inroads certain firms were making in key global markets. Early in the program, the challenge from Japanese companies was important. As a result, there was an emphasis on understanding

this challenge and the reasons, both at the national policy level and at the firm level, that firms like Toyota and Honda were gaining market share. It was also important to describe the structural rigidities in the Japanese market that made it difficult for American firms to succeed there. The response of the American firm was to initiate a series of rounds of cost cutting, top management team change, and the movement of some of its production off-shore. At present, the challenge from Japan is much less important, but those from other developing countries like China and India are becoming increasingly challenging for American business.

### **Participant Involvement**

The course was designed to facilitate learning while providing opportunities for participants to teach themselves. As in most classes, for real learning to take place, the student needs to be an active participant in the learning process. One of the chief vehicles for learning was discussion. The students were there to learn, but they clearly wanted to be involved, bringing their knowledge and experiences to bear. In some cases, students were more knowledgeable about an industry or company specific topics than were the professors. It was also important that a variety of points of view be presented and that views could be challenged by professors as well as other participants.

Another vehicle for learning was assigning the participants into groups to explore readings, projects, and cases. This deliberate strategy forced the participants to discuss the important issues and in the process discover where they stood as individuals and where they would choose to stand as a group. Book reports were used to allow the students to come into contact with the underlying theory. For example, the students read Porter's works to create an understanding of competitive strategy from the perspective of both corporations and nations. Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* and Lester Thurow's *Future of Capitalism* were read, presented, and critiqued by students to deal with issues such as government's role in economics as well as national competition, and Garreau's *The Nine Nations of North America* provided a forum for seeing the United States as a multicultural region not unlike Europe.

Later the list changed to include Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, Stiglitz's *Globalization and its Discontents*, and Friedman's *Lexus and the Olive Tree*. Currently, a more practitioner-oriented book, *Building an Import/Export Business*, is being used to give students a practical look at how international trade is carried out. The readings were varied in terms of rigor, practicality, and political/economic positions. The teams were expected to develop written summaries of each work for class members, rigorously critique the authors' works, make presentations, and discuss the relevance of the work for business and international institutions. The presentations were also graded against the instructors' First Commandment of Presentations—Thou Shalt Not Be Boring.



The Global Environmental Reports were also used to stimulate active student participation. Each group was assigned a world region—European Union and Canada; Latin America, Africa and the Middle East; Russia and Eastern Europe; or China, Japan, Korea and Southern Asia. Each group was expected to provide a detailed update to the class about the region and, more specifically the important trends and challenges for business in the region. For example, the Asian Financial Crisis was a critically important event, which, along with the role of the IMF, was explored during the Asian reports.

Various cases were used in the course, but with its publication, *Managing the Global Corporation* (de la Torre, Doz, and Devinney 2001) became the primary source of cases. The most impressive and important feature of this case book for this type of class is that most of the cases concern foreign-based firms rather than American firms. The cases included start-ups and new product introductions into foreign markets. The cases provide a good introduction to globalization and allow for exploration of strategic topics involving markets, products, and competition. An increasingly important aspect of the presentations was the update of the cases. Participants were challenged to use current sources to discover the strategies the companies in the assigned cases were now pursuing. They were then required, based on their analysis, to suggest future strategic directions for the companies.

### **Grading and Assessment**

The participant grades were based on both group and individual work. The country/industry paper was done individually, while the group book report, the regional report, and cases were completed and presented as a group. Group grading provides challenges, but because of the nature of the participants, social loafing was kept to a minimum.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The process of developing curricula and individual courses can be challenging and rewarding. The sophistication of publishers means that course direction and supplementary material are prepackaged in an almost assembly line fashion. The notion that “you can have a Model T in any color as long as it is black” comes to mind. Not surprisingly, when something is gained something is lost. What is lost is the individual faculty member’s struggle to come up with new ways of assisting students in learning. Innovation and creativity may also be reduced. This may lead to a lack of commitment and excitement about the material on the part of faculty and students. Also lost are those temporary setbacks in course development that lead to new initiatives.

From the standpoint of curriculum development and maintenance, as indicated by Kashlak, Jones, and Cotner (1999) “the international business experience

must be viewed as an integral part of the total EMBA program.” However, it is important to understand that even the best ideas may be defeated for lack of support. Understanding the curriculum development process and the groups that must be satisfied is as important as the concept itself. Finally, today’s victory, though hard won, may be undermined in time.

**Appendix 1. Number of Participants by Industry**

<b>Industry</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Banking	2
Broadcasting	1
Chemical	2
Construction	3
Consulting	3
Electronics	1
Engineering	1
Finance	2
Food	10
Government	2
Health Care	31
Higher Education	1
Export/Import	1
Law and Insurance	4
Manufacturing - Automotive	33
Manufacturing - Glass	11
Manufacturing - Steel	6
Manufacturing - other	49
Military	2
Petroleum	7
Recycling	5
Retail	2
Service	16
Technology	7
Utilities	2
Other	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>206</b>

**References**

- de la Torre, J., Doz, Y., & Devinney, T. (2001). *Managing the Global Corporation*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Doll, W., Sharkey, T. W., & Beeman, D. R. (1996). Reengineering the MBA for Small and Mid-Size Firms: A Business-Driven Approach. *The Mid-American Journal of Business*, 11(2): 19–23.
- Friga, P. N., Bettis, R. A., & Sullivan, R. S. (2003). Changes in Graduate Management Education and New Business School Strategies for the 21st Century. *Academy of Management Learning and Education* 2(3):233–249.
- Kashlak, R., Jones, R., & Cotner, J. (1999). Strategically Rethinking the Executive MBA International Business Experience. *Journal of Teaching in International Business* 10(3/4):11.
- Manuel, T., Shooshtari, N., Fleming, M., & Wallowork, S. (2001). Internationalization of the Business Curriculum at U.S. Colleges and Universities. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 12(3).
- Waldron, D. G. (2000). International Management. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 12(1): 79–91.