

SEWA Empowers Women, Provides Livelihood to Community Abroad

By [Roxanne Ray](#)

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A meeting between IBUS 579 students Afton Walsh and Joe Tun, and 14 field supervisors, skilled workers, and co-op members of Rachaita, December 2012. • **Courtesy Photo**

University of Washington MBA and MPA students are making connections with women in India, sharing skills with the hope of advancement for all.

As part of the UW Foster School of Business MBA program, the Global Consulting Project makes it possible for students enrolled in the UW's International Business 579 course to travel to India to work on strategy projects developed in cooperation with the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA).

The International Business 579 course is taught by program director Cate Goethals, who serves as lecturer within the Foster School and Academic Director of the Global Business Forum. Goethals has led six previous student trips to India. Goethals began offering the course in 2011 to address both the career interests of students and the proposal by SEWA that UW students contribute their knowledge and efforts to the benefit of women in India.

"Several factors converged" Goethals explained "The deans wanted to give

students more opportunities to get hands-on experience in other countries. Many of the students are looking to use their MBA skills to make the world a better place.”

This particular course was developed out of a sense that student travel overseas lacked reciprocity, which bothered Goethals.

“All these women all over India, corporate and village, rich and poor, were generously meeting with us, sharing their time and their insights and effectively changing my students’ lives,” Goethals said. “But what were we doing for them?”

Then an idea was presented by SEWA.

“The leader of one group we visited in 2010, the incredible Self-Employed Women’s Association, an organization representing 1.5 million poor female entrepreneurs, asked one of my groups, ‘What can we do together?’” Goethals said. “And so the seed was planted.”

After internal approval at UW, Goethals designed the course and began to recruit the first group of students, which wasn’t difficult.

“It never fails to inspire American students to see how much a grassroots village leader can do with so little,” Goethals said, “and how in India, a country where so many girl children are unwanted and brides are still burned in some areas, women run the banking industry, unlike anywhere else in the world and certainly unlike the U.S.”

Students must present certain qualifications to be selected for the course.

“Students must be graduate students—MBAs or, for the first time this year, MPAs from the Evans School of Public Affairs,” Goethals says. “They must have at least one year of coursework completed, which means they have had at minimum their core business classes, and they must write an essay about why they’re applying and why they will succeed.”

Individual qualities of the students rank highly in Goethals’s selection process.

“I consider their essays and personal interviews the most important part of the process—not everyone takes to this kind of challenge in a culture utterly unlike our own,” Goethals said. “But as you can imagine, the students who apply to participate in this kind of program tend to be pretty wonderful.”

In 2011, 16 students enrolled and worked on four projects. In 2012, the course expanded to 19 students and five projects, and this year, 20 students will tackle six projects.

Once the students are enrolled, work begins at a fast pace.

“We spend two weeks with SEWA each December, during our winter break, madly scoping our projects and gathering information,” Goethals said, “with the students learning so much about so many things, business strategy and consulting to be sure, but also culture and working in limited resource settings.”

The variety of projects is wide.

“One group had to design a business plan for a restaurant where they cook with cow dung,” Goethals said. “Another had to develop a cash flow strategy for an all-female construction company (think hard hats over gorgeous saris) that keeps its books in handwritten ledgers.”

After the traveling is finished, the hard work starts.

“We come back to Seattle for a class Winter quarter,” Goethals said. “The students work with mentors to complete their recommendations, which are delivered via videoconference to SEWA clients in India in March.”

The experience has been a positive one for many of the students involved.

“Getting to be on the ground with people who are looking for opportunities to improve their lives through the SEWA system was inspiring and enlightening,” said Peter True, a student who completed the course. “To witness the real-world workings of an organization like SEWA change lives through providing job opportunities beyond day laborer positions was really amazing.”

After the students present their ideas to SEWA, next comes implementation and documentation.

“I’ve been told over and over again what a difference the students’ hard work and high-level skills make,” Goethals said. “For example, one team in 2011 created a whole marketing strategy and brand called SABAH for collectives of handicrafters throughout South Asia. Last year I saw the work of those handicrafters sold in a store in Ahmedabad with the branding developed by the students.”

Other IRIIS student proposals have been successful as well, Goethals explained.

“Another group developed a complex financial strategy that was presented to a large Indian bank as part of a successful loan application—for a major pool of money to be used as a microfinance fund to help poor villagers without electricity to buy clean-energy cookstoves and solar lanterns,” Goethals said.

Because of the potential for real-world success, students reported taking this course more seriously.

“I have done four ‘consulting’ projects while at Foster and had an internship in consulting this summer,” says Haid Garrett, another student. “This experience has felt the most real and felt like it had the most consequences. Because there is the chance to affect lives through our recommendations I wanted to work a little harder, make sure my team’s recommendation penciled out and that we were thorough in our research. It was nice to have the feeling that our work had consequence.”

Documentation, however, has been difficult, because students typically graduate from UW shortly after completing the course.

“I’d like to expand the program, so this year we have a student team that is dedicated to measuring the impact of all the previous projects,” Goethals said. “We want to document the difference we’re making.”

Proven successes may also help inspire local Seattle-area businesses and community members to become involved in supporting the students’ efforts.

“The students are paying out of their own pockets to fly to India and work,” Goethals said. “The metrics will help me find funding to open this opportunity to students who can’t now find the money to come.”

Goethals said she welcomes community and individual involvement of all kinds, and suggests that the variety of students enrolled could make participation a rewarding prospect for many in the local Puget Sound area.

“I’ve had a ship captain, a finance guy with his nose constantly in the global financial pages, several people from India who are getting their MBA in the U.S. but want to do something for their country, and a handful who have used it to help them find jobs at large local international development organizations,” Goethals said. “There has been an insurance executive, a Starbucks marketer, an Amazon manager, an education director, Microsoft people. There was a pharmaceutical executive from Japan. You name it.”

The students' goals vary just as widely as their backgrounds.

"Some want to challenge their MBA skills, some want to make a real impact on poverty, others just want to meet locals and have the kind of experience in India that they could never have on their own," Goethals said. "Often it's all of the above."

As student Kris Seidell phrased it: "Our work with SEWA was an ideal opportunity to move beyond the level of tourist and gain knowledge that can only come from working with someone in another country on a problem that they have identified and in their working environment."

Others reported that the Global Consulting Project led to a shift in perspective.

"This was a wonderful opportunity for me to just really think on behalf of the client," said student Kara Gibson. "It will help me remember to put clients first."

According to Goethals, there may be a role for everyone in the wider community.

"In the existing program, students need mentors—a pool of professionals to help them solve complex problems—and sponsors," Goethals said. "I'd love to find ways for students of more limited means to participate."

Goethals said she also wants to expand the Global Consulting Project beyond just the International Business 579 course.

"I'm looking for a partner organization to develop a similar program for older professionals," Goethals said. "I'd like to run a pilot with one or two small groups in the next year."

Goethals's inspiration comes from those who may benefit most from such partnerships.

"SEWA is an organization about empowering women and providing them with livelihood," Goethals said. "I'd love to work with anyone who shares those goals, and who wants to make the world a better place."

Program director Cate Goethals can be reached at categ@uw.edu.