

Spanish-U.S. Master's Degree Will Be Steeped in Liberal Arts

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LONDON — Can listening to [Beethoven](#) make you a better boss? Is a business more likely to survive in the marketplace if its manager has a familiarity with the works of [Charles Darwin](#)? David Bach thinks it just might. Mr. Bach, the dean of programs at the IE Business School, in Madrid, is an architect of a pioneering new collaboration between IE and Brown University that is offering a liberal arts and management executive M.B.A.

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“Certainly managers need technical skills,” said Mr. Bach, who worked for many years at the consulting firm McKinsey and teaches courses on strategy and the intersection between business and government. “But that’s just not going to be enough if they want to be leading corporations in the future.”

Instead, students will be offered a curriculum in which two-thirds of the courses will cover the core M.B.A. material, while a third will be devoted to areas “beyond business” taught by faculty from Brown, which is in Providence, Rhode Island.

A course on health, ethics and society will encourage students — many of whom will be mid-career executives — to use the tools of social and cultural anthropology to understand how societies allocate resources and calculate risks. Another module on culture, politics and the arts involves a case study of the West-East Divan Orchestra, an ensemble founded by the conductor [Daniel Barenboim](#) and the writer [Edward Said](#) where young Arab and Jewish musicians perform together, allowing students to combine “cultural, political, and aesthetic analysis with an engagement with the business world of the arts.”

In Europe, where professional schools tend to stay sharply focused on vocational training, the liberal arts have long been the preserve of specialists. Even in the United States, where undergraduate education often includes a liberal arts component, most professional schools have long adopted a vocational approach. As far back as 1959 two studies by the [Ford Foundation](#) and the Carnegie Foundation complained that business education was too narrow.

Today, particularly in countries struggling with shrinking budgets, the liberal arts are often viewed as a luxury. Britain recently moved to eliminate government financing for university courses in literature, history, philosophy, the arts, and foreign languages deemed not “strategically important.”

But such moves run counter to a growing awareness that in a world of rapid change and contending cultures, the breadth and flexibility of mind fostered by the liberal arts may offer a unique competitive advantage.

Colin Mayer, dean of the Said Business School at the University of Oxford, said that giving students “a broad understanding of topics that go beyond management studies” was already an important part of his school’s approach.

“The social aspects of business — the way it impacts on society as a whole — is crucial to our approach,” he said in an interview.

The Said’s executive education program already offers lectures from sociologists, scientists, philosophers and historians, he said, adding, “This is an element that people at a certain level of organization very much appreciate.”

Roger Lister, a professor at the Salford Business School, in Salford, England, points out that the Austrian dramatist [Arthur Schnitzler](#) and [Gustave Flaubert](#), the author of *Madame Bovary*, were both doctors.

In an essay in the journal *Times Higher Education* in November, Mr. Lister writes that “if the government wishes to avoid generating a work force with unmarketable skills, insufficiently able to innovate and communicate in an informed global society, it must take on board the value of the arts and humanities in vocational studies.”

The study of literature, he argues, is too important to be left to English departments.

“Aspiring accountants, financiers or M.B.A.’s who are exposed to [Arthur Miller](#)’s ‘Death of a Salesman’ (1949) will be better equipped to understand employees,” Mr. Lister wrote.

In the United States, there may be no more passionate advocate of the importance of liberal arts than Martha Nussbaum. She is a philosopher who teaches at the [University of Chicago](#) Law School, the University of Chicago Divinity School and the university’s philosophy department. Her book “Cultivating Humanity” offered a defense of traditional humanism and multiculturalism.

“Universities are places where you come not just for a career but to become an active citizen,” she said in an interview. “Courses that teach you how to analyze, how to think

creatively — how to expand your imagination — should be part of any professional education.”

According to Ms. Nussbaum, decades of narrowing and professionalism have taken their toll on American public life.

“Our political culture is full of bogus appeals to history,” she said. “Judges like to pretend everything is written in the law. But a lot of good judging involves imagining other cultures, other points of view: what it’s like to be a woman, for example.”

Among her own favorite tools for stretching student imaginations are Plato’s dialogues.

“They’re so important in teaching the skills of analysis and argument and critical thinking,” Ms. Nussbaum said. “Plato was the most brilliant dramatizer of the life of an argument there has ever been.”

Might there be a clash of cultures between the entrepreneurial values of IE and Brown’s approach to freewheeling intellectual inquiry?

“There is some trepidation,” said Karen Sibley, Brown’s dean of continuing education. But she pointed out that the university has long had an eight-year “program in liberal medical education, designed to free students from the tyranny of pre-med.”

Unlike that program, which is taught entirely on the Providence campus, the new liberal arts M.B.A. will be taught partly online and in five face-to-face sessions — three in Providence and two in Madrid — spread out over 15 months.

“When we had a chance to do liberal education differently, we jumped at it,” said Ms. Sibley. “We believe that the habits of mind that a liberal education produces are particularly valuable for all sorts of professional pursuits.”

Among those cheering the new venture from the sidelines will be Roger Martin, dean of the Rotman School of Management, at the University of Toronto. Although he heads one of IE’s competitors, Mr. Martin has long been an advocate of bringing liberal arts values into the business school classroom and the corporate boardroom. He is also a vocal critic of the current vogue among educational policy makers to emphasize science, technology, engineering and medicine — the so-called STEM subjects — at the expense of the humanities.

“I have a real worry about STEM-obsessed policies,” Mr. Martin said. “There is a view that if we don’t copy what India and China are doing, they’ll overrun us. We will look back on this as the era where we in the West got scared and flinched.”

For Mr. Martin, a more sophisticated understanding of the underlying issues is no luxury. “The biggest problem in the business world is the limits of representation — for example, hedge fund managers who think their equations describe the economy,” he said.

It was precisely the desire to tackle such questions that led Mr. Bach, who grew up in Germany, to enroll as an undergraduate at [Yale](#). “In the German system, the emphasis is on acquiring particular skills,” he said. “I ended up going to the U.S. to study because I wanted a liberal education.”

The first students for the Brown-IE liberal arts M.B.A. are scheduled to arrive in March. Only 5 percent will come from [Spain](#), with nearly half coming from the United States. Mr. Bach acknowledges that the program “may not be for everyone.”

“I don’t want to sound elitist, because I don’t think the liberal arts ought to be limited to elite institutions,” he said. “But its hard to justify the investment we are asking people to make in their education if all you’re giving them are the same professional skills they can get at every other place.”

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