



WILLIAM DAVIDSON INSTITUTE
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN



Connecting Students Across **Four Countries**

**Fostering Cross-Cultural
Understanding while
Creating Lasting Impact**



The program has granted me something beyond connecting with people from different cultures: the knowledge of how people perceive their own culture and its influence. The knowledge I gained is invaluable, as it even encompasses information I learned about myself – pushing me to go beyond my comfort zone and challenge my preconceptions."

RAMI SULEIMAN, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT



A virtual exchange offers instructors a mindful approach to cross-cultural teaching as it can be designed to ensure that culture is not simply a passive backdrop to student development as it is with study abroad programs, but instead is analyzed through various instructional and assessment strategies and then adopted through an action (behavioral change). It is often assumed that students who study abroad will 'naturally' come to understand and appreciate cultural differences, but that is not always the case. A virtual exchange however provides instructors with a more 'controlled', almost laboratory, environment in which cultural competence can be first understood and appreciated mindfully and then adopted behaviorally."

PROFESSOR MARINA APAYDIN, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

A student looks on during a B&C class.

Building Connections

Business & Culture is a virtual exchange program convening students from Egypt, Lebanon, Libya and the United States (U.S.) to learn how to do business across cultures. The program is supported by the Stevens Initiative and implemented by the William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan (WDI).

Virtual exchanges connect students across countries to learn together and collaborate on projects using technology. They afford students a convenient opportunity to get to know people from other cultures.

Launched in 2020, Business & Culture equips students to communicate, problem-solve and collaborate in a global team environment. Classrooms are connected across countries, with professors from each country leading the students through interactive sessions throughout the semester. Students work in cross-cultural teams to complete assignments, applying their knowledge and building skills in using virtual technologies.

WDI has a long history of forging international connections that foster greater social and economic good in low- and middle-income countries. Virtual exchanges are one of the ways we do this through our Global Virtual Learning Center.

In this report, we demonstrate the impact this virtual exchange program has had on young people from the U.S., and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region by sharing first-hand student accounts and showcasing the rich data derived from our impact assessment of the program. The report covers the three semesters of the program offered to-date, spanning January 2020 to April 2021.

We are pleased to share our experiences, as we believe virtual exchange offers unique benefits to students and universities alike. Such programs can offer a competitive advantage for a university, distinguishing it as tech savvy and on the cutting edge. And, as universities seek to internationalize their offerings in an era of globalization, virtual exchange is a valuable addition. Virtual exchange offers students an opportunity to connect with peers across borders, adding a spark to their educational journey.



Participants (totaling 294) are undergraduate students from the University of Michigan (U-M), American University of Beirut (AUB), and the American University of Cairo (AUC). They are joined by students from various universities throughout Benghazi, Libya brought together by Benghazi Youth for Technology and Entrepreneurship (BYTE).

In Their Own Words



“

This experience taught me how people of different cultures work. I became more aware of my own culture, my own internal biases, and it challenged me to think differently about how I do things.”

JANAVI KRISHNAN, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN



“

When I first registered for the program, I believed I was competent and that I already knew how to deal with cross-cultural situations. Yet the more I progressed through it, the more I was proved wrong. I am leaving the program as a student who is eager to learn and I cannot wait to put into practice all the knowledge I have acquired throughout this experience.”

KAİ-BJÖRN KLOSE, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT



“

This program taught me that despite globalization, perhaps even because of globalization, culture still matters and that managers and business leaders underestimate the impact of culture in business in strategy, marketing, negotiating, and consumption.”

KARMA KARIRA, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN



“

This program emphasized how to understand multinational businesses from different countries, how to have a good awareness if you are running a business in a foreign country well, and how to look at the market in more than one way.”

KAREEM BOKER, BYTE LIBYA



“

The most useful component was the international consulting project. Our project team had four very intelligent people from four countries. The dynamics of the team and the conversations both academic and personal added a lot to the overall positive experience.”

GEORGE ANGLY, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO

Insights

The program goal was to build cross-cultural bridges between future generations in the U.S. and MENA and aimed to build the following skills:

-  **Cross-Cultural Communication**
-  **Cross-Cultural Collaboration**
-  **Cross-Cultural Problem Solving**
-  **Cultural Intelligence**
-  **Knowledge On Culture**
-  **Perspective Taking**
-  **Empathy**



How did we measure this?

WDI's Performance Measurement and Improvement and Education teams co-developed and co-implemented a rigorous monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) plan¹ to measure the impact of the program on enrolled students and conduct *adaptive management*². We administered an electronic survey to students at the start and end of the semester³.

We collected quantitative and qualitative data on key constructs such as cross-cultural communication, collaboration, and problem-solving, as well as on empathy, perspective-taking, cultural intelligence⁴ and knowledge of the differing cultures. These constructs were selected based on requirements by the Stevens Initiative and RTI International – the independent evaluator for the public-private partnership which encompasses the Business and Culture program – and on the program's theory of change.

- ¹ Theory of Change is a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context (Theory-ofChange.org, 2021).
- ² An intentional approach to making decisions and adjustments in response to new information and changes in context (USAID, 2018).
- ³ We received IRB exemption approvals to conduct this research.
- ⁴ Cultural intelligence or cultural quotient is the ability to relate and work effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds (Cultural Intelligence Center, 2020).



64%
of students in
the program self-
identify as women

36%
of students in
the program self-
identify as men

90%
of students "strongly
agreed" or "agreed"
with recommending
the Business & Culture
program⁵ to their
fellow students.

What are the results?

Across the three semesters, we found statistically significant improvements in students' reported scores on empathy, cross-cultural communication skills, cultural quotients and knowledge on culture^{6,7}.

U-M students improved their cultural intelligence and knowledge of the MENA region much more than MENA students did about the U.S. This finding can be plausibly explained by the following: MENA students started the program more aware of U.S. culture from watching Hollywood movies and listening to American music. By contrast, students in the U.S. are largely unaware of the culture and life in the MENA region, as they have limited interactions with students from that region and lack exposure to Arabic television, movies, music and culture. Overall, cultural quotient and knowledge of culture of the U.S. and MENA regions were the most significant impacts of the program.

Please note that the survey did not ask the students to explain why they answered a close-ended quantitative question in a particular way. Other plausible reasons for our findings include: in Winter/Spring 2020, at the onset of the pandemic, some students voiced concerns over the reduced interaction with instructors and other students in a fully virtual environment. In the Winter/Spring 2021 semester, as we marked the first anniversary of the pandemic, several students shared through the survey's open-ended questions that they were struggling to maintain attention and engagement via remote learning. These students also shared how poor internet connectivity (outside of the institutional classroom setting) negatively impacted their learning.

⁵ We asked students if they would recommend the program on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

⁶ These insights are from an ongoing impact assessment and includes enrolled students quantitative survey data from the first three semesters only. The results are based on Cohen's d effect sizes calculated based on methods by Hedges, Larry V., and Ingram Olkin, 2014 and Cohen, J, 1988. Cohen's d are considered a measure of the substantive significance of an effect. We did not ask students why they answered in the manner they did and hence there may be selection bias i.e., enrolled students could be more motivated than those who did not participate in the program.

⁷ Statistical significance is a measure of whether the effect differs from what we might observe by chance in the data.



Connecting with other students from various cultures, inside and outside of the classroom, adds so much to students' exposure and learning enhancement. Now more than ever, with the challenges of the pandemic and the advancement of technology, the benefits of virtual exchange programs are intensifying!"

PROFESSOR MAHA MOURAD, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO



Are the impacts sustainable?

We measured the sustainability impacts of the program through interviews with seven alumni (students who completed the program in Winter and Fall 2020) in April 2021, representing all four countries. We aimed to understand their continued use of intercultural skills and knowledge taught in the B&C program at their workplace or in other university classes, and with friends and family. And, most importantly, we aimed to learn if the program had changed students intrinsically, with regard to their biases and assumptions about people from different cultures and backgrounds.

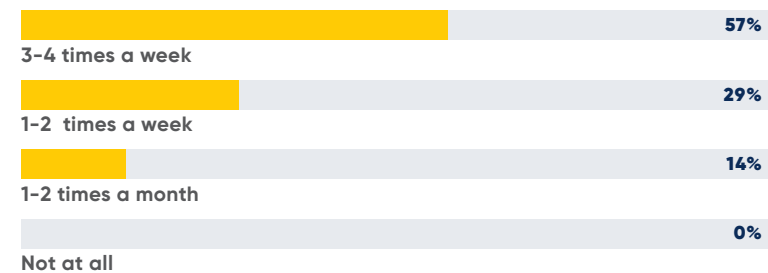
More than half the students interviewed shared that they used the skills and knowledge taught in the B&C program **three to four times a week**. All students noted they used the skills in their workplace or university. Even more notable, all students discussed how the program had helped them become more empathetic, perceptive and less self-absorbed. They also shared examples of how they continued to use the specific constructs taught in the program in their daily lives.



For many students, study abroad remains a dream. Indeed, less than 10 percent of all undergraduate students in the USA spend any time during their degrees studying abroad. The number is even smaller in many other countries, where the cost of studying abroad is prohibitive for most students. Virtual exchange offers a very affordable and scalable alternative."

**PROFESSOR JOHN BRANCH,
ROSS SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN**

FREQUENCY OF USE OF SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE TAUGHT IN THE PROGRAM



KEY CONSTRUCTS TAUGHT IN THE PROGRAM AND THE PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO CONTINUE TO USE THESE SKILLS



How was the program strengthened in real-time?

A key goal of the measurement strategy was to identify and use the past semester results to strengthen the program in future semesters. In this way, the program team engaged in evidence-based decision making to support the program's adaptive management.

Key programmatic adaptations made to the Fall 2020 semester, based on students' feedback from Winter/Spring 2020:

- For more engagement with their peers, we placed them in their intercultural teams

at the start of the semester versus near the end, and implemented the use of new technologies such as Padlet.

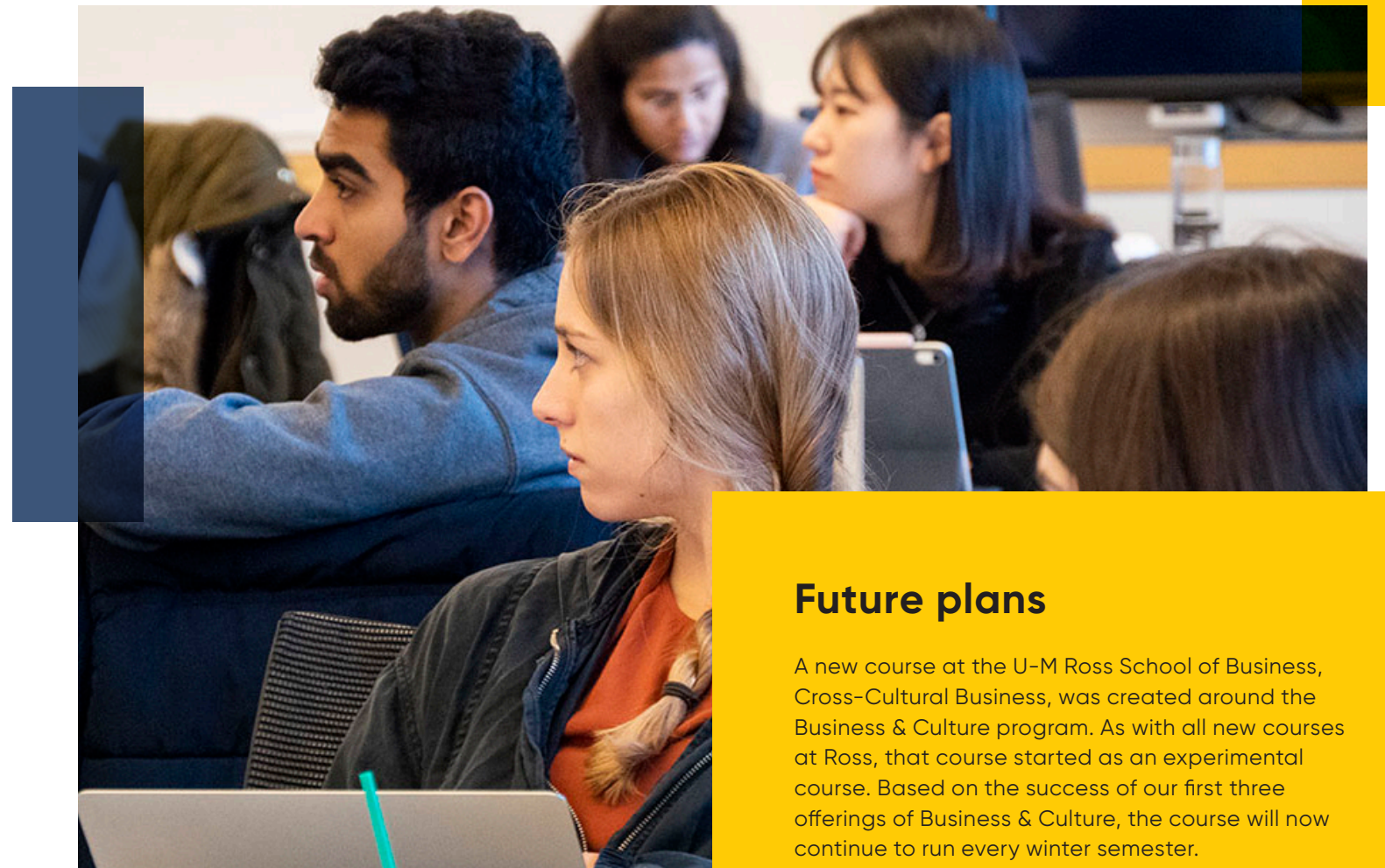
- For more engaging pre-reads, instructors updated readings and assignments to closely align with program goals.

Key programmatic adaptations made to the Winter/Spring 2021 semester, based on students' feedback from Fall 2020:

- For more engagement with their peers outside

their groups, we included breakout rooms in Zoom throughout the semester.

- We used interactive polls to further engage students during online lectures.
- For more engagement with the instructors, we organised and invited students to informal virtual coffee hours with instructors.



Future plans

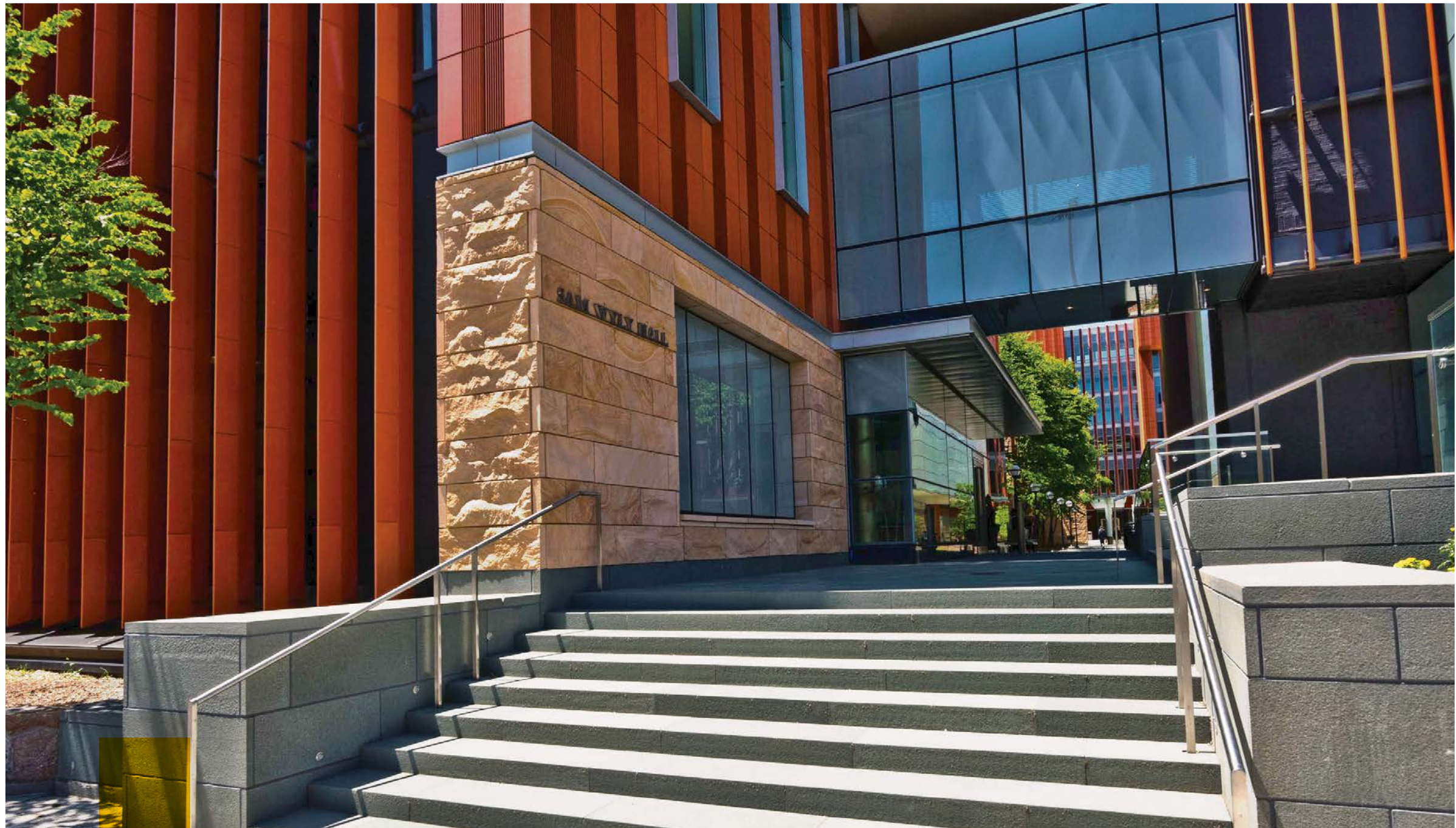
A new course at the U-M Ross School of Business, Cross-Cultural Business, was created around the Business & Culture program. As with all new courses at Ross, that course started as an experimental course. Based on the success of our first three offerings of Business & Culture, the course will now continue to run every winter semester.

About WDI

At WDI, we serve both profit-seeking and non-profit firms by applying business skills in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). We do this by conducting research and working with local partners to develop business models for LMICs and by transferring business knowledge to decision makers in LMICs. WDI works with organizations focused on education, energy, finance and healthcare. We also offer management education programs and measurement and evaluation services.

Our education team designs business and management training, adapting global best practices for learners—wherever they live and work. Drawing on the scholarship of a premiere research university, we collaborate with international educators to bring innovative curricula to classrooms—in-person and virtually. Since our founding in 1992, we've trained over 24,000 participants from multinational companies, small and medium-sized enterprises, universities and non-profit organizations in LMICs around the world—providing the tools for commercial success.

Learn more about our training capabilities for business professionals, entrepreneurs, NGO leaders and virtual learners.



About the Stevens Initiative

Business & Culture: A Virtual Practicum program is supported by the **Stevens Initiative**, which is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, with funding provided by the U.S. Government, and is administered by the Aspen Institute. The Stevens Initiative is also supported by the Bezos Family Foundation and the governments of Morocco and the United Arab Emirates.





OUR MISSION

" To equip economic decision-makers in... emerging countries with the tools of commercial success."

William Davidson, 1992