All the world's a classroom for executive MBA students

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Indre Petrukaitiene, center, an executive MBA student from the Baltic Management Institute in Vilnius, Lithuania, works on a group project with teammates during a breakout session on Wednesday, Jan. 25. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

What’s the best way to learn how to do business internationally? For about 100 executive MBA students from around the world, the answer is to spend a week together.

International Intensive Week is an annual event hosted by the A. B. Freeman School of Business that brings students in Freeman’s New Orleans and Houston EMBA programs together with executive students from partner institutions around the world.

This year’s program, which took place Jan. 21-26, drew students from China, Colombia, France, Germany, Italy and Lithuania, who shared a classroom with their American peers and worked together on projects as part of multinational teams.

Other business schools have courses that bring international students together in the classroom, but Freeman’s program is unique in that the focus isn’t on theory.

“The students spend a week together interacting and learning about each other’s cultures,” said Ira Solomon, dean of the Freeman School. “They emerge with a greater understanding of cross-cultural communication as well as a network of colleagues from all over the world, an invaluable asset in today’s increasingly international business environment.”

Ahmed Ghorbal, a French citizen who runs a consulting firm in Paris, had never visited the United States and had limited experience with Americans.

“When I started working with [Americans], I discovered how goal-oriented and process-oriented they are and I got lot of ideas from them,” Ghorbal said. “In Europe, it’s a little bit different. We like to talk a lot. The meetings are three hours and never get to the point.”

While much of the interaction took place in the classrooms, the students also found time to take a swamp tour, attend a reception at Freeman School Dean Ira Solomon’s house and even visit Frenchmen Street to take in some live music, a trip that Houston EMBA student Thomas Desouza says helped drive home the program’s message.

“Once the music started and everyone started dancing,” Desouza laughed, “there was a very common language.”