One early summer day in Ithaca, five professionals from Western Canada sit in a circle conducting a getting-to-know-you exercise. Each takes a turn in the center, expounding on the theme, “Who I am, why I’m here and what makes me tick.”

It’s clear they’re a diverse group. With jobs in operations, human resources, finance, and supply chain, they work for corporations that make paper, generate power, develop pharmaceuticals, drill for oil and gas, and entertain skiers on vacation. Some are quiet, others voluble. Some love hard data, others prefer a qualitative approach.

From this day on, though, Raj Atwal, Diana Cochran, Sukhi Jagpal, Cynthia Lee, and Valerie Papin will function as a team. They’ll make up one of 19 tightly knit groups from the U.S. and Canada that form the Class of 2011 of the Cornell-Queens Executive MBA (CQEMBA) program. From June 2009 through January 2011, these five students will work through nearly every phase of their graduate studies in tandem.
Members of this new Vancouver team have enrolled in the CQEMBA program to broaden and deepen their skills, learn new disciplines, bolster their professional confidence, build leadership capacity, and work with colleagues from a wide range of industries. They’re attracted by the chance to study in both Canada and the U.S. with peers whose experience extends to countries around the globe. They also recognize the prestige attached to a dual graduate degree from Johnson at Cornell and Queen’s School of Business in Kingston, Ontario.

“Queen’s opens a lot of doors,” says Papin, who, at the start of the program, is operations controller at the Gibbons Hospitality Group in Whistler, B.C. Cornell, she adds, opens further opportunities.

Since 2005, the two universities have offered working managers and professionals from both sides of the border the chance to earn two MBA degrees without interrupting their careers. Teams of five to nine students based in the same region collaborate on projects and attend classes together three Saturdays a month. Sitting in boardrooms equipped for interactive videoconferencing, they work with other teams throughout North America and with Cornell and Queen’s faculty as if they were all in one space.

Regional teams also come together for three residential sessions, on each occasion splitting their time between the Cornell and Queen’s campuses. Finally, each team travels abroad to work on a real-world business case with an overseas company.

FORGING BONDS

At the program’s outset, building a solid team is the first order of business. Starting at Cornell and continuing at Queen’s, the students from Vancouver learn to speak frankly with one another and perform as one unit.

As the team gets down to work on class projects, particular strengths emerge. Cochran, for example, knows how to calm things down when discussions grow heated.

“She’s really good at facilitating meetings,” says Lee, who, when she entered the program, was a supply chain category specialist at Chevron in Vancouver.
DIVERSE EXPERIENCE, REAL-WORLD IMPACT

When Cornell and Queen’s University launched the Cornell-Queen’s Executive MBA program in 2005, they based it on an innovative learning model that Queen’s had used successfully for more than ten years. To make it easy for busy professionals in major cities to pursue its executive degree, Queen’s pioneered offering classes via high-quality, real-time, interactive videoconferencing technology in customized boardrooms in cities across Canada.

For CQEMBA, that model has produced an especially rich environment for students, who attend class with peers from throughout North America. “The participants represent a far more diverse group of industries and backgrounds than could possibly be the case if they all came from a single city or region,” says Danny Szpiro, assistant dean for executive education at Johnson and founding director of the CQEMBA program.

A professional in a software firm in Seattle, for instance, might have a chance to learn from colleagues who work on Wall Street or Toronto’s Bay Street, or in the energy centers of Houston and Calgary, he said.

Classes have grown increasingly diverse as CQEMBA has expanded its footprint. Members of the Class of 2011 attended boardroom sessions in nine cities in the U.S. and six in Canada. More recently, the program added Sacramento, San Diego, and Austin.

While broadening their knowledge and developing new proficiencies, students in the program may also make important contributions in the business world. That happens often during the Global Business Project, in which each CQEMBA team provides consulting services to an overseas firm or to a domestic firm with overseas operations.

“They’re solving a real-world problem or developing an entry strategy or expansion strategy for a company,” says Shai Dubey, director of the CQEMBA program at Queen’s. Teams have applied their knowledge and skills so successfully that some companies have come back to request more students to work on new projects, he says.

Students working on individual projects have also provided valuable services. Several years ago, as part of her project, a student from Calgary working for a major U.S.-based firm devised a plan to restructure some of that company’s operations. “She was asked to fly to headquarters to present to the executive team, because the project was saving the company tens of millions of dollars,” Dubey says.

Some projects spawn business startups. For example, building on his new venture project, Shawn Burns, MBA ’07 (CQ), founded Carbon Credit Corp., a successful Vancouver-based technology and consulting firm in the environmental sector.

In fact, CQEMBA has become a significant breeding ground for new businesses, Dubey says. “It surprises me, the number of people who have decided they have the entrepreneurial flair and have decided to go off on their own.”
Jagpal, senior director of finance and corporate controller at QLT Inc., a biotechnology firm in Vancouver, is an excellent listener, says Lee. She herself is the group’s freethinker: she often comes to different conclusions from the rest, if they don’t reach five different conclusions altogether.

While melding as a team, the students from Vancouver also bond with their colleagues from the other regions. During the residential sessions, given the eight to 12 hours a day students spend in class, plus encounters over dinner, in the gym or on sightseeing excursions, they have ample time to get to know their peers.

“You’re pretty much spending all your waking hours with your colleagues,” says Jagpal. “I don’t think there’s a single team I’m not comfortable talking to and hanging out with.”

While interactive videoconferencing links the boardroom learning centers in real time for classes on Saturdays, participants also use the program’s portal chat function and Skype to discuss course materials, sending comments back and forth across the continent.

Students form solid relationships with professors as well. “You can phone them at any time and they’re willing to help you out with any problem,” says Atwal, operations planning specialist at Catalyst Paper in Richmond, B.C.

Encouragement from professors is one thing that helps the Vancouver students balance the demanding MBA program with their jobs and personal lives. Families and employers also lend crucial support.

Before enrolling in CQEMBA, Jagpal made sure to gain his wife’s blessing on an endeavor that would keep him away from the family many evenings and three Saturdays a month. He also got his company’s chief financial officer on board. Jagpal promised the CFO that he would step in if an emergency arose and no one else could handle it. “But for the most part he was there to support me in any way possible.”

Discipline, scheduling, and communication are crucial to the balancing act as well. “You have a Blackberry and an agenda. That’s pretty much what it comes down to,” Papin says.

“I study between 5 and 8 a.m.,” says Cochran, senior manager, engineering, aboriginal relations and generation at BC Hydro in New Westminster, B.C. “I’m at work from 8 to 5. I schedule in socializing and schedule in what needs to be done by when.”

Despite the crowded calendars, each student makes time for the most important aspects of his or her personal life. For example: Lee attends church, Cochran and Jagpal work out, Atwal reserves part of each weekend for his wife, and Jagpal spends Sundays with his wife and two children.

“You get crystal clear on what matters for the next 18 months,” Cochran says.

EXPANSIONS AND STARTUPS

By the fall of 2009, the students from Vancouver are working on individual projects, along with team activities. The CQEMBA requires each student to either develop a business plan for a startup or provide consulting to an existing business.

For his project, Atwal helps a Vancouver-area firm that makes meat-substitute products and wants to expand across North America. “Being a healthy eater, I realized that this company has a really innovative product, but they were lacking in certain facets of their business,” he says.

He develops a three-year plan, which the company starts to implement. The plan includes a marketing strategy and improvements to operations, human resources, and financial management.

Papin consults with a construction project management firm owned by her extended family, helping the shareholders and partners develop strategies for growth. Thanks to her work, the company restructures its sales department, and revenues increase by 16 percent. “They hired new people, gained new clients, added new shareholders,” she says.

Jagpal takes the entrepreneurial option, developing a plan for a companionship service aimed at busy members of the “sandwich generation” who can’t devote enough time to caring for their parents. “It’s soup-to-nuts — developing the business plan, a hiring
strategy, a marketing strategy,” he says of the blueprint he creates. The project requires him to consider the enterprise through several lenses — not just finance, his field of expertise.

As this project broadens Jagpal’s outlook, working with his team and other classmates expands his focus as well. His peers — professionals in engineering, human resources, operations, and many other fields, as well as entrepreneurs — bring a wide range of perspectives to class discussions, and that exposure makes him more open-minded on the job. “At work, I try to listen to other points of view before I form my opinion,” he says.

Cochran’s CQEMBA project gives her a wider perspective too. Although she is a human resources specialist, for her individual project she develops a five-year investment and operating strategy for a power generation plant in B.C. Hydro’s system. Besides saving her boss the large sum he might have paid to a consultant, the project confirms her growing interest in operations.

The broader expertise that Cochran gains throughout the graduate program also bolsters her influence at B.C. Hydro. “I’m contributing more at the executive level; I’m able to contribute in numerous domains,” she says.

Lee applies some of her new skills to her procurement responsibilities at Chevron. As part of a supplier consolidation project, she negotiates contracts that save the firm nearly $1 million, and she assembles the data to document those savings. “If I hadn’t taken this program, I don’t think I’d be able to do that sophisticated kind of analysis,” she says.

CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTER

In March 2010, Papin leaves British Columbia, returning to her native Montreal to become senior manager, workforce management, at the telecommunications company Videotron. She attends boardroom meetings with the Montreal team but continues to collaborate with her colleagues in Vancouver. The Vancouver group attends its last residential session in August and then heads to Japan to work on its capstone assignment, the Global Business Project.

The mission is to advise a company in Fukuoka that has developed a heating and cooling system using infrared technology. The company wants to introduce its product to North America, starting in Vancouver.

The team arrives at the first meeting in Tokyo with plenty of questions and ideas. But while the business owner and his colleagues are incredibly gracious hosts, they decline to talk much business. Direct questions about the nuts and bolts of their enterprise actually offend them.

“I made some great friends who will last me a lifetime. I’ve already been tapping into that network.”

– Sukhi Jagpal, MBA ’11 (CQ)
It’s an awkward situation. But it yields a vital lesson about doing business across cultures.

“I was shocked by the gap that we had to bridge with the Japanese,” says Papin, looking back on the trip in January. “We really had to earn their trust, which took almost the entire trip.”

The gap closes gradually over a series of lunches and dinners. “We shifted gears and focused on getting to know who they are,” Jagpal recalls. Chatting about their jobs, their families, and their personal goals, the individuals begin to feel like friends. In time, the Japanese executives start answering questions about the business.

Those executives have a cultural gap to cross as well. They have been trying to market their product in British Columbia exactly as they do in Japan, and that strategy isn’t working, Cochran says.

Before meeting the Vancouver team, for instance, they don’t know that there’s little demand for air conditioning in British Columbia. That makes it hard to sell a high-priced system that cools as well as heats. Nor do the executives realize how skeptical Canadians can be about claims that a product is energy efficient. “You have to be certified, and you have to have all the scientific data to back you up,” Cochran says.

The team’s report on the Global Business Project, due on January 17, 2011, is its last deliverable. As members look forward their graduation ceremony in May, they also move forward in their careers.

Cochran is tackling a new assignment at B.C. Hydro, leading a task force in a massive project to transform safety across the company. Lee has left Chevron to become manager of sourcing and procurement in Accenture’s management consulting practice, where an early assignment takes her to Calgary and Oklahoma for several months.
Papin digs further into her job at Videotron, rallying a previously demoralized team that oversees staff at the company’s 17 customer-call centers. She also gives birth to a daughter in December. Atwal enters a program to become the Canadian equivalent of a Certified Public Accountant, with an eye toward pursuing new opportunities. Jagpal collaborates on efforts to forge a new strategic direction for QLT.

Looking back on what they’ve gained from CQEMBA, members of the Vancouver team mention some benefits that any rigorous EMBA program might provide. They’ve learned business skills outside their specialties and learned to better organize their time. They’ve become fluent in the “languages” of different disciplines, helping them to contribute to their firms at a higher level.

But some of their greatest gains are unique to the CQEMBA program. For Papin, one big plus has been the chance to learn from a diverse collection of fellow students who conduct business projects all over the world. “I got to understand how business is done in the ‘States and in Asia,” she says. “Some people have had the chance to work in Europe.”

Canadian students who want to work in the U.S. gain the chance to apply for a work visa here as soon as they complete the program, or whenever a potential job arises, Jagpal points out. “I know I have the opportunity to tap into a bigger market.”

The advantage that team members point out most often, though, is the network they have gained.

“One of the most significant benefits of this program is the cross-pollination between the Canadian students and the U.S. students,” Atwal says. Former classmates from many different industries and geographies are happy to share advice on business issues.

“I made some great friends who will last me a lifetime,” says Jagpal. “I’ve already been tapping into that network.”

The reach of that network stretches well beyond the members of the Class of 2011. While working on her new initiative at B.C. Hydro, for example, Cochran has several times reached out to former professors for guidance and professional contacts. “You can pretty well go to any of the professors, and they’ll know someone who knows someone,” she says.

Such benefits are priceless, Atwal observes. “I don’t think there’s any other program out there that can provide the networking opportunities that this program has provided us.”