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COLUMBIA
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International Innovation in the Classroom

Professor William R. Duggan: Strategic Intuition

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Strategic Intuition is a course in *coup d'oeil*: the selective projection of past elements into the future in a new combination as a course of action that fits your previous goals or sparks new ones, and the personal commitment to follow through and work out the details along the way.

This half-term elective taught by Professor William Duggan helps students develop key skills in strategy, leadership and decision-making in both their professional and their personal lives. The course challenges conventional wisdom on invention, innovation, creativity, luck, goals, success and failure and puts driven and ambitious MBA students in touch with reality—training them to think strategically with an open mind. The course draws heavily on examples from the international world of business, Eastern philosophy (Buddhism, Taoism and Zen) and classical European military strategy, especially German and French.

The course has a strong international focus that can be attributed to Professor Duggan's own international experience. Before joining Columbia Business School in 2001, he worked as a strategy adviser to several international aid agencies and spent significant time in Africa. It was during this time that he became interested in the origins of the art of strategic intuition, or *coup d'oeil*. He continued his research after joining Columbia Business School and in 2003 published his research in the form of two books, *Napoleon's Glance* and *The Art of What Works*. The two books form the basis for most of the material used in this course.

According to Professor Duggan, the word *strategy* entered the English language in 1810 as military scholars rushed to study the success of Napoleon Bonaparte, who won more battles than any other general in recorded history. Over time the study of strategy spread to other fields, especially business. The first scholarly study of strategy, *On War* (1832) by Carl von Clausewitz, shows the key to Napoleon's success was *coup d'oeil*, which means "glance" in French. Today, *coup d'oeil* is recognized as strategic intuition; ordinary intuition is just a feeling, but strategic intuition comes from real knowledge and past experience, brought together in a flash of insight to suit the situation. It's the "big Aha!"—or a series of little ones—that shows the way ahead.

The course highlights its key concepts through a series of case studies developed by Professor Duggan. Examples of case studies include such icons of the U.S. and international corporate world as Microsoft, Starbucks, McDonalds, Marriott, Nokia, Lilly, Puma and Burberry. These cases are supplemented with analysis of the war strategies of Napoleon and General George Patton on the one hand and elements of Eastern philosophy on the other. Professor Duggan goes beyond the world of corporations and war strategies into the world of social enterprise with the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh—one of the biggest success stories in microfinance and a model that is being successfully

replicated in every poor and developing country. In addition, he draws on examples from the world of music and art with case studies on Norah Jones and Pablo Picasso. There also are numerous case studies on Columbia Business School alumni who have used strategic intuition to get ahead successfully in their professional and personal lives.

The key factor that sets this course apart from other strategy courses is that the case studies don't just focus on applying the conventional strategy frameworks to each situation. Instead, the focus is on the people behind each story. The course tries to explore how these illustrious personalities combined their past experiences with a flash of insight to develop a new innovative idea and how they successfully brought their ideas to fruition. In most cases students discover that it's not just the strategy or the brilliance of the idea that matters but also inherent traits—like leadership skills in executing plans and factors that we don't control, such as luck—that play a critical role in ensuring success. The course also teaches students how to deal with failure, which is as important as dealing with success.

The last few sessions of the course are devoted to using strategic intuition to achieve success in personal life. There are several in-class “free your mind” exercises to train a student's mind to convert negative energies into positive. Professor Duggan also provides several useful tools in the form of a personal strategy map, an “insight matrix” to develop better solutions to problems and an “opportunity assessment” framework that helps guide actions. Many students have used these frameworks successfully to align their personal and professional goals.

On the whole, Strategic Intuition is a very unique and innovative course that blends together strategy and philosophy to teach students how to achieve success in their professional and personal lives. The Columbia Business School curriculum has traditionally been oriented toward imparting hard skills to students. These hard skills do provide short-term professional success, but in the long run it's the soft skills provided by courses like Strategic Intuition that help students deal better with the rigors of professional and personal lives and ensure continuing success on both fronts.

William R. Duggan is an assistant professor of management at Columbia Business School.