
International Faculty Profile

Nelson M. Fraiman

Professor of Professional Practice

YOLANDE WILSON MBA '08

Nelson Fraiman joined the faculty in 1995 after a 17-year career at International Paper Company, where his most recent position was chief technology officer for eight manufacturing divisions. Before that, he developed and managed a group responsible for productivity improvement and process innovation, and still earlier he directed company-wide educational activities. Professor Fraiman teaches operations and technology management. His research explores institutionalizing quality improvement. He specializes in the retailing, consulting and process industries.

We know that you are originally from Uruguay. Can you tell us a little about your life there before coming to the States?

I did my undergraduate work in the U.S., but prior to that I lived in Montevideo until I left high school. Montevideo is a pretty city. Things were uneventful for me, but I enjoyed my time there.

Are you currently doing any work with any Uruguayan companies?

We just finished writing a business case with Lolita, a women's clothing chain. In fact, the CEO of Lolita was here recently in my elective class to discuss the case. In some ways, Lolita has tried to emulate Zara [the Spanish retailer], but it's not Zara at all. For example, if you look at the clothing tags from Lolita, they look very similar to Zara's—an old tag with the picture of all the flags. However, since the introduction of the euro, Zara has used different tags, while Lolita has kept the old design. There is still some additional work to be done with the Lolita case. We are sending three students from Columbia's International Development Club to work through an NGO, Endeavor, to help Lolita in the implementation of our recommendations based on some of our conclusions about the business case.

What classes are you teaching this semester?

This semester, I am teaching a new class called Retailing Strategy and Operations, a Master Class, with Bruce Greenwald and Burt Steinberg, who used to be president and COO of Dress Barn. Aside from that, I also teach one section of Operations Management.

What class do you enjoy teaching the most?

In general, I teach the core, but it's more difficult because this year I am teaching a core class for second-year students only. It has been more challenging than in the past because, first, I'm teaching all second-years in a core course that many of them think is unnecessary, and second, it's a 9 a.m. course, so it can be challenging trying to make it interesting so early in the morning. It doesn't bother me, actually. I'm very enthusiastic about the course, and I know that it adds value, although students may not recognize it right away.

There's a very different dynamic in my Retailing Strategy and Operations course: everyone shows up, and it's a project-driven course. To answer your question, if I had to choose between what I am teaching this semester, I prefer the Retailing Strategy and Operations course: after all, it's a new course, and I'm having more fun with it.

What do you find are the most challenging aspects of your job as a professor?

The most challenging aspect is trying to convince the students about the value of Operations Management. The Business School tends to attract people who are mostly interested in finance; for these students, anything other than finance, in their minds, is considered second tier. I think that a lot of other functional areas are just as important. Usually, they don't see the value of the class until they're working. I often get contacted by students who tell me, "I remember what you did—and it was really valuable." It's a nice challenge, and I like the debate, although the students might not [*laughter*]. I pressure them in the class, and that's OK.

Do you feel that you are succeeding in tackling this challenge?

I think so. It takes time with the existing feedback mechanism of formal and informal course evaluations. I don't do it to succeed the same day or even the same semester. Yet during the semester, I see change in some students; they come back to me and say that the class has been valuable. Even if only one or two do that, that's enough to satisfy me.

What research are you currently working on?

Right now, I'm working on retailing and the determinants of entrepreneurs' success in operating across borders. I have a particular interest in entrepreneurs based in emerging economies, particularly Latin America. Small-scale entrepreneurs will be important determinants in Latin America's future economic development. I'm working to create a program in partnership with colleagues at Columbia and other Latin American universities to help these entrepreneurs succeed, an effort that will include training for these individuals who want to succeed across borders. This is all still a work in progress, but we hope to have a pilot session next year.

In your classes, you often mention the consulting projects and presentations that you have worked on globally. What have been your favorite projects to date?

Well, I like two things: strategy and details. So, typically I work with organizations on strategy and operations; both are very important. If you just have a strategy and don't think about the details to implement it, you will not be successful. On the other hand, if you think of the details without linking it to the strategy, you're working on the wrong project.

I come from the process industry, so I still do that as well as retail. On the process side, about a month ago I was in Holland working with a Dutch subsidiary of a Saudi firm, Sabic [which recently bought GE plastics for about \$13 billion]. They have an interesting challenge: as a subsidiary, they are a high-cost producer in Europe and cannot compete with the low-cost producers in Saudi Arabia. The question then arises, what should be their operations strategy? I've been working with them on their strategy going forward. In regard to retail, I have already filled you in on some of the work I am doing with Lolita.

To answer your question, for me it's not about a favorite project—it's different. For example, with Lolita it was fun to write a case, and it's rewarding to now help this entrepreneur grow. Lolita has sales of \$6 million, while Sabic can afford to buy a division of GE. If I had to choose one, I think there are more challenges with the small firm, because then I can get involved in many more things. It also depends on what stage of your life you are at. I've worked with and consulted for large firms for a long time, but I think going back to help Latin American entrepreneurs takes a higher priority in my life right now.

Do you feel that MBA students are currently gaining an international perspective in the classroom? How are you trying in your realm to integrate the international perspective into your classes?

In operations, we've been looking for cases that are international in scope. We just discussed the Ritz-Carlton case in class, which is about a global company, although it's U.S.-based. When we talk about supply chain management, we will discuss Zara, the previously mentioned Spanish retailer, for which several of my colleagues and I wrote a case. As I mentioned, we just finished writing the case for Lolita, which is a Latin American retailer.

In addition, the professors that teach in the core for Operations Management are primarily foreign-born. Four of us teach in the spring, and we come from four different countries. The fact that we are from abroad brings an international component that comes through the classroom dynamics, and we also try to look for examples of companies with an international slant. I assume that happens in other classes as well. When you look at most of the faculty here at Columbia Business School, most obtained their PhD here in this country but were born outside of the U.S. I believe that you have to look at the culture and adapt whenever you interface between countries. A lot of failures occur when companies do not do so.

I believe that international business should be a theme throughout the core and not necessarily a single course in international business. We should continue to encourage everyone to keep adding to the curriculum to make it more international, but to me, international is just a component of any course that we teach.

If you could do anything other than your current job, what would you be doing?

I've happily been a professor for the last 12 years. Prior to that, I was in industry for 17 years. I did not expect to spend 17 years in industry, but I was having fun. Maybe 17 is a magic number [*laughter*]; maybe after 17 years of teaching, I'll do something else. What will I do? I have no idea. I always knew that I wanted to be a professor; when I got my PhD, I wanted to teach and lecture. It was important to me to gain practical experience in industry before I taught full-time. So, I taught part-time in the engineering school while I was working. When the opportunity came to teach, I just took it. Although I still wanted to spend more time in industry, I decided, why not? If a new challenge comes up after 17 years, well, maybe I'll do something different; I know it won't be in politics [*laughter*].

As a professor for 13 years, what do you think your strengths are, and on the flip side, where do you think you can improve?

I think that I am helpful with young faculty in terms of getting them involved with practitioners. I see that as one of my roles here; it's important for young faculty members to be involved with industry. I'm the head of the Deming Center [for Quality, Productivity and Competitiveness]. We meet a few times a year and bring people from industry to speak with our young faculty. I also engage young faculty to do some applied work. I've been fairly successful in this regard, and this has helped the young faculty with their teaching.

Where I have not been as successful is in saying yes to too many things, which ends in a loss of focus. I have been successful in dealing with it, but I wish sometimes I would do less so that I can be more productive in doing fewer things. I teach that, but I don't behave the same way. Sometimes doing less is better.

Columbia Business School is inextricably tied to New York City. What do you enjoy about New York?

Now that I don't travel as much, my wife and I go to the New York City Ballet eight times a year, and a few times a year to the American Ballet Theatre. We've been doing this for about 20, 30 years. I'd go to the opera all the time, but my wife doesn't like it as much as I do [*smiling broadly*].

What advice do you have for MBA students as they head to their first post-MBA positions?

They should worry less about the company they work for, and more about the content of the job. Focus on being passionate about what you do—it will make you happier and therefore more successful. You need to be more of a visionary: try to see what might happen in the future, and pay attention to that.