Finding the best nuggets behind the headlines

By David F. Morill
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Visit Brent Allred’s office in the Mason School and you’ll notice various levels of technology on display, from dueling computer screens and compact discs to eight-track tapes and newspapers. The most thumbed-through examples of the latter are copies of The Wall Street Journal.

“I’m a tangible person who likes a physical product,” says Allred, an associate professor of strategic management and international business. “When it comes to business news, I find the best nuggets – gems with real depth on topics of interest – buried far beyond the headlines.”

Indeed, Allred maintains that one issue of The Wall Street Journal contains enough content to feed his classes for an entire semester. He and his students examine everything from the current economic crisis to the iPad to repercussions from the Iceland volcano. “Topics like these have key strategic issues that you can explore – competitive issues on the global stage,” he says.

Allred’s own research explorations focus primarily on patent rights. In the Journal of International Business Studies, for instance, he and collaborator Walter Park of American University recently analyzed the effects of patent strength on different aspects of innovative activity, namely firm-level research and development (R&D), domestic patenting and foreign patenting.

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Allred teaches a mix of students, primarily MBAs in his Global Competitive Strategy class and undergraduates in an International Business seminar. To illustrate the impact of global issues, he likes to have his students follow such innovations as the iPad from rumor to game-changing reality.

“We found that overall in developing economies patent strength negatively affects domestic patent filings and insignificantly affects R&D and foreign patent filings,” he explains. “It’s just the opposite in developed economies, after a critical level of patent protection is reached.”

Another interest is sourcing strategies. Although recent examples are mostly anecdotal, Allred is finding instances of companies returning to the U.S. after more than a decade of outsourcing. "It’s not as if manufacturing is rushing back to the U.S.,” he cautions. “But more of it is happening, often because it’s becoming cheaper to manufacture

With his penchant for international travel – 72 countries and counting – and ability to mine a variety of digital and print sources for the best information, it’s a given that Allred can provide that grounding. And students are grateful. He’s won three faculty teaching awards at William and Mary, and students have even presented him with homemade tee shirts honoring his devotion to The Wall Street Journal. One shirt, mimicking the Alex P. Keaton character from the 1980s sitcom Family Ties, says, “I Love the WSJ”; the other, “I Really Love the WSJ.”

The broad smile on Allred’s face when displaying these gifts shows the Keatonesque sentiment to be genuine.