

Interview

An Interview with AIB 2025 International Educator of the Year Brigitte Madrian

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Brigitte Madrian, Dean of the Brigham Young University Marriott School of Business in Provo, Utah, USA, was selected as the 2025 AIB International Educator of the Year by the Fellows of the Academy of International Business (AIB). In this interview, she discusses with Maria Tereza Fleury and William Newburry what led her to become a professor of economics, her career path to her current position, and the keys to success for Brigham Young University. She also provides advice regarding important success factors in the current academic environment.

INTRODUCTION

Brigitte Madrian, Dean of the Brigham Young University Marriott School of Business in Provo, Utah, USA, was selected as the 2025 AIB International Educator of the Year by the Fellows of the Academy of International Business (AIB). She has had a fascinating career beginning as a preschool student at BYU where her father worked as a sociology professor, progressing through PhD studies at MIT, faculty positions at the Harvard University Economics Department, the University of Chicago, the Wharton School, and the Harvard Kennedy School, before returning to BYU to serve as the Marriott School of Business Dean. In the interview excerpts below, Dr. Madrian discusses with AIB Past President, Maria Tereza Fleury, and *AIB Insights* Editor, William Newburry, several themes of interest to international business scholars.

Interviewers: Maria Tereza Fleury [MTF], Fundação Getulio Vargas, Brazil, and William Newburry [WN], Florida International University, USA

Interviewee: Brigitte Madrian [BM], Dean, Brigham Young University Marriott School of Business, USA

CAREER BACKGROUND

[MTF]: Congratulations on your selection as the AIB 2025 International Executive of the Year! We will begin with some information about your education and career. Then, we will discuss the importance and development of international business at Brigham Young University (BYU). We will close by asking what advice you would provide international business students and academic scholars. To start, why did you choose to study the economy?

[BM]: I took an introductory economics class my first se-

mester of college because it was required for a political science degree, which is what I thought I wanted to study, but I ended up loving economics. For me, it was a very intuitive way of thinking about the world, and it dealt with issues that were important and of consequence. I was attracted to economics as a tool for solving public policy questions, and that's been reflected in my teaching and research before becoming an administrator.

[MTF]: We had similar backgrounds. I started with economics and social science, sociology, and then I went to California, to Stanford, and then I moved to business administration.

[WN]: Can you describe your career progression? What factors impacted your move from place to place? It's interesting that you moved between different types of schools and disciplines.

[BM]: I'll start by saying that my career did not turn out how I had planned. I feel kind of like Cinderella when I look back. My career was better than anything I could have dreamed of. I was an undergraduate at BYU. I feel like I really grew up on this campus. My father joined the sociology faculty here when I was 3 or 4 years old and I attended preschool on campus.

My intent was to go to MIT, get my PhD, and come back four years later and be the first female faculty member in the BYU Economics Department. Then, when I was finishing my PhD, I received several offers. One of them was from the Harvard Economics Department, and interestingly, another was from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, where I ended up later. We were living in Boston, and my husband had a full-time job in Boston, so we decided to stay in Boston and I accepted the job at the Harvard Economics Department. This was around when Bill Clinton was elected president, and several senior faculty who would

have been my natural mentors took leave to work on the Clinton campaign and then in the Clinton administration. So, the job was not quite what I had hoped for because the mentors that you would really need and want as a brand-new assistant professor were not there.

One of my best friends from graduate school accepted a job at the University of Chicago, Graduate School of Business, and they had also made me an offer. I had turned it down because I wasn't interested in a business school, but she called me about a year into my first job at Harvard and said, this is a fantastic place. I think they would resurrect that offer if you were interested. So, I went and spent a week just seeing what it was like, and it was great. And against my better judgment, I decided to go to a business school. The University of Chicago is dynamic, rigorous, and intellectually stimulating. It's not warm and fuzzy, but it pushes you to learn, and I learned a lot.

After seven or eight years, Wharton made me an offer. Wharton has a public policy unit within the business school. As I noted earlier, what got me interested in economics was what you could do with economics to influence public policy. During my time at Chicago, I started working with companies in my research, in particular, a big company that was managing retirement savings accounts for large employers. My research had evolved, and Wharton was a great location for what I was doing because it was about two hours from Washington, DC and about two hours from New York City. The policymakers were all in Washington and the financial nexus of the world is in New York City, so I went to Wharton for those reasons.

After about a year and a half at Wharton, the Harvard Kennedy School reached out. My husband and I had loved living in Boston, and the Kennedy School is the premier public policy school in the world. So, I made the decision to join the Harvard Kennedy School. About a year after I arrived, they started a joint degree program between the public policy school and the business school. I ended up teaching in that program for several years and it was a wonderful place for what I was interested in. I thought we would end up retiring in Boston because I truly loved my job.

I was not particularly interested in being an administrator. I didn't have those aspirations, but after several years at Harvard, the university started an internal leadership development training program, and they asked me to participate in their second cohort. While going through the program, I thought, this is something I might be interested in. About a year after finishing that, Brigham Young University reached out as they were looking for a new dean of the business school. I didn't know if I was really interested, but the winds seemed to be blowing to push me into an administrative responsibility at Harvard. It had been 12 years since I'd interviewed for a job, and I thought that being part of the process would be good for me.

I threw my hat into the ring, and they kept advancing me to the next stage, and eventually they offered me the job. I had a difficult decision about whether to stay at Harvard or to come to BYU. I decided that I'd had a really great career doing research and teaching and that I was ready to embrace a new set of challenges and learn some new skills

that I would only learn in a position like this. It was a bit of a leap of faith because I hadn't served in any significant administrative roles. I'm not quite sure why they were willing to take a risk on someone so inexperienced. I came here to be Dean in January 2019 and have absolutely loved it. It's been the most challenging job I've ever had, but it's also been the most rewarding. I love the opportunity to be a facilitator and to help other people accomplish what they're trying to do, and then amplify their efforts. I am grateful to be here.

[MTF]: Fantastic career. Congratulations. I have been a Dean twice and I'm still a Director, and on the AIB board, where I was the President for a term. I feel that there are some differences between men and women regarding competences and skills. You mentioned the role of facilitator. Do you think that there are differences in the way we manage?

[BM]: I suspect there are differences in the way that men and women manage, but I don't know how to separate what part of me is just being me and what part is being a woman. Shortly after I arrived at BYU, I wanted to understand how people across campus perceived the business school. We did a survey of students, and one frequently used adjective was "intimidating." I didn't want the business school to feel intimidating because then some people who would be great business students would be deterred. I want anyone interested in studying business to feel welcome, so, I met with my leadership team, and we started talking about how to make the business school feel warmer, more welcoming. Then we started putting some of those things into action and I think we've succeeded. I'll give you two indicators.

The first is that at the end of fall semester when the students come back from Thanksgiving break, they have a couple weeks before final exams. We started doing something we call Festive Finals. Here in Utah, it's dark, it's cold, and everyone's exhausted waiting for the semester to end. We just do something fun every day in the business school building. We'll hand out hot chocolate one day; we'll have Christmas caroling in the atrium; we'll have sugar cookie decorating. A couple of years we had a Dean's Office flash mob dance, so I learned how to dance to "Run, Run Rudolph," and the students just loved it. One of our students walked into the atrium with a friend who was not a business school student, and the friend said, the Tanner Building feels like the happiest place on campus, and I thought, we have succeeded. Disneyland is the happiest place on Earth, Finland is the happiest country in the world, and the Marriott School is the happiest place on campus.

The other interesting thing is that the fraction of women who've decided to study business has gone up by 50% in six or seven years. When I came, it was about 24%, and the class we enrolled for this fall is about 36%. So, it went up by almost 50% in six years. I don't have firm data to support this, but I think a large part of the reason why is that we made the business school more welcoming. I'm not sure that a male leader would have had the same perspective on that issue as I did as a woman.

[MTF]: Congrats. It was a very good initiative.

MOVING INTO ADMINISTRATION

[WN]: What advice would you give to others considering being a dean or pursuing an administrative career path?

[BM]: Seven or eight years before I came into my current role, people started giving me hints and nudges, “Maybe you should think about this.” I decided that I would be open to opportunities in small “1” leadership positions. I started taking on committee assignments and things like that. When I accepted these, I decided that I would take them seriously and do my best because they would provide an opportunity to learn whether I liked it, whether I was any good at it, and develop skills that might make me a more capable leader. I think that was a good approach because it didn’t feel particularly scary, and I learned by doing that I enjoyed it more than many of my colleagues and that I was actually pretty good at it. That created a reinforcing cycle, but one of the things that I really love about being a dean is the opportunity to help others further their goals. This kind of position increases the span of your influence. You’re impacting, in my case, 150 faculty members who are teaching about 8500 students who are taking classes here at the business school in any calendar year.

The other thing that I’ve really loved is the opportunity to set a vision and a strategic direction, because the way you really have an impact is by coming in and ascertaining how could we be more than we are today? How could we have a greater influence? How could we be better? What should our objectives be? It has been really rewarding to have that kind of influence on an organization. But it’s also been a tremendous learning experience for me.

A year and a half after I got here, we embarked on an effort to develop a new vision, mission, values, and guiding principle for the Marriott School. In my first several months here, I found myself in conversations where I wanted to say, “At BYU Marriott, our mission is . . .,” and I never knew how to finish that sentence. I googled “BYU Marriott mission statement” and I learned that we did have a mission statement. I looked at it and said “OK, now I understand why nobody’s talking about it.” It was long, clunky, and cumbersome, and didn’t flow off the tongue easily. It was OK in terms of describing what we were doing, but it wasn’t aspirational and visionary. I said, “I need something that’s short, and that I actually want to talk about.”

We went through that effort and came up with a distinctive and unique vision for the Marriott School: “We aspire to transform the world through Christlike leadership.” And that’s been a hugely important change here in terms of unifying our faculty, staff, and students around who we are and what we’re trying to do in a way that’s helped us make better decisions about how to allocate resources. It’s been fun to be a part of an institution where you can have influence.

[MTF]: Fantastic. Can I ask you a personal question?

You have children, two daughters. They are well-adapted with a mother who is a dean.

[BM]: I hope so. I feel like you should ask them. Yes, my husband and I have two beautiful daughters. Our youngest daughter had just graduated from high school when I was given this opportunity, so the timing was perfect because both girls were in college. Our older daughter was in school in Boston. We kind of left her behind when we moved here. But our younger daughter had decided two weeks before I received the offer that she was going to attend the University of Utah because she loves to ski. She thought she was moving 2500 miles away from mom and dad for an independent college experience. Then she learned that we were going to join her. So, we traded living close to one daughter to living close to another.

On a happy, coincidental note, our older daughter graduated from medical school last month from Washington University in St. Louis, and just this week she started a residency program at Intermountain Health in Salt Lake City. So now we have both of our daughters close to home.

[MTF]: Congratulations.

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

[WN]: Let’s talk about Brigham Young University. The Marriott School has a long history of supporting international business education. I’m currently President of CUIBE (Consortium for Undergraduate International Business Education), and I’ve interacted with several BYU faculty at different points and even visited BYU when you hosted a CUIBE meeting in 2015. I loved your campus and everything that’s going on. Can you discuss some of the factors impacting international business education at Brigham Young?

[BM]: Let me start at the university level. I don’t know if you noticed when you came to campus, but as you drive into the main entrance on campus, there are two monuments on either side of the road. One says, “Enter to learn, go forth to serve.” The other says, “The world is our campus.” These are two unofficial mottos here, and they reflect a strong sense of mission in that there are many things education can accomplish. But in its loftiest form, the importance of education is that it allows us to more capably serve others and benefit humankind, and that benefit should accrue to the whole world, not just to us as individuals or to our families or local communities. And we can benefit the world by sending out students to live and work and serve in other countries, and through faculty and student research that impacts public policies or generates new innovations and technologies.

Every university is unique in its own way. But one of the things that makes this university unique is that we are a faith-based institution sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which is a worldwide church known for sending lots of missionaries throughout the world. That means that we have a lot of students who have

lived in other countries for 18 months to two years. About 60% of our students speak a foreign language, and at any point in time, about 30% of them are taking a foreign language class. We offer courses in almost 100 different foreign languages on campus, and I think BYU sends more students to get PhDs in foreign languages than any other university in the US. I don't know how that would compare world-wide. There's incredible support on campus for international education because of the international experiences that many students have had before arriving here. So, we're a business school operating in that university context.

THE MARRIOTT SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

[BM] I can talk about some things we're doing at the business school, although I certainly don't want to sound like we're the only ones doing these things, because many universities are doing them. This year we're sponsoring 26 different study abroad programs. At BYU, we really engage our faculty in going with our students on these programs. I've got 150 faculty. About half of them have gone with students on a study abroad program over the last few years. I have not gone on an entire study abroad program as I don't quite have the time as Dean, but my Associate Deans all have, and over the last three weeks, I've popped in and visited three programs for two or three days just to check in. I really don't want that type of opportunity to be the purview of students from wealthier families; I want all our students to feel like a study abroad is an experience that's available to them. Thus, we've increased the amount of financial aid we're giving to go on study abroad programs by three- or four-fold in the last several years. I'm really proud of that.

We've been a CIBER institution (Center for International Business Education and Research), via a US Department of Education grant, since about 1990, one of the early CIBER grant recipients and we've had it continuously over that period. A couple of the interesting and unique initiatives we've sponsored as a part of that grant are international business language case competitions. We do one for teams of college students from universities from all over the place. They come to the US and present in a foreign language. I think they can have one student on the team who's a native language speaker, but for the other students, it's got to be a different language. Then we do another version for students from high schools within a two- or three- or four-hour radius of the university. I think we're doing that in Spanish, Chinese, and Arabic, maybe one or two other languages. Those are kind of unique things that get students into our building and potentially interested in studying business.

[WN]: You do a lot! The FIU CIBER works with the BYU CIBER on an FDIB (Faculty Development in International Business) program to India every year, and it is a fantastic program.

[BM]: Yes. And then we have a new head of our Global Business Center, Shad Morris, who's a management department faculty and he started a couple of initiatives to provide re-

sources for other universities that are trying to teach international business.

One is called our Global Hub. With the Global Hub, we have a team of students working on creating an infrastructure and content of free, high quality international business resources that faculty can use in their classroom—that includes YouTube videos, podcasts, articles, and case studies that will be helpful in every curricular area. To really make it helpful, they're also developing a Canvas integration tool that makes it easy to add that content into your learning management system if you're using Canvas.

A second piece is called iLabs, which is working on making international business education more experiential through three interactive online simulations: market entry, foreign exchange, and cultural intelligence. We know that active learning is the learning that sticks. It's one thing to learn about how exchange rates work by reading a textbook, and it's another thing to learn how they work through experience. So, this is a way to create an experience that will help students better learn those concepts.

Then, we have another initiative that we've had in place since the early 1980s. Our Cardon International Sponsorship program brings students from other countries to BYU Marriott in our graduate programs. Financially, it's set up so that if you study in the US at BYU Marriott and you graduate and go back to your home country or another similar country, we will forgive your loans. But if you come to the school, and then you decide you're going to take a job in the US, you must repay the loan on the same terms that anyone else would repay. So, we're creating an incentive for students to study here, but also to take their education back and benefit others.

And then the last initiative I'll talk about is we are actively exploring the creation of what we would call a Global MBA program—a distance learning MBA program for students from countries who would never be able to come and study in the U.S. at an affordable price. In contrast to pursuing online education to generate revenue, initially it will be subsidized. Eventually we hope it will be cost neutral, but it will be affordable to students around the world, including lower income countries. For us, it's about having impact. We think that complements some of our sister school efforts that are sponsored by the same church.

One of those efforts is BYU-Pathway Worldwide. This is a distance learning online education program for students run in 180 different countries. The tuition is tied to GDP, so in a country like the US, the tuition is something like \$100 a credit hour, whereas in a very low-income country the tuition might be \$3 or \$4 a credit hour. It's an affordable way to get an education and there are around 75,000 students around the world studying through BYU-Pathway Worldwide. About a third are studying business and one would only need a fraction of those to graduate, get work experience, and be interested in an MBA to have significant demand for a global MBA program.

I'm not making any announcements yet because it may or may not get approved, but I think that's an illustration of how we think about those two mottos that I referred to earlier: "Enter to learn, go forth to serve," and "The world

is our campus.” We’re trying to use the resources we have at BYU Marriott to deliver educational opportunities that allow people to provide for their families and create benefits for our students and for others around the world wherever they live.

[MTF]: Fantastic. You know, we launched a program, the AIB-CIBER Doctoral Academy, and last Friday we had the graduation ceremony. I could not resist doing some marketing.

ADVICE FOR STUDENTS AND JUNIOR FACULTY

[WN]: What should international business students do to succeed in the current global environment, and similarly for junior faculty success in their international business careers?

[BM]: Does anyone have good answers to those questions? For students, an important thing in any environment is to be resilient. I think the most important thing that you can learn in college is how to learn because the world is changing quickly. Of the skills that I learned as a student 30 years ago, 75% of them are irrelevant and out-of-date. We teach a lot of perishable skills. The skill that’s not perishable is learning how to learn.

For students who want to work in international business, the other thing is to be open to new ideas and experiences. When I talk to alumni working in other countries, very few plotted out their life—“I’m going to work in the US for three years and then get transferred to London and then get transferred to Singapore.” Opportunities came up and they said, “I’m going to take a chance.” My observation is that those end up being great opportunities to gain new skills, to get visibility, and to move forward in your career more quickly. Those opportunities can be risky because there’s a lot of unknowns, but they can have a huge payoff.

How can junior faculty succeed in an international business career? First, we should think carefully about what it means to succeed. For many faculty, success means getting research published in so-called “A” journals. That’s fantastic when it happens. But for me, it’s been much more rewarding and fulfilling to do things that have an impact, whether or not they get published. If you want to be a happy, successful international business scholar, work on problems that matter. Work on things that excite you and try to have a positive impact. And if you’re doing that, success will follow as opposed to trying to chase success. You’ll be happier and you’ll make a difference in ways that you never thought possible.

[MTF]: I agree. At FGV, we have this new challenge. You have to make an impact not only in the business community, in public policies, in all communities.

[BM]: When we say, “You have to have” a social impact, we frame it in a pejorative way: “You have to do this.” I would frame it in a positive way, which is, “we get to do this.”

[WN]: We’re very lucky.

[BM]: Right. I view it as a blessing, and we get to articulate how we’re doing that.

[MTF]: Yes, indeed. But on the other hand, the job market wants students to have ABS 4 papers published, it’s not easy.

[WN]: Is there anything that you’d like to add.

[BM]: The last thing is that when I was informed that I had been nominated for and selected to receive this award, I was honestly quite flabbergasted because I’ve never considered myself an international business scholar. I’m just me, and I happen to enjoy traveling to other countries. My mother is from Germany, so I’ve got a little international background, and I’ve had an appreciation for being a citizen of the world rather than just a citizen of a particular country since I was very little. When I came to BYU, it was easy and natural for me to support the things that are going on around international business at the Marriott School, not as an intentional strategic priority, but just because it felt like the right thing to do. I’m really very humbled. I’m grateful for the opportunity to support the amazing faculty that we have here in educating the amazing students that we have here to “Enter to learn, and go forth to serve” in a world that desperately needs good leaders who are willing to make a difference.

[MTF]: I agree with you. It’s not an easy task, but we must think about the new generations. Congratulations!

[WN]: Congratulations again!

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Brigitte C. Madrian is the Dean and Marriott Distinguished Professor in the Brigham Young University Marriott School of Business. Before coming to BYU, she was on the faculty at the Harvard Kennedy School, the University of Pennsylvania Wharton School, the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business and the Harvard University Economics Department. She is a research associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research and served for many years as co-director of the NBER Household Finance working group. Dr. Madrian’s research focuses on behavioral economics and household finance. Dr. Madrian received her Ph.D. in economics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and studied economics as an undergraduate at BYU.

Maria Tereza Fleury is a full professor of International Management at both Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV) and the University of São Paulo (USP) and a Past President of the Academy of International Business. She was dean of the

School of Business Administration (2008-2015) and the Director of FGV, a Brazilian think-tank. Previously at the University of Sao Paulo, she was the Director of the School of Economy, Administration, and Accountancy – USP. She was a Research Fellow at the Institute of Manufacturing at Cambridge University, UK at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK, Institute for Development Economics, Japan, and Visiting Professor at ESSEC – France.

William Newburry is a Professor and the Ryder Eminent Scholar of Global Business at Florida International Univer-

sity (FIU) and an Academy of International Business (AIB) Fellow. Bill was founding Chair of the FIU Department of International Business (2018-2023) after chairing the Department of Management & International Business (2015-2018). He is Editor of AIB Insights and President of the Consortium of Undergraduate International Business Education. Bill is also a Past Chair of the Academy of Management International Management Division, the AIB Latin America Chapter and the Strategic Management Society Global Strategy Interest Group.

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