Talking Points

Has the online MBA market reached saturation point, or is there still a place for high quality programme providers?
No, I do not think the market has reached saturation, and this is evidenced by the number of traditional universities rolling out online programmes and attracting students. With the increasingly mobile society, employees who want to continue their education while travelling for business will likely increase the demand for online graduate programmes for many years to come.

How do you respond to the detractors that claim online MBAs are only of value to the schools and private companies that market them?
If this were the case, we would not have any students! Good quality programmes are able to maintain their student bodies because they provide value-added for multiple parties – from students enrolling in the programmes to companies hiring them and the broader society – creating a more highly educated population. Unlike for-profit companies, both public and private universities have an education mission, not a profit mission.

How can online MBA providers replicate the feeling of community and the networking opportunities attached to an on-campus programme?
In the Georgia WebMBA, we start with a weekend orientation that provides students the opportunity to interact with one another face-to-face. The students will then go on to work in small teams with the same teammates throughout the programme, supported by phone calls, emails, chat room activity and other available technologies, which promote a feeling of interconnectedness. There are also plenty of opportunities to connect with the class as a whole. Although not required, online MBA students can attend on-campus networking events, lecture series and other activities available to those in the on-campus MBA programme. It is not about reading the material, taking the test and then you’re done. That is what one might consider a correspondence course. We strive to make the programme and courses as relevant as possible to help our students succeed. We aim to meet students wherever they are in their professional or personal lives, and expose them to current market/business practices and trends.

Do you feel that job applicants with online degrees are viewed as favourably by employers and HR professionals as those from traditional programmes?
The employers and HR professionals that I speak with are more interested in the university offering the degree than the mode of delivery. With the Georgia WebMBA, for instance, our online students receive the same degree as our on-campus students. The diploma does not specify if students attended in person, online or in a hybrid programme that combines both delivery modes.

In your opinion, what are the top three advantages attached to an online MBA over a traditional programme?
Flexibility is a major advantage. Many of our students are working professionals, so they simply do not have the time to come to campus and sit in a classroom several nights a week or on the weekend. The online environment allows qualified students, who otherwise would not have the opportunity, to continue their education.

A second key advantage is diversity of the students in the programme. There are no limitations geographically in terms of the students we can attract, be that domestically or internationally.

A third advantage to an online MBA is that it matches the work environment of the 21st Century, where companies conduct business with diverse partners who may be in other parts of the country or the world.

“...The online environment allows qualified students, who otherwise would not have the opportunity, to continue their education..."
What’s in a Name?

To what extent does brand name recognition open doors and influence future career prospects and compensation? There are of course certain brand names that will always be recognisable and carry a premium, which is true in any industry, and education is no exception. The Georgia WebMBA has a strong reputation for quality in the market and, as result, students are attracted to the programme and a number of employers regularly send their employees to us.

If we assume that name brand recognition commands a significant premium in the workplace, we can also safely assume it comes at a price. Given the competitive pricing attached to most online MBAs, where do you stand on ROI? The Georgia WebMBA is competitively priced and has received a ‘Best Value’ designation from GetEducated.com for many years. In addition, our graduates tell us that the programme is extremely good value for money, and this is supported by the success they achieve post-MBA. Many graduates of the programme receive promotions, pay increases and new jobs.

Admissions

Certain quarters maintain that where online MBAs are concerned, admission is far more relaxed. What are your thoughts in this connection? That is an inaccurate perception for many programmes. The admission process for most universities is an online process for undergraduates, graduates, on-campus and online programmes. In most cases, the qualifications required for admission to an online MBA are the same as those expected from an on-campus programme – in some cases applicants to online programmes are held to a higher standard. The Georgia WebMBA adds an additional work experience qualification beyond those required for on-campus students.

What should applicants expect and/or prepare for when applying to an online MBA provider? Applicants should do their due diligence: analyse the programme, research the university offering the degree, examine the curriculum, and consider the faculty. Price is always going to be a consideration, but as with any purchase value is key. Anything one would normally consider when assessing a traditional MBA should be considered in evaluating an online MBA.
STUDENT PROFILE

Why did you choose Richards College of Business at UWG to receive your WebMBA? UWG and the Richards College of Business came highly recommended in several publications related to graduate programs. RCOB garners very high marks in student satisfaction, flexibility, staff competency and affordability. I also noted that the strength of the alumni network was formidable. The staff was extremely accommodating and supportive and I felt their personalities, attitudes and focus on students and academics were a reflection of the school as well as the program.

Where do you see yourself when you are done with your WebMBA? I graduated in April of 2014 at the conclusion of the spring 2014 semester. I realized the benefit of my MBA before graduating as I was recently promoted to Assistant Vice President, Growth Platforms – AT&T Business Solutions. This promotion would not have been possible without the MBA I am receiving from UWG Richards College of Business. The MBA also directly impacted the decision by the AT&T executive leadership team to select me to participate in the 2014 class of AT&T’s exclusive General Manager Accelerated Development Program (GMA ADP). This robust opportunity, which is reserved for fewer than 40 general managers (out of the population of 7,000 GMs) across AT&T each year, includes developmental activities across three broad areas: Education, Experience, and Exposure. The MBA and the experience of the program have prepared me for an entirely new dimension in my career. I am a more skilled manager, a more effective leader and a much better business person (Financial acumen, decision analysis, strategy, etc.). I see myself now equipped with the necessary tools and experiences to continue to evolve as a leader within AT&T and to develop my people and reach for executive roles with higher levels of exposure and responsibility.

What is the one word that describes you, the program and your future?

Ascending.

Jarrod S Barnes, Assistant Vice President, Growth Platforms AT&T Services, Inc. Dallas, TX.

Student Support – Behind the Technology

Students enrolled in online programmes don’t have the advantage of rubbing shoulders with on-campus recruiters during social events or dropping in to have their resumes reviewed at a career services facility. How do you tackle this in an online environment?

Most of our online MBAs are working professionals, therefore, the requirement for career services is not in high demand. That said, career services are available to students through one-on-one appointments, recruiting fairs, and networking events. Everything we offer our on-campus students is made available to our online students.

High-end production values, state-of-the-art video conferencing technology, and internet simulations are great, but what can students expect, over and above the technology?

Over and above technology, students should expect some type of personal connection. We use phone calls to connect with students which, while low-tech, work. Naturally, we use other communication tools but, essentially, any kind of conversation, regardless of how it takes place, will help to build that connection with the student. It is important to maintain a human contact as much as possible, even when the course work is mainly online. Great programmes ensure those connections are happening. Within the Georgia WebMBA, we make those connections early on and continue to do so throughout the programme. This in turn facilitates important feedback which allows us to constantly enhance the learning experience for our students, whether that be a change in curriculum, process or faculty.

The Online MBA Market, Today and Tomorrow

Typically, schools offering an online MBA option alongside their traditional MBA programme often mirror the curriculum, faculty, and admissions criteria employed by the latter. Therefore, are the aforementioned misgivings born out of a lack of understanding?

It is hard to pinpoint exactly why some may have doubts. Some people are traditionalists and simply like being in a traditional classroom setting. It may be hard for them to try a new method of educational delivery! Online MBAs are no longer a new thing, and are relatively mainstream these days. As our numbers continue to grow, we are focused on meeting the needs of our students while providing them a high quality education. Evaluations and personal feedback continue to make the online experience better and more valuable for different constituents of students.

Given the lack of corporate funding available to MBA applicants, price matters more than ever. As applicants increasingly look to smart and affordable options, what impact will this have on online MBA application volumes going forward?

Price is always a consideration when corporations reduce the amount of money they are willing to reimburse. It is very easy when the company is paying for the programme to not worry about price as much. However, when it’s coming out of one’s personal account, students become very focused on the cost/benefit. Financial aid is also available. Student loans are certainly less preferred than employer reimbursement, but they are available for graduate programmes just as they are for undergraduate programmes.

What does the future hold for the online MBA market and the Georgia WebMBA?

We will continue to innovate, not just from a technology standpoint, but also in terms of what we are doing in the classroom and through the development of our faculty. This will ensure we are staying competitive while also maintaining a strong return on investment, which we know is so important to our students. In the future we do anticipate more competition as an increasing number of traditional campus-based programmes are moving online as a result of student demand.

One of the things we are seeing is that many of the students who apply to our programme are former undergraduates who come back to us for an online MBA, regardless of where they are now. So that name brand recognition we pointed to earlier may also become more important as competition increases.

Biography

Faye S. McIntyre, Ph.D. is Dean and Sewell Chair of Private Enterprise, Richards College of Business, University of West Georgia. The Georgia WebMBA® is offered by University of West Georgia, Columbus State University, Georgia College & State University, Georgia Southern University, Kennesaw State University and Valdosta State University.

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