Mastering the MBA

By Laurie Arendt

Since the early 1980s, three simple letters have often signified the difference between career stagnation and upward mobility: MBA.

The master of business administration degree is both criticized and praised in business publications for its ability to train leaders for the future.

While the MBA degree has been around for nearly a century, the mass proliferation and marketing of advanced business degrees really took off about two decades ago. During the past 20 years, many programs have continued a quick evolution to meet the needs of business executives.

Most colleges and universities shy away from "traditional" scheduling, having fully understood that working professionals, particularly in an unstable economy, are loath to sequence out of their careers to return to campus full time. Coursework has become less general, more project and real-life oriented, and based on doing business in an international marketplace. As MBA programs at Wisconsin's campuses have changed, so too have their students.

Bob Erffmeyer, Ph.D., director of UW-Eau Claire's MBA program, says that there have been a number of subtle changes when looking at the demographics of the students enrolled in his school's program.

"Our average MBA student returns to the classroom about eight years after earning a bachelor's degree," he says, noting that the span recently decreased from about 10 years.

"The economy has also played a part in decreasing the number of students who pursue MBAs directly after earning their bachelor's degree."

While some state schools and universities continue to offer MBAs via traditional day coursework, most have followed a framework of accelerated night-and-weekend programming.

For Phil Bollman, the work-friendly scheduling was one of the factors in his decision to...
enroll in the UW-Eau Claire MBA program.

"I didn’t want to quit work and didn’t want to move away," says Bollman, a livestock production specialist for Land O’ Lakes at Durand-based Countryside Cooperative.

"After two years on the job, I began to look for more ways to broaden my knowledge base and to make myself more marketable in the workplace.

"I like my job but at some point I am looking to take on more of a management role."

Bollman is on track to graduate in May, and says that his decision to pursue a more management-focused advanced degree makes him somewhat unique in the livestock industry.

"Most people in my field are very science and research orientated," he says, adding that the merging of his animal science undergraduate degree with a graduate business degree is likely to make him more marketable on his career path.

"I am a little different than most because I am concentrating on the business side of things."

He is not the only one to see the benefit in the merging of two formerly distinct areas of academic study. At UW-Madison, a new master of science degree in biotechnology is offering students the opportunity to combine further scientific study with business knowledge.

"Biotechnology is really an emerging industry," says program administrator Kurt Zim-merman, "and there is a growing demand for cross-functional understanding for professionals in this field. Our curriculum integrates the life sciences with business and legal issues, including the ethics of biotechnology."

He thinks the UW-Madison’s biotech MS is unique in the country because of that integration of disciplines.

Ryan Liermann, who works as an associate research scientist at Pierce Biotechnology in Rockford, Ill., was an early convert to the UW program.

"I chose to get a degree in biotechnology instead of a traditional MBA because it was more specialized and it built on my science background," he says.

"My employer was able to understand how this education relates to my job in a way that is more specific than a traditional MBA."

Jennifer Fronczak also found that the cross functionality of this program appealed to her.

"I knew that I did not want a traditional science MS or Ph.D. program where I would be locked in the lab for years studying a minute aspect of science," she says.

"I also knew that I did not want to enroll in an MBA program. I wanted to learn about the business side of the biotech industry and more of the science side. I wanted a program which would educate me on a variety of topics and also give me a skill set that would help me with a career in this industry."

Since enrolling as part of the first class in fall 2002, Fronczak has transitioned from an entry-level scientist to group leader in the Operations Department at the Madison site of Invitrogen (the former PanVera), a maker of biochemical reagents for drug discovery.

Though the program has increased her scientific knowledge, it has also improved some crucial business-related skills.

"My communication skills have increased tremendously through the program, which has helped me to interact with others in the company," she says.

"Giving a 10-minute presentation in front of a group no longer frightens me. I am now more articulate and also am able to tailor my presentations to fit my audience. Communication is an enormous part of my job."

Liermann has also found that the program has impacted his career. "Already I have noticed more about my company and how every aspect works together in a way that may not have happened without this education," he notes.

"Additionally, this program has already helped me achieve a career goal I have been seeking for about one year; I have transitioned from a bench scientist in R&D to a project manager."

UW-Madison’s biotechnology program offers similar scheduling to that found in other executive MBA programs. Students attend class every other Thursday night, Friday and Saturday; the curriculum includes lecture and lab time. All students enrolled in the program are maintaining their current jobs while attending the program.

The ability to effectively maintain a career and pursue further education has also prompted a new evolution in advanced business degrees. Thanks to technology, it is now possible to also complete an MBA without ever setting foot in a classroom.

UW-Eau Claire’s MBA program began sharing coursework with other UW campuses via compressed video in 1995.

"By 1998, we moved onto the Internet," says Erfimeyer, who also serves as the director
of admissions for the UW-System's Internet Business Consortium MBA Program. "At that time, each school was providing one online prerequisite class, and it evolved when we began adding elective coursework."

The consortium is now made up of the following University of Wisconsin campuses: Eau Claire, La Crosse, Parkside and Oshkosh.

"Online programming bridges distance and accessibility issues."
Rob Erffmeyer, director
UW-Eau Claire MBA program

Tuition is somewhat more expensive, approximately $525 per credit vs. around $300 for on-campus credits, primarily due to the costs of maintaining a functional Web classroom.

Online MBA programs are a bit different than their classroom counterparts.

"It's hard to hide," says Erffmeyer. "You must be an active student. It's a little different than in a traditional classroom. You can't participate by simply being an active listener."

Classroom discussions are posted on the program's Web site. Classmates often break off into chat rooms for discussion purposes or simply pick up the telephone to talk to each other.

"Online programming bridges distance and accessibility issues," says Erffmeyer. "I have one student who works second shift at the post office, making it impossible for her to attend night classes. But she 'attends' class when it is convenient for her, often in her pajamas."

Online student Mark Hanson lives and works in Madison, but enrolled in the online MBA program.

"I chose this program because I wanted to go to Eau Claire but couldn't afford to quit work just to go to school, plus I like living in Madison," he says.

"I tried to get into the MBA program at UW-Madison but the cost and the fact many classes were in the day made it unfeasible for me."

After performing regular, required self-assessments at work, Chad Gustafson came to the conclusion that graduate school was in his future.

"Every time I performed the self-assessment, I identified business acumen as a weakness and my supervisor agreed," says Gustafson, now a quality engineer for Applied Tech Products in Elkhorn.

"I decided that I was going to turn a weakness into a strength and pursue an MBA."
He began taking traditional on-campus courses before making a career change and subsequent relocation.

"At that point, I did not know where I was going to be living in the near future, but I knew I wanted to continue with school, so I enrolled for the online classes," he says.

The online program currently draws students from throughout Wisconsin and beyond our state's borders.

"Ultimately, we would like to also add a global online MBA, where each cohort would be made up of students from eight or nine different countries," Erffmeyer says, noting that the target rollout date for this program is summer 2005.

"This particular program would truly be an international classroom that would go far beyond Wisconsin's borders.

"Based on our continued experience with online MBAs, we believe such a program has the potential to be quite successful."

And based on the experience of those completing executive MBAs of all kinds, they also have the potential to be more successful.

---

**LETTERS: Continued from page 8**

**Millard Johnson replies:**

The definition of goodwill has been a contentious issue among accountants for many years. It is true that the current convention is to calculate it as the excess of the purchase price over the fair market value of the tangible assets acquired, but it is also true that goodwill appears on the acquirer's balance sheet as the excess of the purchase price of the assets over their new, recomputed net book value.

But let's not get too technical. Goodwill could also be described as the term accountants assign to an intangible asset that the rest of us would view as the value of the extra earning power a company can generate because of a favorable perception by customers.

Mr. Schultz raises a second point: Of course bankers will "really care" if a debtor's cash flow starts to dry up. But at that point the bank has already dealt with the issue of goodwill, or should have.

On the third and final point, auditors often give qualified opinions, but if that doesn't ease their discomfort with the financial statements they can always disengage. The client then free to shop around for an accountant who can fashion an adequate disclaimer. That may sound cavalier, but so be it.

**Millard Johnson**

Contributing editor