

Your Turn

by Mark E. Haskins



tunity to create substantive yet distinctive programs that contribute to a school's long-term sustainable success.

In the spirit of this idea, I can suggest four areas that offer avenues for differentiation among

business schools.

First, we might target our class profiles. A diverse student body encourages rich interactions among students; but it also affects course content, and not always in a positive way. Like many professors, I currently teach students with a variety of learning styles, talents, personalities, career levels, life experiences, and nationalities. To design each course so that each student has the potential to achieve the course's learning objectives, I must create classes that are more general than I would with a more targeted group.

But what if schools geared their admissions processes to select students according to only one, two, or three very specific profiles, instead of assembling a class of students with a mixed, broad array of attributes as is commonly done? Under this model, professors could tailor courses to the learning needs of specific student groups. For example, I would design a very different accounting course for a classroom of international students who are visual learners with humanities backgrounds than I would for a classroom of American students who are kinesthetic learners with science backgrounds.

Such differentiation, of course, poses some challenges. Different programs might need to vary in length to accommodate different student groups. Faculty would need to design learning experiences and

Schools often compete for the same faculty, students, and corporate friends.

Professors select course materials from the same directory of publishers and frequently exchange course syllabi. Case-oriented programs introduce lectures to clarify concepts, while lecture-oriented programs introduce cases to exemplify practice.

None of these factors, if taken alone, are necessarily to be avoided. It's natural to trade ideas with one's colleagues and seek to improve one's product. But when stacked on top of each other, these factors create an expanding arena of similar practices, philosophies, and purposes. It's not as if we're adapting ideas from other industries to our businesses, as Ford Motor Co. might do with lessons learned from Wal-Mart. We're all in the same business. We're all selling MBAs. By borrowing each others' ideas and mimicking each others' practices, we preempt differentiation between programs. We create not a robust and vibrant community of unique MBA programs, but rather a widespread, indistinguishable sameness.

At one level, the GHP may appear to be inevitable. After all, the risks and rewards of crafting distinctive MBA program features are problematic. Even modestly successful differentiations in an MBA program have historically been hard to defend and often do not contribute to a business school's pursuit of competitive advantage.

For the bulk of MBA programs, however, an unexplored challenge exists: to break the mold from which most modern MBA programs are created. We should seize the oppor-

I The GHP ("Great Homogenization Process")

Are we in danger of commoditizing the

100,000 MBA degrees awarded each year? I think we are. Across the community of full-time, residential MBA programs (including my own institution), the GHP is at work—the Great Homogenization Process.

We see the GHP at work every day, the result of a number of similar, converging forces. Excluding the handful of MBA programs with a historically anchored brand name, the characteristics that distinguish most MBA programs are the same: size, alumni, price, and location. Likewise, most MBA programs pursue the same goals, such as greater globalization, more diversity, and more valuable alliances, as well as the incubation of business startups and the construction of state-of-the-art facilities.

To achieve these goals, school representatives visit each others' campuses and Web sites to "borrow" good ideas. They conduct benchmarking studies of other institutions' programs, comparing them to their own. Consortia are formed to provide face-to-face opportunities for sharing information. Accrediting agencies impose similar criteria on the schools they visit. Deans devour the latest business-press rankings and find themselves driven to an identical set of scorecard metrics.

But the GHP doesn't stop there. It affects admissions brochures, which are laden with generalities, promising similar-sounding experiences through "innovative programs," "leadership development" or "international opportunities."

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course content tailored to the strengths and weaknesses of a specific student group's profile. Class sizes might have to be smaller to achieve tailored learning objectives, and the same courses might have to move at different speeds for different groups of students. Even so, with so many potential student body profiles from which to choose, a school has a number of opportunities to establish a reputation for excellence in targeted niches.

Second, we can change our educational philosophy, providing "just-in-time" (JIT) content instead of "just-in-case" (JIC). MBA programs are largely JIC in nature—that is, we say, "We think you should be able to calculate the capital lease liability reported for a publicly traded U.S. company." After learning the skill, the student goes to work for human resources in a privately held company, never giving that calculation another moment's thought.

Under a JIT model, however, recruiters hire students upon their admittance to an MBA program, not after graduation. Students learn skills that are immediately required by their employers, rather than skills that *might* be useful in the future. It would not be necessary for students to be on the hiring organization's payroll immediately, but their educational program would be determined, in large part, by the collaboration of the student, faculty, and the employing organization.

This model integrates students' work experience with their learning agendas. Therefore, the time from course design to delivery would need to be shortened to respond to students' learning and working needs. Schools would need to develop a process for identifying students

with similar JIT needs. They also would need to construct new methods for assigning faculty to courses, determining appropriate faculty loads, and evaluating student performance. But the customization of course content would attract organizations who want to hire students with the profiles a school serves, further differentiating an MBA program from its peers.

Third, we can create a more heterogeneous landscape for the MBA through the creation of and adherence to meaningful certification standards. Too many MBA programs appear to be "cash and carry"—once a student is admitted, takes the course requirements, and pays his bills, he earns his MBA degree. But do we truly identify real differences in student mastery? Not all admitted students perform at equivalent levels. We do not do a service to our programs, our students, or those who hire our students by awarding largely undifferentiated grades and generic degrees.

Indeed, it can be convincingly argued that the lack of differentiation among MBA graduates is the primary reason there might be a market for an MBA certification exam. Few programs have assessed and reported student performance in a meaningfully discriminating way; therefore, a certification exam would be a way for business schools and employers to evaluate student competencies. Such an exam, however, would not be an issue if business schools implemented a system to assess student performance, one that better communicated a student's competencies to prospective employers.

Finally, we can differentiate the degree itself. If undergraduate liberal arts majors complete an MBA pro-

gram tailored to them, we could differentiate their degree as an MBALA. If we tailored an MBA program to students with an engineering background, we might award them MBAEN degrees.

I'd like to make clear that I do not advocate differentiation for its own sake. Not every MBA program can specialize, and not every business school can accommodate students with unique objectives. But I believe that many untapped opportunities exist for MBA programs, and that thoughtful differentiation would rejuvenate the overall MBA community.

The siren call of the GHP is luring us to a land of commoditized programs, degrees, and graduates. It's time to acknowledge the GHP at work in our MBA programs before our programs become no more than mere commodities. Rather than funnel a diverse student body through a one-size-fits-all MBA program experience, let's be more boutique-like in our student segments, offering more customized programs and providing truly value-added educational experiences. Let's be more discriminating, partnering with employers to offer JIT curricula that students with a specific "need to know" can immediately put to use.

Let's seize the opportunity to be different and to define our programs in a more meaningful way. If we can do this, I believe the constellation of MBA programs has ample space for many stars to shine. **■**

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