

## Where Are All the Female MBAs?

**If women make up half the population, why don't they make up half of students enrolled in MBA programs?** At most universities, female enrollment in the MBA program hovers at just above 35 percent. Why aren't more women applying to graduate schools of business?

In 2000, the women's research and advisory group Catalyst partnered with the University of Michigan to conduct a study to find the answers. The top reasons respondents gave were: They don't have enough role models and mentors; they're concerned about flexibility and work/life balance; and they have serious concerns about academic and other pressures.

To address the issues uncovered in the Catalyst study and inspire more women to become business leaders, Forté Foundation was founded in 2001. Forté has conducted studies and done intensive outreach to women at all stages of their careers to encourage their pursuit of business leadership positions. As executive director of Forté Foundation, I have been able to closely watch the changes in MBA programs over the past few years and see what progress they have made since my days as assistant dean and director of the MBA Program at the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin.

Even though b-schools have been working to address these issues, the concerns of women remain. True, female enrollment rates in MBA programs have made steady progress since 2000, and many business

schools have broken the 35 percent "glass ceiling." Yet, at Forté, we still hear some of the same concerns from young women who are considering applying for their MBAs, which means much still remains to be done.

I have a blunt truth for business school administrators: If you want women to enroll in your graduate business programs, you need to work harder to attract them. Primarily, this means finding ways to show them how successful they could be in business careers—and how your school can set them on the right path. It is imperative that you proactively counsel these young women about their many and varied career choices, how these options could fit into their personal life goals, and what hurdles they might encounter on the way.

Our research has identified five broad strategies that can help any business school attract more women to its graduate program. Most of them cost little, but they could have far-reaching effects on the female population of your school.

### Start earlier.

Don't just recruit undergraduates. Work to change the perceptions of high school students about business careers and business education. Reach out to parents, who are often the key influencers when it comes to career choices. Too often, I've seen parents direct their sons toward specific career goals and experiences, while encouraging their daughters to remain flexible and open to all options. This hesitation puts young women at a disadvantage because they immediately find themselves several steps behind their male counterparts.

Tap into groups that serve teens and preteens. You can work with junior achievement organizations or local business groups that encourage young women to pursue business careers. You also can encourage faculty and students to participate in high school programs or summer camps so young women can interact with them and grow excited about business prospects.

Think about partnering with a group like Independent Means Inc., which runs Camp \$tart Up, a business plan competition that encourages entrepreneurial spirit in girls ages 14 to 18. One of the group's partners, the Johnson School at Cornell University, hosts a camp each summer as a pipeline development tool for its business school. The details are online at [www.johnson.cornell.edu/odi/campstartup/](http://www.johnson.cornell.edu/odi/campstartup/).

### Use women to recruit women.

E-mail prospective students information that showcases female professors or features current female students. At the same time, find a student who would be willing to answer questions or be a resource at an online bulletin board, and include her contact information in these e-mails.

Make sure your Web site includes photographs of students and faculty who are women. Consider including case histories or videos from female alums who explain why they decided to apply for their MBAs.

Review the print materials that you use in recruiting or that you share with alums. If you don't have a brochure that specifically targets female MBA candidates, create one. One-half to one-third of b-schools don't have a women's brochure—don't be left behind.

**BUSINESS SCHOOLS AND THE ORGANIZATIONS THAT SUPPORT WOMEN IN BUSINESS MUST DO A BETTER JOB OF CONVINCING YOUNG WOMEN THAT A BUSINESS DEGREE IS ACHIEVABLE, PROVIDES INTERESTING CAREER OPTIONS, AND WILL PAY OFF THEIR INVESTMENT OVER TIME.**

**Maximize your resources.**

Find an alumna who is passionate about seeing more women enrolled in business school. Ask her to open her home or office for a networking luncheon or a mentoring meeting, or find out if she'd be willing to sponsor an event on campus.

Showcase the female business professors among your faculty. Give them opportunities to be role models on campus and in the community. Incorporate such community relations into their performance reviews. Not only will their visibility help attract more women to your program, but it will enhance your school's reputation for diversity.

Promote your women alums to local and national media outlets to prove that your school believes it is possible for women to have careers in business. Perhaps your development office can research your databases to find female graduates who would be willing to be seen as inspirational figures. Contact them to discuss how they could support the school with a gift of time and experience. I have found that many are happy to serve as role models.

**Mine your undergraduates.**

These are some of your most likely candidates for applying to graduate schools in business, so be sure to cultivate them. Through on-campus events or online mentoring sessions, create opportunities for female undergraduates to meet women who are current MBA students or

graduates with successful and fulfilling careers.

Find the women who are participating in honor societies, student groups, and extracurricular activities. Initiate relationships with them now, so after they graduate they can continue to serve as ambassadors for the school.



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Consider ways to keep those young women attached to the university—and the business school. Develop an early admission initiative that commits female undergraduates to your graduate business program while they're still on campus, so they will return to your school once they've acquired work

experience. You should also give them reasons to come back often, either in person or via your Web site, to learn more about how an MBA can open doors for them.

**Smooth the way.**

Consider offering your students flexible options for completing your MBA program. The Millennials, as today's younger students are sometimes called, are more concerned about flexibility than previous generations. Perhaps you could accelerate a two-year program to an 18-month program. Or you might offer more options in scheduling classes. Consider ways your program could accommodate childcare concerns or maternity leave.


Promote majors that appeal to female students, and I don't just mean human resources or marketing. Ask your alums and your board

members to help you identify curriculum offerings that particularly appeal to women. Reinforce these options by bringing in role models who can show young women the connection between their classes and their careers.

Offer services for the families of women who are relocating to attend business school. In MBA programs, it's much more common to see women trailing their husbands back to business school—but we might see women take that step more often if we made it easier for women to relocate their partners.

**Wooing the women**

If you want to draw more women to your graduate business program, you must create a program that seems exciting, welcoming, and full of promise. You must educate them about the full range of opportunities that are available, appeal to their specific interests, inspire them through role models, and build formal networks that will support them throughout their careers.

Business schools and the organizations that support women in business must do a better job of convincing young women that a business degree is achievable, provides interesting career options, and will pay off their investment over time. Even now, there are young women looking for reasons to attend business school. Let's not keep them waiting. 

Elissa Ellis is Executive Director of Forté Foundation, a consortium of corporations, nonprofits, and business schools dedicated to motivating and supporting women pursuing business careers. It is headquartered in Austin, Texas.