

# THE EXTREME



# MAKEOVER

**A**s one of the first students to enroll in the redesigned MBA program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Business, Elizabeth Knox describes an educational experience that's quite different from that of most MBA students before her. Rather than take required courses in a general core curriculum, Knox chose a specialization before she took her first class. Rather than work primarily on her own, Knox will work with a team of students—each with a different specialization—for the duration of the program. And rather than wait until the

ula. In the face of some criticism of more generalized MBA educational offerings, many business educators have reached a consensus: The core MBA curriculum, while still very valuable, is no longer enough to suit the needs of today's employers. The degree needs a comprehensive makeover, they argue, to transform the way business schools teach business.

#### **In With the New**

The wave of recent MBA redesigns may have been inevitable, given mounting external pressures business schools are facing. Few deny that the heart of the MBA

**Many business schools are taking a new look at the old **MBA**. Their verdict? The conventional MBA curriculum may need to be reconsidered and revamped to supply 21st-century business with graduates trained to solve its 21st-century problems.**

### **BY TRICIA BISOUX**

end of her program to plan her career, she consults regularly with two industry mentors who will guide her professional development concurrently with her studies.

This new approach has “opened countless doors,” says Knox. “Students immediately adapted to the challenging coursework and competitive atmosphere, and focused on their specializations from the first day of class.” The specializations also encouraged more immediate, goal-oriented job searching, she adds. In fact, some students had summer internship offers before the first semester finished. Knox herself had already fielded interviews from nine different companies in her chosen specialization—market research—before December.

Welcome to the new and improved MBA—and, its corollary, the new and improved MBA student. Business schools are betting that companies will clamor to hire students like Knox, who are the product of more specialized, integrated, experiential, and sequenced curric-

ulum—with its focus on building skills in finance, marketing, and other core business disciplines—remains vital to teaching business. Even so, recruiters are demanding MBAs who are better communicators, team builders, and creative thinkers. Moreover, a competitive market has compelled business schools to move in completely new directions.

The ever-growing importance of technology is also behind the MBA's transformation. Technology has led to globalization, long-distance collaboration, and dilemmas of ethics and security that did not exist before the Internet, e-mail, databases, and virtual workgroups. In an integrated world, say educators, a compartmentalized MBA program simply no longer does the job.

“The MBA market is maturing, competition is increasing, and market demands are changing more often,” says Stephen Foerster, director of the MBA program at the Ivey School of Business at the University of

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—Mel Crask, University of Georgia



Western Ontario in Canada. “People are asking serious questions, such as ‘Why should I pursue an MBA? Why should I pursue it at your school? And what’s in it for me?’”

The modern-day MBA makeover is the result of years of soul-searching at a number of schools, as they attempt to respond to these questions. Ivey, for instance, recently launched its latest revamped curriculum, which now consists of eight seven-week terms, sequenced to emulate the business decision-making process. Some other schools that launched redesigned MBA programs in the fall of 2004 include the Tepper School of Business at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; the Terry College of Business at the University of Georgia in Atlanta; the University of Washington Business School in Seattle; LeBow College of Business at Drexel University and the Fox School of Business at Temple University, both in Philadelphia; and the Lally School of Management and Technology at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York.

Early specialization is an especially prominent feature of some of today’s redesigned MBA programs. MBA students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, for example, choose to specialize in one of 13 areas, including corporate finance, security analysis, arts administration, brand and product management, entrepreneurial management, real estate, information systems, and market research, among others.

“Some students are interested in a general management curriculum, and there are many programs out there for them,” says Michael Knetter, dean of the university’s business school. “We wanted to focus on students who know they want a career in a particular functional area.”

In addition to specializing, redesigned MBA programs are paying greater attention to helping students become better problem-solvers and decision makers, says Dan Poston, executive director of MBA programs at the University of Washington. “MBA recruiters have told us they have been dismayed, at times, by outstanding MBA students from top schools who, when faced with actual business problems, either freeze or forget what they’ve learned and revert to ‘seat-of-the-pants’ decisions,” says Poston.

“So, we now require students to complete at least two company projects beyond internships. We also provide faculty coaches to help them if they freeze or disregard something they’ve learned. In this way, we build a stronger bridge between theory and practice.”

As business schools place new emphases on specialization, presentation, and career management in their revamped curricula, students learn more than general business skills, say educators. With every course they take, students develop career-specific skills and knowledge that make them immediately valuable to employers in their chosen fields.

### **No Longer Going It Alone**

To equip a student with all the skills employers desire—proficiency in team-building, communication, and leadership, as well as a solid grasp of general business knowledge—many business schools have realized that they can’t do it all. Business has become too complex and too interlaced with other disciplines; it’s not feasible to expect business faculty to teach their core subjects thoroughly and address all the soft skills a business student must also develop.

In response, many MBA programs are more frequently calling on the talents of individuals and organizations outside the business school building. That means business schools are hiring outside experts in communication, culture, and professional development to compensate for areas where their own faculty lack expertise.

The answer for the University of Washington Business School was to allow business professors to teach their courses in tandem with Judith Kalitzki, formerly a member of the undergraduate communications faculty. Now the director of management communications at UW, Kalitzki works with individual faculty members to bring communications-based projects, such as take-home essays, in-class presentations, or corporate reports, into their core courses.

“In the past, communications was limited to one MBA elective that students could choose to take in their second year. That course had to cover everything related to communications—written, oral, strategic, interpersonal—the whole

gamut,” says Kalitzki. “The course was limited, in both the information and the feedback students got.” Today, UW’s new program incorporates communication as a foundation of its redesign. Kalitzki works with students individually to complete assessments of their communication skills, noting strengths and weaknesses that need to be addressed. Students for whom English is a second language also receive help in improving their English proficiency.

Now that the program has almost one full year under its belt, Kalitzki already plans to recruit this year’s first-year students who excelled in areas of communication, leadership, and teamwork. As second-year students, they can apply to become “coaches” who will teach these skills to the incoming class. The learning experience will then come full circle, says Kalitzki. First-year students will benefit from the knowledge and experience of the second-year students; and second-year students will benefit from putting into practice the skills they’ve already learned.

Administrators at the Terry College at the University of Georgia hired ten executive coaches to teach students communication and professional development skills. “We didn’t want to put that burden on our faculty—they’re business faculty, not speech or writing instructors,” says Mel Crask, director of Terry’s full-time MBA program. “We didn’t want to put them in the position of saying, ‘This is good writing’ or ‘This is bad writing.’ So, we brought in the same sort of executive training experts that businesses use to teach good business writing and presentation skills. The classroom becomes a laboratory for students to practice these skills and receive feedback in a safe environment where they don’t have to fear making mistakes.”

Carnegie Mellon’s Tepper School expanded its MBA program into other areas of the university for its new “MBA Tracks” program. The program allows students to choose a particular track, or specialization, from ten options, which include biotechnology, computational marketing, e-business,

## The MBA, Then and Now

Different business schools have adopted different approaches to developing their newly minted MBA programs. In large part, however, they are responding to the same market trends. As a result, they are making similar choices in their redesigns, which show just how much the MBA is changing:

### THE OLD MBA...

- Focuses on required courses aimed at the core business disciplines, often offered in no specific order
- Offers a general business education that covers the core disciplines of business
- Allows students to take electives based on a variety of interests, often at any time during their programs
- Includes developing communications and career management skills as a separate course or activity
- Encourages students to work alone, except for time-limited projects or class discussion
- Encourages faculty to work alone to teach their chosen disciplines
- Includes staff-provided career counseling to students in the second year of the program

### THE NEW MBA...

- Focuses on core and industry-specific courses and activities, offered in a sequence designed to build skills over time
- Often requires students to choose a specialization in their first year of study
- Allows students to take electives at predetermined times in their programs, based on their chosen specializations
- Integrates development of communication and career management skills throughout all courses
- Requires students to work in teams for a semester or even for the entire program
- Often requires faculty to work in teams to integrate several disciplines in a single course or project
- Brings in mentors, executive coaches, and leaders from industry to give students advice and feedback from the start of their programs

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—Dan Poston, University of Washington



entrepreneurship, integrated product development, international management, operations management, operations research, wealth and asset management, or general management. Tepper tapped faculty in engineering, computer science, public affairs, and other Carnegie Mellon departments to take an active role in developing industry- and skill-specific courses that dovetail directly into the MBA. A professor in the German department may teach a language course for students on the international management track, for example. Or an engineering professor may teach a course on manufacturing design to students on the integrated product development track.

The program is the result of many hours of meetings between John Mather, the executive director of Tepper’s master’s programs, and the deans and faculty from colleges across the campus. Now that the MBA Tracks program has been launched, says Mather, outside faculty are growing more enthusiastic about developing their own courses for the MBA program. In addition, business school faculty are finding new opportunities to engage in collaborative research with faculty from other colleges on campus. Colleges are also collaborating to include Tepper MBAs in their own job fairs and corporate recruitment.

“In our Wealth and Asset Management Track, there’s a behavioral view of investment, so our psychology department is considering creating a course on investment behavior,” says Mather. “We’re also working on a track with the fine arts department, which will focus on the merging of fine arts, business, and technology. We are sitting on a microcosm here at Carnegie Mellon, and we wanted to see what we could do with that opportunity. It’s so exciting to see this new program develop a life of its own and to watch the impact it’s having on the entire campus.”

### **‘Stay Out of the Way’**

Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of a curriculum redesign is keeping its momentum going from year to year. At first, faculty and staff may express seemingly inexhaustible enthusiasm for a curricular overhaul, but the project’s future still can be tenuous. If the person championing the redesign changes jobs, or leaves the school, momentum

can stall and a new program can regress into its old format in no time.

Poston, who was a major driver of the redesigned curriculum at the University of Washington, has seen this regression happen before. “People central to the redesign move on and do other things; new people come in who are less enthralled with the project,” says Poston. “It’s hard to keep that enthusiasm going.”

In the end, redesigning an MBA curriculum is a community effort. No matter how passionately a dean feels about the new program, it’s better to allow the entire faculty to contribute to a collaboratively designed program, says Knetter of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “Every dean will have a strong view of what should happen in a curriculum redesign. It’s better, however, to provide the information and resources faculty need to make good decisions and then just stand back,” he says.

Knetter admits that the final version of Wisconsin’s new MBA program doesn’t have exactly the elements he would have chosen. Even so, it represents the faculty’s best collaborative efforts. “What’s important is that the majority of people are happy with what we decided to do, and they’re the ones who have to deliver it,” says Knetter. “In any curriculum redesign, deans should pick the few spots where they really think there’s something important to advocate. Otherwise, they should just stay out of the way.”

### **The ‘One-Course’ MBA**

In perhaps the biggest shift, business schools seem to be moving away from self-directed course selection. In the past, MBA students only had to complete the required courses—the order in which they took those courses was largely left up to them. That system, however, has one significant disadvantage: It does not ensure that students build and develop a specific set of skills from one course to the next.

As a result, many business schools have made the switch to a carefully sequenced curriculum designed to help students accumulate knowledge and skills throughout their programs. Course content is planned so that the work stu-

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# Anatomy of a Redesign

## A New Undergraduate Curriculum at Curtin University of Technology By Nimal Jayaratna

**M**BAAs aren't the only programs undergoing redesigns. Undergraduate business programs, too, are evolving. In my tenure as head of the School of Information Systems (SIS) at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Australia, I worked with faculty and staff to tackle a complete redesign of our undergraduate curriculum. Our old curriculum treated the areas of teaching, research, and industry involvement too separately. Our goal in creating our new curriculum was to integrate these areas into a single, interconnected "system" of learning.

In the redesign process, we temporarily ignored the considerations that traditionally dominate a school's attention, such as accreditation requirements, university regulations, and resource limitations. Instead, we wanted to aim for our ideal, integrated curriculum, one that allowed students to deepen their understanding, accumulate knowledge, and build on their skills over the course of the program.

### A New Philosophy

As educators, we often associate what we do in terms of "delivery," as if education were a commodity that can be delivered to a consumer in a neat package. That terminology may be convenient, but it can undermine our ultimate goal—to improve student learning. When education is "delivered," students often expect a physical entity, confusing their textbooks and notes with an understanding of the material.

In the past, business programs also have "modularized" their educational offerings, presenting each course separately. This approach may provide excellent choices for students, but it also inadvertently encourages them to learn material in portions. They discard material once they've completed the class, accumulating credits rather than developing knowledge.

We set out to change that mindset. We knew that we had to move away from modularization and embrace integration. Our graduates would have to know more about "how to integrate" than about "how to construct." Rote knowledge and memorization would not be as useful as the ability to examine and integrate new information.

### Design, Plan, Execute

We based our curriculum redesign on the "systems" work of the late West Churchman of the University of California, Berkeley, campus and Peter Checkland of the Lancaster

University Management School in the United Kingdom. We proceeded through the following stages:

**Constructing Our Model.** Our first task in the redesign process was to construct a new model for education, in which we viewed learning as a series of "transformations" in our students' education. The primary transformation in the new program would be the development of students' problem-solving abilities—their ability to think, perform, and evaluate their actions.

**Linking Teaching with Research.** For our new curriculum development model, we wanted our teaching and research to be inextricably linked, and our faculty's research used as a learning tool. In addition, we linked our teaching and research to resources off campus—including industry, publishers, professional institutes, and employers.

**Identifying Knowledge Areas.** Our new curriculum is organized into five themes: analysis (problem solving), system design (databases and Web sites), development (computer programming), technical infrastructure (business technology), and integration (case study and capstone project). Each theme is led by a thematic subject leader, whose role is to work with faculty members to coordinate the 12-week courses, or units, within each theme.

The first unit in each theme starts with simple generic concepts. For instance, the first unit in systems design aims to pique students' curiosity as to why they should study that theme. Instructors encourage students to understand what is meant by "design," what skills are involved, how one designs, and the role of structure in design. The next units add increasing levels of complexity and challenge.

This approach has three primary advantages. First, students start with generic concepts, so they do not lose sight of the subject's contextual issues. Second, units within a theme "build" on one another, so students won't forget what they've learned in the previous unit. Finally, the units are carefully planned to eliminate redundancy in the information students receive, increasing each theme's consistency and coherence.

**Emphasizing Faculty Involvement.** We wanted to ensure that our entire faculty had access to the latest ideas from industry. So, we recruited eight "industry champions" from the corporate community to work with the thematic subject leaders.

**Setting Unit Objectives.** We developed a common template for the organization of each unit. Each unit is organized around a set of objectives linked directly to the school's mission and targeted to a set of learning outcomes. In our new program, a

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unit is effective only if it answers two questions to the faculty's satisfaction: “Why are we teaching this content?” and “Why should students study this content?”

**Planning Content.** We then considered the most appropriate mix of units for a particular market segment. We appointed a course program leader to head each program and work with an industry champion who provided the market perspective.

**Bringing It All Together.** Because each industry requires different knowledge requirements, we introduced a unit in the second year as a capstone project to integrate industry-specific knowledge and skills. After the final unit, students should be prepared to be immediately productive in their careers.

### Lessons Learned

Only *after* we designed our ideal curriculum did we turn our attention to the more political and procedural concerns of the university. With our new curriculum structure in hand, we retroactively mapped it to university regulations, adjusting its timing, format, and presentation as needed. But because we were not blinded by such concerns from the beginning, we were truly able to design a curriculum that was ideal for learning.

Throughout the redesign process, we gleaned several valuable lessons:

- The dean or head must lead—or at least oversee—the redesign process to give it direction and maintain its momentum.
- Faculty involvement is *critical* for the subsequent success of the new curriculum.
- Faculty involvement does not guarantee success.

Consensus helps achieve “what is feasible,” but not necessarily “what is desirable.” All involved must often subordinate individual concerns to the good of the project as a whole.

- A process must be established to ensure that the project continues, even if those responsible for creating it move on.

For a curricular redesign to be successful, administrators must commit to the philosophical aspects of curricular change and resist being waylaid by apparent obstacles to change. After all, such a constructive shift in educational philosophy is one that may be crucial to a business school's survival in an increasingly competitive, adaptive, and demanding market.

*Nimal Jayaratna is former head of Curtin University's School of Information Systems in Perth, Australia. He is now the executive head of the School of Business Information Technology at Manchester Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom.*

dents do in one class builds directly on the skills they learned in the previous class. Some programs consist, not of distinct courses, but of interconnected courses, in which the lessons learned in one are applied and expanded in another—sometimes consecutively, but often simultaneously. In a sense, this “new MBA” may be slowly evolving into a single MBA course that happens to last two years.

Perhaps the most significant characteristic of this new breed of MBA is the perpetual state of its redesign. The educators involved in the redesign projects mentioned here emphasize that their work will not end with this year's class or next year's class. Their MBAs will never be “done.” Rather, they'll remain works in progress, changing in response to new research, new development, and new demands in the marketplace.

“There's now a lot of pressure on business schools to keep their programs changing,” says Poston of the University of Washington. “We're always being asked, ‘When was your last curriculum revision?’ We now must mirror the industries we serve, where product life cycles are very short and must be constantly adapted to meet new needs.”

“As we continue, we'll fine-tune the program, but we're trying to make the program much more responsive to change,” says Mather of the Tepper School. “If change in business is more widespread and more rapid, then MBA programs must be designed in a more responsive mode.” Many educators have adopted a completely new view of their business programs. Instead of saying, “Our new MBA will take us into the next two decades,” they are saying, “Our new MBA will have the flexibility to change, grow with, and adapt to business indefinitely.”

In large part, the traditional MBA, in its familiar form, may be singing its swan song. Years of sustained discussion about its value, its ability to innovate, and its relevance to the modern business world have pushed the MBA into a rapid evolution—into a perpetual makeover. But such constant evolution isn't necessarily a burden. It can help business schools stay adaptive to the new business context of each academic year. It will create an environment where educators feel freer to innovate and recreate their educational delivery. And many hope that continued redesign and improvement of the curriculum will keep the MBA nimble enough to meet—and even surpass—the ongoing demands of business. 