

The ABCs of M.B.A.s

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MAE 2011 Volume: 6 Issue: 5 (June)



Toward the end of James King's military career, he began to think about his options. After 18 years in the Navy, he was ready to transition into a civilian career and explored his options for postmilitary life. That's when he discovered the W.P. Carey School of Business at Arizona State University and found that an M.B.A. would perfectly complement his background and allow him to build upon the management experience that he gained in the military.

Though King thought that the school's staff was helpful—such as when he attempted to navigate through the extensive and daunting red tape associated with receiving his tuition benefits from the Yellow Ribbon Program—he still was unsure about exactly what he wanted to do when he finished his degree. Thanks to the W.P. Carey School, King was able to gain perspective about what his goals were and ways to use his military experience to his advantage in the workforce.

"To be honest, as I was transitioning out I had no idea of really what I wanted to do. This is where the program that I selected helped me because there is a phenomenal career management center that works with current M.B.A. students and graduates. They gave us a pipeline and a guide on where to go to determine what we're going to do next," said King, who now works as the director of admissions for M.B.A. Programs at W.P. Carey. "I suggest that military students utilize all of the resources they have available to them as they're transitioning out. The transition is never easy, but a school's services are going to make it a lot simpler as they transition from one lifestyle to another."

Despite the challenges of transitioning from the military into civilian careers, the experience that these students have is invaluable to those who select M.B.A. students, and many believe that their background makes them ideal

candidates for admission and a perfect fit for any M.B.A. program. "Students with a military background bring just about every qualification that we could possibly want or ask for in any M.B.A. candidate—almost in a uniform manner," said Kevin Kiley, the director of M.B.A. admissions and the senior associate director of M.B.A. admissions at Washington University in St. Louis. "The things that we generally look for in the admissions process, veterans almost always bring—things like maturity or tactical skills, performance under pressure, motivation or drive toward a goal, leadership, dedication and good citizenship. Everything that we look for in every one of our M.B.A.s, these veterans almost always bring to the table in droves."

Benefits of an M.B.A.

Whether or not a military or veteran student has a clear picture of the future, an M.B.A. program offers the knowledge and practical skills that are needed to successfully transition into the civilian workforce.

Teamwork

Working in a team environment is nothing new to those who have been in the military, and for M.B.A. programs the ability to work in teams with people from different walks of life is the cornerstone of student learning. These teams are made up of students from different work backgrounds—the military, the public sector and the business world—who bring their diverse perspectives to the table when tackling assigned problems. For example, schools may partner with representatives from local companies who present a real-world business problem to students who must then work to solve the problem and present their solutions to these businesses. This type of learning prepares students to think outside the box and become accustomed to merging their ideas with other members of a team in order to find solutions to a problem.

"Our faculty members are pushing students to be very active participants in their own learning and to share their experiences with each other," said Susan Cates, the president and associate dean of executive development at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. "We believe that a big part of any top tier M.B.A. program is the ability to learn from your fellow students and so we are very mindful and purposeful in how we approach our admissions process—bringing students together forms a rich fabric of experiences from which the faculty can draw on to drive discussions and interactions within the classroom." That is not to say that working in teams does not come with its challenges. Just as with any workplace, team members in an M.B.A. program will face a number of conflicts—ranging from differences of opinion to personality problems. Part of being an M.B.A. student is learning how to deal with these rifts in a professional way and not allowing differences to hamper their ability to get the job done.

"A critical part of learning in an M.B.A. program is learning how to deal with different sorts of personalities and how to manage through that," Cates said. "In the course of your career, you are often going to be working on teams with people that you didn't choose to be on the team with and so we have very high expectations of our students in terms of their ability to work through those situations in a professional and respectful manner."

In very extreme cases, however, a school will sometimes need to step in and try to help resolve the conflict within a team and reassign team members if the conflicts cannot be solved amicably.

Building Hard and Soft Skills

M.B.A. programs emphasize both a core curriculum and electives that help students hone in on the specialized

areas that they may want to pursue professionally. Whether a student is interested in marketing, entrepreneurship, finance, or business consulting, the track of electives that they choose will augment their resumes and make them attractive to potential employers.

Through these courses students learn the fundamentals of business—the hard skills that are the theory and the practice of the business world—that employers expect from M.B.A. graduates. However, it's not enough to be a cookie cutter of a potential employee. In order to stand out, particularly in this economy, students need to develop soft skills—such as interpersonal communication skills—that facilitate the application of the hard skills they learned to a real-world work environment. The workplace is made up of people, not theories and case studies, so it's important for students to learn how to interact with others, whether they are in work teams or not.

“People who hire M.B.A.s in general assume that the newly-minted M.B.A. is going to come to the workforce with a certain set of skills—the hard skills being the quantitative analysis, the finance, the accounting and the numbers crunching. The soft skills are things like interpersonal skills, charisma and leadership ability,” said Kiley. “In a perfect world, every M.B.A. would have a wonderful combination of both hard skills and soft skills, because it's the soft skills that really differentiate the good M.B.A.s from the great M.B.A.s. Oftentimes, it could be tempting to dismiss soft skill classes as being touchy-feely, but it's been our experience overall that the kind of skills taught in many of these soft skills courses are the ones that ultimately make the difference in someone doing that great job.”

Marketing to Potential Employers

Although military and veteran students bring qualities to the table that businesses can benefit from—such as leadership skills, technical abilities, discipline, and maturity— sometimes potential employers may not be able to understand the desirable qualities that these students have. By pursuing an M.B.A. program, students are able to build upon the skills that they gained in the military and hone the specific skills that employers seek. As a result, M.B.A. degrees can act as a marketing tool for military students— giving them the rubber stamp that alerts businesses that they are capable of performing well in a civilian environment.

Concerns about the Economy

Despite the slow buds of economic recovery beginning to sprout in many areas of business, finding employment in the current economy is still a real concern for students in M.B.A. programs. After spending two years or more in graduate school, students want to know that their degrees were worth the effort and that jobs will be available when they complete their studies.

In many instances, these concerns are not a real issue. Many M.B.A. programs report that they have high graduate placement rates—in some cases, as many as almost 90 percent of students have a fulltime job within three months of graduating. Oftentimes, students are being vetted for jobs prior to completing their coursework and have offers in hand before the ink dries on their diplomas. Despite this success, some M.B.A. programs have seen a dip in their placement rates due to the struggling economy. With this in mind, students want to know what's hot and what's not—what areas will most likely offer them their desired jobs after graduation.

For students who are concerned about which courses will lead to good jobs, there are some areas of study that are proving to be particularly relevant in today's economy. Business schools report that mainstays of finance,

marketing and consulting are areas that, while they have seen a decline in the last few years, are picking up. Also, supply chain management and entrepreneurship are two subject areas gaining traction.

For many veteran and military students, supply chain management and logistics is an area that is already quite familiar. Students can build upon their military experience with logistics through M.B.A. courses that focus on a broad range of topics that are relevant to the current economy. For example, students may learn about how supply chain management works in the manufacturing industry where logistics professionals oversee the process of creating products from raw materials until they are in the hands of their customers. These skills are important for organizations in many industries today—all of which are trying to do more with less, King explained, “The economy is tough, so corporations, the government, and the public sector are all looking to streamline and cut budgets. Where you do that is in your supply chain and in your operations.”

The leadership skills that military students obtain during their service are a perfect foundation to transition into an entrepreneurship course of study in an M.B.A. program. In these classes, students can learn what they need to successfully run a business—such as cash flow and resource management, marketing, and ways to streamline the process of running a business as needed.

While these courses of study are all good options that can lead to viable careers, Ash Deshmukh, the chair of the Intercollege M.B.A. Program at Pennsylvania State University, warns that students should not make decisions about their degrees and their careers based on what appears to be hot on any given day. Trends change, so Deshmukh suggests that instead of following the fads, M.B.A. students should take Joseph Campbell’s advice and follow their bliss.

“There are many careers that can be considered hot or better than other careers, but I never advise my students to go for a career because it is hot. Things change rapidly, so what was hot yesterday will not be hot today. Unless you have a passion for certain things and you want to do certain things, they are not really a good choice as a potential career,” he said. “For example, when programming was hot, some people chose programming, but that needs a certain mindset and a certain type of personality to succeed in that particular career. If you don’t have that, then even if you make good money eventually you are just going to drop out of that whole thing—and your whole education and experience will be wasted. So my advice is always do what you really want to do and if it’s not hot right now, you may want to wait and you may have to do some grunt work now, but eventually you will do something that you will truly enjoy that will be your career—it won’t be a just a job.” ♦

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