

FLEXIBILITY IS THE KEY

» Debbie Moss talks to Hugh O'Neill

Program Overview

There are many options and a wide range of program formats from which to choose as an executive MBA candidate. Kindly define the University of North Carolina's (UNC's) MBA value proposition. In defining our value proposition, the first element concerns the flexibility in the programs we offer. We have an evening and weekend version, and we have our OneMBA, which is a global partnership. Offering different programs accommodates students' learning styles and their major interests. Some people prefer learning in a sequenced way, like every Monday and every Thursday. The evening program takes care of those people. Others prefer learning on an immersion basis, for which the Friday and Saturday classes meet twice each month. The OneMBA program participants meet Friday, Saturday and Sunday, once a month.

The second part of the value proposition is that we allow a fair amount of customization for the students in the weekend and evening programs, once they have finished their core courses, which represent about 60 percent of the curriculum. The remaining 40 percent can choose from as many as 40 different courses in order to complete the elements that will best serve their **career**. For example, if they're interested in marketing, they could focus on a set of marketing courses; the same goes with finance. For the OneMBA program, the focus is on global expansion and they get to study in Europe, China, Brazil and Mexico.

The final part of the value proposition is the delivery in the classroom. With respect to support services we have a cadre of very

skilled teachers working simultaneously in academic and corporate environments and a very dedicated support staff. Across the elements of design, delivery and support, value is created.

A graduate of the OneMBA Program at UNC gets the traditional MBA, along with the OneMBA certificate. Please explain what the certificate represents. The OneMBA is a partnership across five different schools that span the globe. Each has a strong, local brand and a good degree. Students in each of the particular areas earn that degree. But, those who are in the OneMBA have an experience that goes just beyond the normal degree. They have studied at each of the schools and they have studied with faculty in each. The OneMBA certificate recognizes the unique value of that particular form of study.

To stay competitive it's important to specialize. UNC allows MBA participants to customize their career goals. How does this work? How does it tie in with other courses? The specialization for our students occurs through the opportunity for them to take the electives. Specialization also occurs by having the ability to design work-specific projects as part of the curriculum. First the student finishes the common body of knowledge courses such as, accounting, finance, marketing, strategy, etc. Then, the student has the opportunity to craft a set of courses that fit his/her particular needs. Generally we have three classes of people. First, there are people who are *climbers*. They are inside a hierarchy trying to advance within that particular hierarchy. Then, we have those we call *shifTERS* who are trying to shift into a different arena. And we have *founders*, who dream of being entrepreneurs. These three



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groups represent 70 to 80 percent of the students in the class.

For the first group, the climbers, the curriculum offers a fair number of management, strategy and human resources courses. Here they can learn to design, manage and build organizations. For that particular group we also offer access to executive coaches so they can get some guidance on how to enhance their visibility inside their corporation.

With respect to shifters, what they're generally trying to do is shift from a function they started in, to a different function. Take, for example, someone who starts in information technology and wants to move into marketing. These individuals would take marketing courses. We also pair them with a career coach to help them understand the difference in skills. The entrepreneurs (founders) have a number of basic courses to choose from, along with a couple of entrepreneurial courses. In one the student creates a business plan for an outside company. Second, the student creates a business plan for a company that will be his or hers, and then gets to propose that plan to a number of potential investors.

Each year we change a few of the electives to match the unique needs of that class. Sometimes we try to probe the class to see if there's something we need to add. Two examples help to illustrate the point:

- Class of 2008: We had a larger than usual number of students interested in the health industry. So, we added an elective on health industry marketing.
- The class of 2009: Although they're not finished yet, they're fascinated by the financial crisis, so we've added an elective on *Managing a Financial Forum in Distress*.

As we go along we try to enhance the customization by responding to the specific needs.

ROI
Explain the ROI expectations a typical corporation has from an executive MBA program. I don't think there's a typical cor-

poration anymore. In our case, they want the candidate to begin to demonstrate improved competence while they are still in the program, and they generally want the candidate ready for some type of promotion somewhere near graduation. So, from the perspective of improvement in job performance, I'd say somewhere between one and two years. From the perspective of full recovery of investment, it's three to four years.

How much emphasis should be placed on the return that comes from a lifetime of networking with a group of smart, successful professionals? You almost can't underestimate the return there. But, we have an interesting conflict in terms of what our agency responsibilities are. There's absolutely no doubt that some corporations are paying for the education of students and we have to help enhance the value of those students for those corporations, but we also have some students who are paying their own way and we have to help them enhance their value. The value of the network is somewhat different across those two groups. So, with respect to the corporations, the network will be an opportunity for partnership and advice that will last through life. We had a recent example of a student whose company was thinking of going into business in China. He knew one of the colleagues from his class had considered that question earlier so he used that colleague as a sounding board for how to best enter the Chinese market.

When it comes to cost vs. quality, UNC offers significant value. What do you consider UNC's key strengths? Our key strengths, again, begin with flexibility in choice because of the customization allowed by our electives. There's also the balanced strength of our faculty. We are a school that for decades has insisted on first class research and first class teaching. Our staff, both in terms of professional services and indirect services, is focused exclusively on the executive MBA program and provides an environment where if students need career or any other kind of help, they can get it. It makes for a very comfortable and safe learning environment.

Leadership
In this ever-changing economy, what role does leadership play and to what extent

is it addressed throughout the program? There are two levels of leadership we need to think about. One level is the traditional sense, "I lead an organization" or "I lead a group of people." The second level of leadership is, "I am responsible for managing myself." We address both; and I think in this changing economy, both are critically important. Now, with respect to leadership at the organizational level, what we do is first choose candidates into the classroom based on testimony that they've already signaled they'll be strong leaders. We also take past career, and reports from previous managers/colleagues very seriously when thinking about the choice of the individual. We then start very early in the program with a 360 form of evaluation that's been done at the workplace. We use that as a basis for the candidate writing his/her professional development program, which is part of one of the first courses he/she takes. We revisit the professional development tool in the middle and end of the curriculum to make sure the candidate is making progress.

We hold events directed at building leadership skills. So, for example, we have a new leader speaking exercise where each student gets up in front of a small group, which includes a coach. The student gives a speech and gets coached about his/her ability to do speaking. Everyone is in teams and we rotate the leadership function of the team so each gets the opportunity to take responsibility for the specific projects. We have blind feedback about their ability to do it, meaning we gather assessment from their colleagues. We don't tell them which colleague said what, but we share their strengths and weaknesses.

With respect to the notion of self-leadership, we start early on with responsibility for issues of personal brand and career management. We do try to get them to recognize early on: "If it's to be, it's up to me." They have to put themselves in positions where they are visible, they have to take responsibility for managing their own career, and they have to create their own sense of unique and individual value. These services take place primarily through both our career management and coaching activities.

In UNC's program, leadership style is attended to prior to the managerial and

leadership skills core course. Does UNC advocate a specific leadership style or do you prefer to strengthen the style that the participant has already adopted? Please elaborate. This is a question where both answers are true within the context of the entire program. For example, we *do* promote a style of leadership that builds on empathy, as well as on the ability to listen and be an effective team member. We do find some individuals come in with well-established, strong, personal styles of leadership that are effective and only need the opportunity to nourish and blossom. And then some come in that haven't yet developed an effective style. For those who haven't developed one we expose them to a breadth of ideas about leadership and gently get them to test different approaches within the context of a small group environment so they can find a space where they're comfortable.

How do you test the leadership qualities of your students and, ultimately, prepare them for the real world business challenges that lay ahead? First, we rotate the assignment of projects in the group. Secondly, we encourage many of them to take projects and work that can add immediate value to the workplace. Thirdly, we put them through the presentation activities. We also try to emphasize an involvement in community work.

Accreditation

To what extent does accreditation underline the quality of a school? It provides an opportunity to be assessed and vetted by outsiders who do have strong knowledge of the business of educating professionals. And, I think external perspective is very useful when it comes to understanding what you're doing well and understanding what you can do better.

What aspect of the accreditation process has been most beneficial in your rise to excellence? Accreditation has been both unofficial and painful. It's the aspect of articulating objectives, assessing performance toward objectives, maintaining a record of that assessment and then engaging in remedial actions to improve whatever shortfalls you have. Because of the accreditation process, every few years we do have to demonstrate that we are adhering to the precepts involved.

International Business

MBA programs have taught international business courses for some time now. However, given the fact that our global economy has become so upfront and center for today's executive, does that mean global business classes should change accordingly? Back in the 80s and early 90s we recognized it was important for companies to become international, so we added a course in international business. However, with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the establishment of the European Union in '92, and the growth of China, etc. we began to realize that this was something happening to business in general. As a corollary, we reached a point where every course was designed with some international or global content.

There's rarely a course you can take that's not addressing some of the international components of business. Then we began to understand that while learning in a classroom does provide cognitive insight, it doesn't address behavioral skills. So, our goal was to ensure that every student was somehow exposed to international opportunities. One part of that was recruiting more aggressively to get international people both on the faculty and in the program. And, we now have opportunities for them to take what we call an immersion course which is focused study on one particular part of the world, which includes a seven to 10 day trip to that country. Students can choose from China, India, South America, East Europe, and this year there's one to Dubai.

So, that took us through the 90s. Then we got to 2002-2003 and realized we needed to build alliances with other schools. Now we offer a comprehensively global program. Students study in the United States with American faculty but have colleagues who are citizens of other parts of the world. They learn from people with different cultural backgrounds and become global by virtue of experiencing the globe.

The number of students coming from around the world to graduate school grows every year. And, both the number of American companies bringing people from around the world to work here, as well as the number of

international companies relocating here are increasing all the time. So, globalization is happening right down the block. We know it, we see it, and we have to respond to it.

The OneMBA curriculum draws knowledge and talent from five business schools on four continents. Kindly identify the schools involved and why they were selected.

- University of North Carolina Kenan-Flagler
- Erasmus University, Rotterdam School of Management, The Netherlands
- Chinese University of Hong Kong
- Fundacao Getulio Vargas, School of Business Administration, Sao Paulo, Brazil
- EGADE Monterrey Graduate School of Business, Mexico

Culturally, these are schools that value both scholarship and teaching. As far as similar goals as concerned – these are schools that want to build world-class programs and want to achieve excellence in everything they do. We approached it as any major corporation would approach a learning alliance. We wanted to be full partners and make joint decisions about curriculum and how to build the program from start to next generation. It's a wonderful but complex collaboration across five different campuses around the world.

Looking Ahead

Since the onset of the global financial crisis, has UNC changed the focus of certain courses? We've added a course to address troubled financial institutions and troubled financial products. Also, we have two courses that were already in the electives curriculum: *Managing Under Uncertainty* and *Managing Decline and Turnaround*. Naturally, we expect there to be higher demand for these courses. ■

Biographies
 Hugh O'Neill is a strategic management professor and associate dean of Executive Evening and Weekend MBA Programs for the University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler Business School.