

THE CHANGING FACE OF DISTANCE LEARNING

»Jonathan Calens talks to Dr Richard Thompson

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Introduction

The story behind Jones International University® (JIU®) is an interesting one. Can you talk to us about how JIU started? Our founder and chancellor, Glenn R. Jones, has devoted much of his life to his passionately held belief that education should be available to everyone, everywhere. A cable magnate, Jones in 1987 launched the cable television network Mind Extension University™ (ME/U™), which enabled 30,000 students to take courses from more than 30 colleges and universities via television. In the nascence of the Internet, Jones foresaw the potential and started JIU in 1993 – the first university anywhere to exist completely online.

Despite the naysayers, Jones knew in his heart that this was the future of education. So it was with great pride that, in 1999, JIU became the first fully online university in the U.S. to be accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, and a member of the North Central Association. Since then, we have continued to develop and expand our degree programs – all of which are designed to meet the needs of busy professionals eager to shape their futures.

Kindly define the JIU's MBA value proposition? The University's value proposition is founded on the fact that we are 100% online: designed to work well and function at the highest levels as an online school. The MBA itself has adopted many of the initial underlying propositions put forth by Glenn Jones concerning what a University should deliver and to this end, we have a set of institutional outcomes

to which all the degree programs align; we will train students to be effective communicators, and ethical decision makers, with the ability to work in teams and lead groups.

The higher outcomes mentioned by many schools are actually our founding principles and these also drive the MBAs specifically: so in talking about the value proposition, the initial statement therein is that students will graduate with the professional competencies and capabilities required for business leaders today and tomorrow. Simply put, we are really talking about being able to write and communicate effectively, make ethical decisions and have a global awareness. All of these factors are built into the program.

Most MBAs will have core courses allowing the majority of people to take a subject of choice such as accounting, marketing etc. and you will find that here as well. However, what we hear time and again from our employers and prospective employers is that they want people who can communicate and lead. Accordingly, we have built those concepts into the course work. We evaluate and make it part of the assignments, so the students come back to these large concepts time and again as they work on some of the more specific business knowledge and skills.

Some schools prefer to use senior faculty members when teaching courses. Is this something that you advocate at JIU? Again, we work somewhat differently here at Jones International University. We are first and foremost a teaching university. Even though we offer programs at the Doctorate level, for example in Education and Business Administration, the degrees are very practitioner focused. As such, we are really looking for experienced practitioner faculty who can teach.

Instead of having tenure faculty we have contract faculty, many of them having taught on and off for us for 7 or 8 years. We expect them to have terminal degrees, and at least 3 to 5 years experience in their particular industry. So for us the term 'senior faculty' refers to people who have a pedigree in our line of education, and have terminal degrees and industry experience.



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It is also worthy to note that anyone we hire as a faculty member is a course instructor, as opposed to faculty who concentrate on the research side of the equation. We also seek faculty who have written and presented professionally.

There are many other ways the faculty can demonstrate scholarship and activity in the field. Currently, 85 percent of the MBA faculty actually do hold terminal degrees, with an average work experience of 8 to 9 years. This enables us to maintain that focus on quality and a very different learning model that's unique to us.

We provide our faculty with training from day one: before they walk into a classroom they learn our technologies, our learning model and so forth. We carry out regular and ongoing evaluations of the faculty using numerous online tools that provide us with rich and timely feedback, which in turn is used to further develop the faculty.



Effectively, when we talk about our high quality faculty, we are talking about the well trained instructors who are providing formative and summative feedback that is timely and substantive and is grounded in both theory and practice.

The quality and background of the professors charged with teaching and motivating JIU's students is clearly very important. However, what sets JIU's faculty apart from other schools? Every school affirms they have quality. Certainly everyone within their definition of their mission and vision is providing quality. Our definition of quality of faculty is, as mentioned previously, terminal degrees, 3 to 5 years experience and scholarly work in the relevant industry.

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We are not seeking the narrower academically focused who have published in tier-one or tier-two journals, we are looking for faculty who have done professional presentations and can demonstrate scholarship and activity in the field.

Given the competitive demands placed upon corporations today, and increasing globalization - both of which require tomorrow's business leaders to be flexible and manage workforces and internal structures that cross cultural and political lines - have you redefined your MBA offering? It's not so much a matter of redefining the MBA offering. As mentioned earlier, we started with a different focus on how to deliver business education incorporating those higher level needs that organizations are constantly requesting. In short, the MBA and all our programs have always had a focus on making effective decisions in a global environment.

We have content and courses that focus on ethical, global and sustainability issues. Our faculty and student populations are also global, thus providing further opportunity for all our students to explore issues at an international level. We have created a really interesting mix within the classroom so students can experience what it's like to communicate with and work with students and faculty from around the globe.

Many organizations are interfacing with the concept of globalization. This does not necessarily result in people traveling any more. A lot of it is someone sitting in Denver having a scheduled phone conference with someone in New York or someone in India. Our students, through our technologies and design model, learn to do this from the very first course they take with us. They learn to work with students and instructors across the globe: how to present their ideas, how to coordinate projects and cope with the give and take of negotiations from a distance.

In terms of career management, how much support does JIU offer? We have two levels of support: one is a trademark program, which is a career services program called the Total Professional Advantage TM. This service is offered to all JIU students and it runs in parallel with their education. As they go through their course work, e.g. in their MBA program, over the course of 2 years they will attend seminars which cater for some of the basics, resume writing, career planning strategies, networking and so forth.

The difference here at JIU is that we build some of those concepts into the academic program. For example, when a student takes a course, be it accounting, finance or strategic management, he is evaluated on different levels. In an accounting course we also evaluate them according

to our expectations for writing and communication skills and foster the idea of the importance of these aspects in their career, and we emphasize those concepts over and over again.

We are very overt about what we are doing; we tell students over and over again that this is the formula for success, and we ask the students to demonstrate and tell us how this additional knowledge will be helpful in their careers.

In summary, we are not simply offering a set of courses in a vacuum. We recognize they are here with plans to advance their careers, and we want to do the most for them in the program to help them achieve those goals.

Technology

JIU is considered to be a technology intensive institution. To what extent has this benefited your students? Being a fully online institution, we live and breathe technology. What we have had to do over the years is to juggle the availability of the courses in our programs against the newer technologies as they are launched and developed. We have always tried to create a simple and small footprint for our courses.

For the most part, a student can still access everything and be successful with just dialup technology; obviously, anyone with DSL or higher speed internet access will have a much cleaner integration with the material but can still access our courses through dial up. So while we are technology intensive, we've kept it as simple as possible from the user perspective so the learning experience for the student is a very efficient one. Everything is laid out neatly and cleanly.

All of our courses are designed following a very similar template. No matter whether it's the first course or the fifth or the tenth, the student does not have to worry about where to go to find anything. All the materials are laid out in a very organized and consistent fashion: we've utilized the technology, especially web technologies, in order to ensure that the course material is presented as clearly as possible. Our new students participate in an orientation that provides them with the tools and guidance that they need to be successful. When they step into the first class they are ready. It's about using the technology to make the user experience as easy and as friendly as possible.

You have developed an exclusive career development portal and program. Are you able to tailor the aforementioned technology to the individual needs of your students? For starters we've built the



career development portal on the same learning platform. It's an incredibly flexible tool and allows access to, and delivery of, content curriculum in numerous ways. So, even though it's built on the same platform, the career development portal has a different professional look and feel for the students.

In catering to individual needs, undergrad or masters level students alike, there are a number of seminars available, some of which branch off in different directions, depending on a student's particular interests. Should the student still need additional information about a particular area there are additional resources available; we also have career counselors available online as part of that service. So it's not just a static website: it's interactive with live help available. So the students can start with the basics and then build up a career model that works for them.

Green Issues

Socially responsible programs and green campuses are just two of the hot-button issues affecting the MBA space. What steps has JIU taken in order to embrace the aforementioned challenges and opportunities? As a 100 percent online University, we are about as green as you can get. Students do not have to do that extra commute to get to a campus. Physically, we live in a very small building here in Centennial, Colorado, and our students understand we do not have an entire rolling campus to maintain. They just simply log in whether they are at work or at home in the evening. So that part of the green issue, i.e. access to a University, is already taken care of. The other half concerns the kind of focus we have within the MBA itself.

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Can you tell me about the Principles for Responsible Management Education initiative? As a University, we are required to submit a report on our initiatives. It is an overview of how we have integrated and further expanded on the principles we cover in our courses and how we have added value. At the doctorate level, we are changing a course that had been purely looking at entrepreneurship and innovation to also incorporate a focus on how entrepreneurship and innovation can drive sustainability. In another example, issues of micro financing are being introduced into the finance courses. In effect, we are really bringing spot focus where it works and where it is most applicable.

Program Selection

When is the best time to enroll in an MBA program? I would say two years before one really needs the degree would be the best time. But nobody can really accurately forecast the appropriate time. Here at JIU, we have rolling starts during the year. We actually have classes starting the first Sunday of every month. Admission is on a monthly basis so students can enter the program at any time of the year: no need to wait for a fall or spring semester as they would in a standard university. This provides maximum flexibility.

The general MBA is typically shorter in duration when compared to the specialized MBA. However, some say that the specialized MBA can make the graduate more marketable. Do you concur with this? There are schools that provide two variations on the MBA. The student can do the general piece and if he or she wants a specialization in accounting or marketing then they can take another four or five classes over another semester, or similar structure.

Our own MBA has the specialization built in as a concept from the very beginning. So the core of set courses flows into whichever specialization the student is interested in and they all take the same amount of courses whether they are generalists or focusing on say entrepreneurship or healthcare administration.

Quality vs. Quantity

The number of schools offering online MBA programs has grown exponentially over the last six years. Has the market reached saturation point? I think there is a lot of room to grow. There is a general perception that all MBAs are created equal. In truth, every school does have a unique delivery, whether it's our model with the online delivery vs. ground-based instruction, or the types of courses, or the focus of the curriculum, or the learning outcomes that are addressed. There are enough variations out there to cater to the needs of most student audiences.

JIU School of Business is also one of the original 100 signatories to the UN Principles for Responsible Management Initiative (PRME). We have joined other organizations and universities around the globe to look at the issues of responsible management sustainability and ethics and corporate social responsibilities and those precepts are built into our courses.

In this connection, and as discussed above, we have social and ethical responsibility issues built into the programs, and with our recent membership into PRME, we are adding additional issues, the largest one - especially when we talk about green issues - is in the area of sustainability. There are numerous schools of thought on this, whether it's 'how do we make the most of our resources and stretch them out best over time'. Economists argue about the efficacy of any real measure for these facets, but from our point of view, we provide very practical orientation in the MBA and as we do with other issues, we look at current success stories and failures of the green movement.

I think the biggest change in the green movement - compared with back in the 60s or 70s - is that the environmental issues are still there, but at least from the business side there are economically viable models that can be examined and followed. So, an organization is not necessarily going to incur excessive costs in becoming green, in fact there are ways to do it and save costs. Finally, I think the biggest change is that businesses are looking at it as a positive thing, not just simply something that 'if we can afford to do it we will to appease our stockholders and shareholders'. I think corporations are looking at it as something that can be economically viable and actually lead to an improved bottom line.

Corporations have a number of needs that are simply not met. Couple this with the fact that there are still a lot of people, especially in these tough economic times, making the effort to further their education; I believe that we are nowhere near saturation.

The Next Chapter

Moving forward, what can new and existing students expect from JIU over the next twelve to eighteen months, in terms of program innovation? There are a number of areas where we are always improving - our underlying learning platform and other aspects of the technology that is behind the scenes - changes that are invisible to the student. We don't change our learning in such a drastic way that students start saying 'where am I?' when they show up to class the next day. We focus on improving the speed and ease of access to our courses.

We are also considering social networking technologies. We recognize that the implementation and use of social learning does take a lot of thought. It should be done carefully, for if haphazardly, the students will not appreciate it or use it and, therefore, not benefit. We have spent time looking at how we can best bring these tools to our students, to enhance their learning. So we have a number of features in that arena that we will be launching this year that will support the students not only in the classroom but on the career management side as well.

As a school, on the curriculum side of the MBA, and keeping with our emphasis on practitioner focus, we are looking at programs and degrees that not only have high demand from the business side, but also from prospective students.

We will continue to capitalize on the many opportunities for growth. On the business side there is a huge demand for accountants: in looking at the US Department of Statistics, accounting careers tend to be in the top five, whether in respect of salary growth, number of jobs, or percentage of job growth. Finance follows closely. Effectively, we will be looking at ways to offer additional curriculum and additional programs in those areas to help meet some of the need.

On the other side of the coin, we've looked at a number of degrees over the year that are in high demand - a good example relates to education where there is a shortage of mathematics teachers - but we are finding that students do not want those jobs. We would dearly love to have a mathematics degree as a foundation to an education degree; but the students don't want to do it. In this connection we shall continue our efforts to find that balance enabling us to offer degrees that are in demand from both sides. ■

Biography
 Dr Richard Thompson is the Dean of the School of Business at Jones International University®, Ltd.


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