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MANAGEMENT & CAREERS

During Covid-19 Era, Online M.B.A.s Gain Traction

Howard University, Wake Forest join some large state schools in offering internet-based programs



Howard University had been considering an online version of its M.B.A. program before the pandemic.

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By [Patrick Thomas](#)

Sept. 2, 2020 8:10 am ET

Online M.B.A.s are gaining traction during the coronavirus era as more U.S. business schools seek new students and some wonder if their traditional full-time and on-site M.B.A. programs will survive.

Many universities said this year that they would roll out online M.B.A. degree programs, including the business schools of Howard University, Wake Forest University and John Carroll University. They join the ranks of some big state schools, including the University of Illinois's Gies College of Business and Indiana University's Kelley School of Business,

which have launched online M.B.A.s and are reporting significant increases in applications and online enrollment for the fall.

“We found there is a huge potential market for folks who want to get a Howard M.B.A.,” said Anthony Wilbon, dean of the business school at Howard, one of the most high-profile of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The Washington, D.C., university has had a traditional, two-year, in-person M.B.A. program for decades and had been considering an online version before the pandemic.

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“The future is with online programs,” Mr. Wilbon said. “It gives us a much more expansive exposure across the globe with other countries, and the stigma of online is declining. Everybody is doing it now.”

Online M.B.A.s have proliferated over the past decade. Since 2009 the number of online M.B.A.s at accredited business schools in the U.S. more than doubled, according to the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business. Many of the top business schools initially resisted, leaving remote learning to for-profit education outlets. But now more high-profile universities are joining the online-learning ranks and are attracting more people who want to jump-start their careers during the coronavirus-induced recession.

The shift to online programs comes as business schools look for new ways to attract students as M.B.A. programs reckon with several years of declining applications. Schools

are also facing the potential loss of some international students, a major source of revenue, because of travel restrictions related to Covid-19 and worries about the availability of visas under the Trump administration.

Boston University's Questrom School of Business announced last summer that it would offer a less-expensive, \$24,000 all-online M.B.A. starting in the fall of 2020. Interest has exploded since the pandemic began.

Questrom was planning to enroll 200 students in its first online M.B.A. class this fall but has doubled that to 400 students, said J.P. Matychak, an associate dean at the school.

Most of the school's online M.B.A. students are in their mid-30s, which is several years older than the typical full-time M.B.A. candidate, and have 12 years or more of work experience, Mr. Matychak said, adding that the online program is attracting international students.

"We saw a large number of applications come from abroad during those recent months of the pandemic when it became a lot more clear that travel restrictions were still going to be in place," he said. "That has opened the door for more people thinking about an online M.B.A who don't want to postpone their education right now, or don't want to learn remotely."

The belief that online degrees aren't as valuable as traditional ones was already fading as students desired more-flexible schedules and lower-priced degrees, said Tim Westerbeck, president of higher-education consulting firm Eduvantis. The pandemic is speeding up that process as more faculty and students become accustomed to working and learning online.

"Covid has been the accelerant that got thrown on the fire," Mr. Westerbeck said. "People have got a glimpse of how things can work online, and it's not all bad."

Stacey Koprince, instructor at Manhattan Prep, which helps applicants study for entrance exams, said many young professionals are looking for affordable options. The expansion

of online M.B.A.s that don't require a student to move to a new city and leave a job could help business schools diversify their student populations, which M.B.A. programs have struggled with for years, she added.

"You don't have to get up and move, and you can do it anywhere with an internet connection," Ms. Koprince said. "It opens it up to a broader pool of people."

Applications to the online M.B.A. program at Indiana's Kelley school of business have risen 41% from a year earlier, said Ramesh Venkataraman, an associate dean with the program. And at the University of Illinois's Gies business school, applications to its online program are up 35% over the prior year, said Brooke Elliott, an associate dean at the school.

Last year the Gies school shut down its full-time, on-campus M.B.A. and focused on its online program. Ms. Elliott said the online program increased the number of students enrolled by more than 40% to about 3,440 to accommodate demand.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Do you believe the stigma surrounding online business degrees is fading? Why or why not? Join the conversation below.

"Launching the program at the price point we did broke down traditional barriers," she said. "Our investment is paying off."

Creating an online M.B.A. doesn't guarantee profitability for a university because remote learning requires substantial investments in upgraded technology, as well as educational design and marketing to attract new students, said Mr. Westerbeck at Eduvantis.

"Many of these programs are shelling out lots of money for years before they reap any financial growth," he said. "You have to look under the hood. It can be just as expensive or more expensive to deliver."

Boston University's online M.B.A. program is trying to scale up to 2,000 students in the next few years.

“That’s what’s going to allow us to break even relatively quickly, and then be somewhat profitable,” Mr. Matychak said.

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