Blended MBA Programs: An Optimized Form of Learning

by Karen Hebert-Maccaro

While online education is not new, significant advances in the effectiveness of learning platforms and innovation in pedagogy have enabled a dramatic improvement in quality. In particular, for some disciplines – and for some faculty and students – blended learning has emerged as a superior alternative compared with 100% on-line programs. Blended learning programs are those delivered in part via interactive, web-based learning and in part through face-to-face interaction. Academic discourse has scrutinized, debated, and judged the value of online and blended programs. However, the question of whether online learning is a space higher education should occupy may be nothing more than theoretical. More and more colleges and universities are answering the call for flexibility and convenience by increasing the number of courses and programs offered at least partially online.

Lest we think that they are inferior learning vehicles, since convenience factors may be playing a large role in the development of these programs, I call your attention to "What can an Online Program Do for You?" by Paris de L'Etraz in the November/December 2010 issue of BizEd. In this article, Associate Dean L'Etraz outlines the significant benefits of blended learning programs for students, faculty, and schools including convenience of delivery, rigor and quality, access, diversity, and the possibility of program growth.

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I explicitly add one further benefit that was implied in the article referenced above: relevance. Blended learning programs may optimize the issue of MBA program relevance on multiple levels. First, our professional lives are conducted through and with technology each and every day. We are increasingly called upon to be part of virtual teams with members that vary across great geographic distances, time zones, cultural perspectives, and languages. In a blended learning program, this is emulated. In essence, educators have the opportunity to teach through both their content and their delivery methods. Just as an example, providing tools for effectively managing virtual teams is possible for any program, but providing the experience of actually managing and contributing to virtual teams is something embedded in this form of delivery, increasing the relevance of the education.

Second, blended learning MBA programs, like the one we have recently launched at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, are often targeted to working professionals, many of whom may not be capable of attending traditional part-time programs because of high expectation jobs, frequent travel, and family obligations. As such, these students bring with them rich experiences managing teams, leading projects, and innovating inside organizations. This adds to the quality of discussion and engagement inside the classroom (virtual or

otherwise), and they have the benefit of applying concepts and tools from their program to their companies in real time. Making this connection from classroom to boardroom is at the heart of achieving relevance.

Even with compelling arguments for the adoption of these programs, the implementation can present challenges. From personal experience teaching in and leading blended learning program launches and from speaking with both faculty and administrators who have also been part of launch teams for these programs, I have come to the conclusion that there are four tenets of implementing successful blended learning MBA programs:

1. COMMITTED LEADERSHIP FROM FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

As with most major change initiatives, buy-in from key stakeholders is necessary. This is magnified in the development of blended learning initiatives by the fact that there may be skepticism about this mode of delivery. Early adopters among the institution's senior faculty and academic leadership can help facilitate discussion among the community to address any concerns that may be present. A word of caution, this support cannot

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be titular only. Faculty development programs, funding for faculty research on pedagogical techniques, and modifications to evaluate and reward performance in the blended program require a sustained effort and are likely to lead to a greater acceptance of the new program and therefore program success itself.

2. THE "RIGHT" STUDENTS

Faculty and leadership commitment is only one half of the equation. Successful blended learning programs need to attract and retain the right students. What is the right student? This may vary a bit by institution, but certain characteristics are dictated by the medium. For

example, given that most blended programs require significant periods of asynchronous work in between face-to-face sessions, the level of self-motivation required from students is higher. Intrinsically motivated students are likely to do better than those that require more extrinsic modulation.

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Additionally, students who are unafraid of technology (admittedly less a concern today than perhaps ever before), and embrace it, are more likely to utilize the full range of tools available to support and augment their learning, thus making the experience richer. Finding the right students, those who will most appropriately fit the program's delivery, may require institutions to reconsider admissions policies and processes. At WPI, we take a consultative approach to admissions, emphasizing getting to know prospective students well early in the process, to determine if they have the competence to succeed in the classroom as well as the professional attitude and resourcefulness to manage and optimize the delivery mode.

3. SUFFICIENT AND FLEXIBLE TECHNOLOGY

Adequate and flexible technology might be considered a threshold tenet of successful blended programs, meaning without it you cannot cross into the domain. However, thinking about it only in that manner is limiting. Yes, the choice of technological platform for delivering the program must be reliable and easy to use for both faculty and student, but done well, it could go beyond that into an integral part of the learning experience itself. The creative uses of web 2.0 technologies, for example, can transform a technical platform from a simple tool into a dynamic window to a virtual world of engagement with the material and interaction with classmates and instructor. Gone are the days when virtual interaction was limited to one-way communication vehicles. Today it is about dynamism, even in asynchronous engagement. As for flexibility, the rapid pace of change

in technology means there is always something just around the corner that may enhance the learning experience. Strong partnership with your institution's technology professionals is necessary for maintenance of the existing platforms and, perhaps even more importantly, to stay ahead of these changes. You don't have to be on the bleeding edge of technology to make this work, but it does not hurt to have flexibility in both mindset and capability to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the revolutionary change in available technology.

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4. A TRANSFORMATIONAL MINDSET

The fourth and final tenet of implementing successful blended learning programs may be the most challenging to acquire. It involves an openness on the part of faculty to transforming two conceptions of teaching and learning that are often the result of deeply held beliefs and years of experience. First, in a blended learning program, the nature of the delivery mode itself tends to transform the role of the faculty from a central figure to a facilitator, from a role akin to a ship's captain to one much closer to a team's coach. This loss of centrality is disarming to many faculty members. This is probably the result of a conception of their role based on the belief that they have the responsibility to be the expert and to instill their expertise onto their students. This type of teaching is easier done in a face-to-face classroom, where one has the benefit of commanding attention, of monitoring and more closely steering class discussions, and of shaping outcomes. In a blended program, the faculty member is not "front and center" for what might be most of the course. He or she is more a participant, if a different type of one, in the unfolding discussions that may be less linear and shaped more by the students themselves.

The second conception that can present challenges is a belief that the content of a course can be transferred from one format to another without adaptation. You can

no more build a house on the moon the same way you might build one on earth than you can successfully take a course built for a traditional program and transplant it into a blended one. Delivery mode affects content in a variety of ways. You must consider issues of time (and the absence or suspension of time boundaries), technology, and translation.

First, let's take time. In a blended learning course, a case discussion that may occur over two hours in a face-to-face format may take several days or even a week online. The development of key themes, the presentation of follow-up questions, and the appropriate time for introduction of new concepts or tools needs to be more thoughtfully considered. Next, there are the issues around technology. For example, if a traditional face-to-face course has presentations or group work embedded in its design, allowances need to be made for the technologies to support both, and their frequency may need to be examined as well. Finally, translation – in a blended program there is the benefit of balance. Balance in the sense that there is face-to-face time and online time in the program.

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Faculty should consider the content carefully to determine what topics work best in each format to not only accommodate the design, but to optimize it. A final word on the right match between content and delivery format: It may be surprising to some what works and does not in each format when both options are available, so being prepared to experiment and having the right mindset is key. Business education has a responsibility to be relevant and responsive to the changing needs of students, corporations, and other organizations. Well-executed blended programs have the potential to meet that expectation. They do not have to be compromises to traditional learning vehicles. Done well, they can represent an optimized form of learning; one that it is easy to imagine will increasingly become the optimal choice for obtaining an MBA.

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