

Full-Time MBA? Part-time MBA? It's a tough decision

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A full-time MBA offers the full experience.

A part-time MBA fits the workday, but throws the student into an asocial, caffeine-fueled, home-based hodgepodge.

Simple? Sure, but untrue. A rich variety of part-time and full-time offerings, the Internet and new financial concerns have changed the paradigm.

First off, a part-time or online-based MBA program may not offer exactly the same learning experience, but it should offer the same quality education.

"No matter what the student is doing, we offer all students the same exact opportunities and services," said Ron Mickler, Jr., assistant director of graduate business programs at Cleveland State University.

The process may be different. Full-time students may explore more. Part-time students may hone in more on the MBA. Full-time students frequently arrive fresh out of college. Part-time students tend to arrive with work experience.

Most important, part-time tends to spread the workload out.

"That's really the big difference," said Michelle Parrish Manning, director of marketing and communications at the College of Business Administration at Kent State University. "They're all getting the same thing, but it's their option on how they want to do it with their life schedule."

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“Whatever the student does, the degree does not change,” Mickler said. “The degree that is awarded under any of these options, accelerated, online, in-lecture, part-time, full-time, is the same degree and that’s a Master of Business Administration or a MBA.”

Full-time is a hefty commitment. The University at Buffalo’s website estimates students will need to cut out 20-plus hours weekly.

“Allocating time to study group meetings is critical and is the second most important aspect of the program next to class attendance,” the website notes. “It is not unusual for students to spend eight to 12 hours a week in group meetings in addition to personal study time.”

Case Western Reserve University’s Weatherhead School of Management puts it bluntly. Do you need flexibility around your work schedule? If yes, its website guides you to an executive MBA or part-time MBA.

Part-time MBA programs confine classes to evenings and weekends, while full-time programs may have classes during the workday. Part-time classes may meet once or twice a week, avoiding an overwhelming load for students.

“They can manage it with their work life and their home life,” Parrish Manning said.

Working professionals have options besides part-time. For example, EMBA programs, while strenuous, are designed for working professionals.

“They want to be able to put whatever they’re learning on Saturday into action at work on Monday,” Parrish Manning said. “It’s a lot. I really give them so much credit for taking the time.”

Travel can even come as part of an EMBA package. It’s critical – necessary even.

“Even though we’re Northeast Ohio, the Clinic is building hospitals in India,” Parrish Manning said. “It’s a global environment.”

Full-time can cater to professionals as well – and send them around the world.

Take Cleveland State’s Global Accelerated MBA, which features Friday and Saturday classes and a weeklong trip, which has previously taken students to European cities like London, Copenhagen and Barcelona to study businesses.

“We meet with company executives in all different areas of business,” Mickler said. “It really provides the students an opportunity to look at how business is done abroad. They can pick up things that they didn’t even think of and bring back to their workplace, and see how they do things differently.”

The Internet has also changed the game. It has, of course, allowed MBA and EMBA programs to be accessed from home and around one’s work schedule. Exams and discussions may be completed online.

Under Cleveland State University’s Mobile Accelerated MBA, the whole program can be completed online. Students are given an iPad and, a year later, a MBA, if they meet requirements. The program caters to out-of-state residents, full-time workers and budget-conscious consumers.

Each class may require six hours per week – with no more than three classes at a time – thus equaling out to 20 hours or fewer per week. In other words, that’s about as much time as the average American devotes to television, according to a 2013 U.S. Bureau of Labor survey.

So, how do potential students make up their mind?

Advisers can help.

“We have a fully staffed advising office and we are ready and willing and able to answer all questions,” Mickler said.

For many students, wallets dictate decisions. Many students opt for a part-time program that allows them to pay as they go and postpone studies as they need rather than take out loans under a full-time program.

“You can do it for up to six years,” Parrish Manning said. “You can spread it out.”

Perhaps more important, part-time allows potential students to continue work for a company that will help subsidize their education.

That truly is what it's about.

“The biggest thing is money,” Mickler said. “It's always coming down to money.”

If you're struggling with the decision, don't despair. You're not alone. Many students attend open house after open house before signing up.

“It's a commitment that most people take a couple of years to decide to do,” Parrish Manning said. “It's a big thing to insert into their life.”