



Sidestepping The GMAT

Many executive MBA programs waive the test. Will this water down the degree?

YOU'RE BUYING A CIRCULAR rug for a square room, and you want to calculate how much floor space will be left bare once the rug is in place. Do you know how? This is a question much like one you might see on the Graduate Management Admissions Test, for years the gatekeeper to an MBA education in the U.S.

If you're in midcareer and want to get into an MBA program tailored for busy executives, and you can't summon the college math, don't fret. Try this one: How many executive MBA programs in *BusinessWeek's* top 25 require the GMAT? The answer: 12. That's right, you can get into EMBA programs at 13 top-ranked B-schools without taking the GMAT.

In the last few years, scores of B-

schools—including such top-ranked institutions as University of California at Los Angeles' Anderson School of Management—have quietly abandoned the GMAT as a requirement for EMBA pro-

grams. Some now waive the test on a case-by-case basis; others have cut it from their admissions criteria altogether.

That development—the subject of a raging debate inside the closed-door world of B-schools—comes at a time when EMBA programs and applications to them are on the rise. That leads some to suggest that the waivers are motivated by profit, since full-time MBA offerings, which require the GMAT, are struggling to attract students. Says Maury Kalnitz, managing director of the Executive MBA Council, an EMBA research group: "It's a matter of competing for students."

REFRESHER COURSES

IT'S THE NATURE of the EMBA itself that makes this a contentious issue. A weekend degree offered to upper-level managers but otherwise identical to its MBA counterpart, such programs draw students with an average age of 37 and 14 years of business experience. For that reason alone, advocates of the waiver argue, the GMAT is not a valid test of the applicant's strengths. Instead, they say, schools should base decisions for enrollment on academic records and work history—something the GMAT can't gauge.

At No. 1 ranked Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, EMBA applicants aren't required to take the test but may be asked to take a refresher course if their quantitative skills are rusty. Julie Cisek Jones, the program's director, says students who are admitted are precisely the kind of successful executives who will enrich the educational experience for their classmates—GMAT or no GMAT. Says Cisek Jones: "We are much more concerned with the professional career and the value and diversity that those experiences bring into the classroom."

Schools like the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and Duke University's Fuqua School of Business take a hard line the other way, arguing that by

No GMAT? **No Problem**

In a controversial move, some top-ranked B-schools, including UCLA, cut the GMAT requirement

TO WAIVE...

- Business experience is more important than test scores for EMBA programs
- Test is unfair to applicants who have been out of school for 10 years or more
- Rejecting for low test scores would reduce the diversity of backgrounds

AND NOT TO WAIVE...

- Without testing, students may lack analytical skills needed in first year
- Exam is the only way to compare applicants of different backgrounds
- An EMBA is still an MBA, and the requirements should be the same

itself, work history, though important, is a poor test of an applicant's analytical skills. With no standardized measure, these schools argue, programs may end up taking students unable to keep up with classmates, especially in math-heavy first-year core courses, thus dragging everyone down. "The students are constantly working in teams," says Daniel Nagy, associate dean for Duke's EMBA program. "If you add a weak link, it takes away from the value of the class. And you're going to hear about it."

Since schools often claim their EMBA and MBA degrees are identical, GMAT supporters want admissions standards to be, too. By waiving the GMAT for EMBA applicants, they say, schools may need to dumb down the curriculum for those lacking math skills, ultimately muting the degree's prestige. Says Wharton EMBA Director Howard Kaufold: "The bottom

GMAT fans say they need a single standard

line is that at the schools not requiring the GMAT, there has to be an impact on the technical content of their MBA."

Schools worried about the consequences of a full-scale waiver have carved out a

middle ground, granting waivers on a case-by-case basis. UCLA dropped its GMAT requirement after it received a slew of applicants with graduate degrees in other areas or jobs in fields requiring quantitative skills, such as engineering. But it recommends that applicants without such backgrounds take the test, and last year nearly 25% of the class did.

The University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler Business School requires the GMAT but waives it for applicants with advanced degrees or technical jobs. About a third of students skip it. "The test doesn't measure their determination, their drive, their leadership, those things that are critical in the application process," says Penny Oslund, director of UNC's EMBA program. "It's a piece of a much bigger puzzle."

Is the GMAT a piece of the admissions puzzle that EMBA programs can do without? As more B-schools answer in the affirmative, EMBA admissions are becoming more art than science. ■

-By Geoff Gloeckler in New York

BusinessWeek online For Q&As with EMBA directors and sample GMAT questions, please go to businessweek.com/extras