

Business school, with a family in tow

Francesca Di Meglio

For applicants who have families, the B-school choice is complex. Geography, finances, and the job market all come into play.

For many business school applicants, spring is about more than just nice weather and long days. It's also decision-making time. As MBA programs notify applicants about their admissions decisions, the mental calculus begins. But in the rush to decide on a school, pack up, and move to campus, an important decision-making factor often gets lost in the shuffle: the impact of the two-year B-school sojourn on a family.

Applicants who overlook family considerations in their quest for the perfect B-school do so at their peril. After all, an MBA program puts a lot of stress on everybody, not just the student. In many cases, entire families are uprooted, new jobs must be found for spouses, and new schools for children. A happy and contented family can make the difference between a miserable B-school experience and one that will be remembered, fondly, forever.

That's why, in addition to finding the best program in the best town for accomplishing their personal and professional goals, prospective students should consider the needs and lifestyle of those around them, too.

It all starts with communication. Applicants with families should share their motivation for going back to school and how the MBA fits into the plan they have for themselves and their families. Doing so increases the likelihood that family members will accept the move. Discussing where you want to live and the impact of the move on the family's finances and relationships is a must. "If the family is not happy, [the move] will not be a successful experience," says Anna Millar, associate director of the MBA program at the University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler Business School (Kenan-Flagler Full-Time MBA Profile).

To ensure smiles all around, partners and families of applicants must be part of the application process from the very beginning. What follows is a checklist of what families of applicants should be taking into consideration when deciding where to go to business school.

GEOGRAPHY When Ashley Patrick's husband applied to B-school, she wanted to visit every campus. "I think it all goes back to the culture," says Patrick. "You can tell what life is going to be like when you visit." But she says one school to which her husband applied was too far north for these Southerners, so she refused to even consider it. She wanted them to be in a place where they could easily travel to and from their family in Atlanta. Ultimately, they wound up at UNC's Kenan-Flagler Business School, where Patrick is the vice-president of Kenan Connection, a club for spouses and partners of Kenan-Flagler students.

Before deciding where to apply, applicants should decide where their family would like to live during and even after B-school, since in many cases the location of the school may dictate where you'll find a job at graduation. If you want to be in New York, but your wife would rather be in Illinois near your extended family, then you'll have to come up with a compromise or risk marital discord. These discussions should begin in the earliest stages of the application process.

Cost of living is another bit of the geography puzzle that all applicants must consider but especially families supporting young children. Living in Hanover, N.H., while you attend Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business (Tuck Full-Time MBA Profile) will have a much lighter effect on your wallet than moving to Los Angeles for the MBA program at the UCLA Anderson School of Management (UCLA Anderson Full-Time MBA Profile). You'll want to know how much

you're likely to be spending on rent or a mortgage as well as items such as groceries, especially if you're planning on enrolling in a full-time program that will have at least one of you earning no income for the next two years.

FINANCES A top business school, which can easily cost upwards of \$80,000 in tuition for two years, is a huge investment. That's why money will play a part in every family's decision about where to go to school. In addition to considering geography and cost of living, families should talk about how much money will need to be borrowed and how they'll make loan payments in the years during and after business school. Looking at your accumulated savings, current living expenses, and the likely return on the MBA investment will help determine if this is feasible. Planning ahead and talking openly about financial aid is a surefire way to prevent family fights. Making an appointment with the financial aid office at the schools that interest you is a must, says Rachel Garonzik, director of graduate recruitment and marketing at the Villanova School of Business.

When Cathy Reeves' husband was deciding where to go to business school, she was pregnant with their first child. The couple knew that they wanted to be in the Midwest, which is closer to their families than New York, where they both had previously been living and working. But they also knew that Reeves wanted to stay home with the baby while her husband attended school, which would mean they would have no income for two years. The thought was terrifying, Reeves says, but they mapped out a plan that allowed them to get by on savings and student loans. Now that they have ended up at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management (Kellogg Full-Time MBA Profile), she says, they have the added bonus of seeing each other more often than they did in New York, where they both had hectic jobs and were rarely home. "The lifestyle change was an improvement," says Reeves.

HOUSING As couples start to consider the campuses and communities where they might live, they need to think about the actual housing available to them. Does the campus provide housing for families? Will they have to live off campus? Will they rent or buy? After all, the first step to imagining yourself supporting a spouse at business school is picturing where you might actually live and what that might entail. You can usually get information about the available housing for graduate students from the school's Web site or the admissions or housing office.

JOBS Usually, the spouse or partner who is not attending business school needs to find a job in this new city or town. In addition to conducting your own independent research online, you should find out if the school helps spouses or partners find work. Many do. Patrick, for instance, found a job at Kenan-Flagler as the MBA assistant registrar. Business schools, however, can't employ every partner or spouse themselves.

At Kellogg, administrators provide assistance and networking opportunities, even from a distance, for partners and spouses of students, says Wendy Metter, associate director of student affairs at Kellogg. Although most foreign partners can't work because they don't have the necessary government approval, the school still helps them find volunteer work to add to their résumés, adds Metter. Partners at Kellogg can join student clubs and help with student conferences, too. "There are lots of perks for students' partners," says Metter.

THE KIDS If you have children, you probably will need to learn about the nearby schools and child-care options available while you and your spouse are studying or working. Many B-schools have systems in place to put families in touch with the local community to have their questions answered and enroll their children in various programs. Finding out about school and child-care alternatives earlier works to your advantage because it will help you make informed decisions as the acceptance letters roll in. It also gives you a better chance of securing a spot for your child if there are waiting lists of any kind.

One of your greatest resources when it comes to getting information about community services are current students, recent alumni, and their families. During visits to campus, says Millar, you should ask as many questions as you can about the community and anything else that's on your mind. You can also reach out to people by e-mail and phone.

B-SCHOOL SUPPORT During campus visits, notice how supportive the culture is of families. Millar shares her job at Kenan-Flagler with Meghan Gosk, so they can both better balance work and career, something MBA candidates will have to do. They say they hope their job sharing, which they have been doing for the last five years, speaks to the family friendliness of the campus, and serves as an example of family-friendly policies that will impress the business school's managers to be.

Indeed, B-schools seem to hold the key to success for families who have a member in their programs. From the first time you visit a school's Web site, you should be looking to see if there are groups dedicated to helping the families of students. At Kellogg, for instance, Reeves is the co-president of Kellogg Kids, a group for families and children of students. She says she didn't realize how important the support group was going to be for her until she got to campus. Other people are "going through the same thing you are," Reeves says. "Their husband is back in school, and their income isn't what it used to be."

Visit schools as your spouse or partner is going through the application process, but be sure to keep attending events that are open to families, such as orientation programs and admit weekends, to make friends of your own and see what kind of experience your partner is going to have. While it is important to find a rigorous program with a good reputation, Patrick says, the decision on where to go is not all about which program is ranked number one. She adds that you both have to feel comfortable on campus and with the people in the community.

When the decision is finally made about which program to attend, the student's family should feel as though it fits in as much as the MBA candidate. "Look at the opportunities of which you can take advantage," says Metter. "Ask yourselves, 'Could this strengthen our relationship and bond as a family? Do we have other families as friends?'" In the end, say those who've gone through this process, you should pick the school that accepts you and makes you and your family feel at home.

DI MEGLIO, Francesca. Business school, with a family in tow. **BusinessWeek**, New York, June 4, 2009. Disponível em: <www.businessweek.com>. Acesso em: 18 jun. 2009.