

Admission deferrals: Business Schools hold the line

Anne VanderMey

Once fairly routine, deferrals of admission are getting increasingly rare. Next year will be worse.

Your applications are done. You've been accepted at your dream school. You paid the deposit. What could go wrong? For the would-be MBA class of 2011, plenty. The unforeseen events that often waylay admitted students were compounded this year by difficulty securing loans, problems selling homes, and anxiety about leaving the workforce. At many programs, that meant more would-be students asking for a deferral of admission. But while that may seem like a simple process for an applicant qualified enough to get in initially, next year will see more top schools leaning away from handing out deferrals, even as the financial turmoil prompts more students to ask.

Deferring admission is the relatively common practice of guaranteeing an admitted student a spot in next year's class, or at some schools, fast-tracking their application for consideration that year. A typical MBA program might grant a dozen of these requests in any given year, most aimed at accommodating unforeseen circumstances outside of students' control. But in recent years the question of what constitutes a valid reason for deferral has grown more complicated as programs have evolved, application volumes have increased, and each new class is more qualified than the one that preceded it.

In an effort to stabilize changing admissions equations, many schools have reduced the number of deferrals they grant. Marci Armstrong, associate dean for graduate programs at Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business (SMU Cox Full-Time MBA Profile), says the program has made a "concerted effort" to scale back this year and will continue the policy for the class of 2012. "Gone are the days where it's just an auto-deferral," Armstrong says. Arizona State University's Carey School of Business (ASU Carey Full-Time MBA Profile) and Duke University's Fuqua School of Business (Fuqua Full-Time MBA Profile), are taking it a step further. Both will aim next year to offer no deferrals at all.

A numbers game

At Cox, Armstrong says the full-time program granted delayed admission to five applicants in the fall of 2007. It scaled back in 2008, granting just three, and granted another three in 2009. While the actual number of deferrals hasn't registered much change, the percentage of successful requests has been falling. On the whole, inquiries and requests have been on the rise, Armstrong says, though the school does not track the exact numbers. It's a similar story at many programs. Vanderbilt University's Owen Graduate School of Management (Owen Full-Time MBA Profile) saw a marked uptick in requests, and even the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School (Wharton Full-Time MBA Profile) saw a modest increase from last year.

Many of the requests are related to the financial crisis and the considerable price tag of the MBA degree. At Vanderbilt, Director of MBA Admissions John Roeder says the decision of whether students are able to attend depends on whether they can secure funds, or for out-of-state students, sell their house. There also seems to have been a move away from students deferring in order to pick between different schools, says Fuqua's Associate Dean for Admissions Liz Riley Hargrove—instead they're deciding whether to attend school at all.

Students aren't the only ones who are uncertain. Schools are hedging their bets as well. Part of the reason behind the move away from deferrals is the rising number of MBA applications at many programs, with each year bringing a more qualified class than the last. "We just don't know what the following year will bring," Armstrong says. "You may be a competitive

candidate this year, but you may not be a competitive candidate next year." That means stellar applicants still have a good shot at deferring their acceptance, while the rest will have to clear a very high bar. Says Armstrong: "Anyone we think is on the margin, we will not let them defer."

MBA class composition

It's not easy, admissions officers say, to round out the perfectly qualified, enthusiastic, and diverse MBA class. Deferrals complicate that challenge. "It's a moving target in a fairly fluid process," says Fuqua's Hargrove. "I think you'll probably see more schools less likely to grant deferrals in the future," she says. "Just because it's such a risky proposition."

First there's the question of whether the student will be qualified relative to next year's class. Next there's the question of whether they'll actually come. Rudy Pino, director of MBA admissions at the Carey School, says the yield rate for students who defer is lower than that of the typical student. Less than half of those who defer eventually enroll, Pino says, making it particularly hard to plan for the coming year. On top of that, he says students who defer miss out on the early networking process with students in their incoming class and can feel detached from their classmates, having gone through the application process a full year apart. Pino saw 10 formal deferral requests in 2009, of which six were granted. He hopes to grant zero next year. "It really is in the student's best interest," Pino says. "We want to work with them while they still have that enthusiasm."

The process is further complicated by programs like the Harvard Business School 2+2 program, where undergraduates are immediately accepted into the program contingent on their getting two years of work experience. At schools like Cox, where these programs are being beefed up, the prior commitments can threaten to take too many spots away from applicants who enroll immediately. For MBA programs, which place a big emphasis on applicants picking the right time to apply, the timing makes a big difference. "We encourage our students to apply the year they plan to attend," says Soojin Kwon Koh, director of admissions at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business (Ross Full-Time MBA Profile). The "vast majority" of the spots in an incoming class, says Armstrong, "should go to those that apply for that year."

Dreams on hold

While actual policies vary, schools like Ross will only grant a deferral after a "heavy commitment in writing," a deferral deposit (the school would not release the exact amount), and a signed statement indicating the applicant would not apply to other programs. "We don't want admitted students to use this as a way to hedge their bets," says Ross' Koh. Ross, like many schools in the top 10, will allow students to defer after matriculation but only in "extreme, unusual circumstances and with proper documentation." The applicant's qualifications can play a role, she says, but typically a very small one. J.J. Cutler, director of admissions and financial aid at Wharton, which also seldom grants requests, says guaranteeing someone admission without knowing how his or her qualifications will stack up relative to next year's class is something the school takes "very seriously" and that applicants should not consider it a given. "That level of certainty," Cutler says of admissions guarantees, "is a fairly rare gift."

Some students who don't make that cut will instead go on to nontraditional programs, such as part-time programs or one-year MBAs, which have been enjoying a surge in popularity. At Arizona, Pino said he advised many students who had considered deferring to pursue that option instead. Mae Jennifer Shores, assistant dean and director of MBA admissions and

financial aid at UCLA's Anderson School of Management (Anderson Full-Time MBA Profile), says others who were turned down for deferrals decided to matriculate this year anyway.

Still, there are a few students this year who will delay their admission. There are some requests schools will almost always grant. Military deployment and serious illness are a few examples. For situations that truly are life-changing, unforeseen, and beyond a student's control, admissions directors will be flexible. "It truly is a case-by-case basis," Cutler says. Requests for work-related reasons (there were a lot of these, even some promotions, according to UCLA) are less convincing to most top schools. Before this year, says Koh, when unexpectedly strong interest from admitted students prompted the school to be more flexible, "we had never granted a deferral for work reasons." Next year, the school will go back to denying visa- and work-related requests.

For all those who want to defer but don't know if they'll make the cut, admission directors say simply making the request won't count against you. You'll get a fair shake, experts say, should you decide to resubmit an application the next year. And for students flummoxed by loans, hoping for admission at a better school, or unsure exactly what they want to do with their lives, that might actually be the best time to apply.

VANDERMEY, Anne. Admission deferrals: Business Schools hold the line. **BusinessWeek**, New York, Dec. 7th 2009. Disponível em: <www.businessweek.com>. Acesso em: 11 dez. 2009.

A utilização deste artigo é exclusiva para fins educacionais