

GMAT test prep: changes on the way

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The business school admissions test gets an overhaul in 2012, and GMAT test prep companies are tweaking their offerings.

The Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) is about to undergo its biggest makeover in more than a decade, and test prep companies are gearing up to help students get ready to take the radically redesigned exam.

Starting in 2012, aspiring business school applicants will take the Next Generation GMAT, which will include a new section on integrated reasoning, in which test takers will analyze data from multiple sources to draw conclusions, says Ashok Sarathy, vice-president for the GMAT program at the Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC), the Reston (Va.) nonprofit that administers the test.

This is the 10th version of the GMAT, the MBA admissions exam, and it is the result of a survey of faculty members from business schools around the world, who reported that they wanted to measure a candidate's ability to integrate data from multiple sources to solve complex problems, Sarathy says. "These skills are necessary for success at business school," he says, "and also in the corporate world."

Test prep companies say they're expecting a rush of students to take the GMAT in coming months—or to opt instead for the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), which is now accepted by many business schools—specifically to avoid the new GMAT. But those planning to take the new test have numerous options. GMAT says it will eventually make test prep materials available, of course, but many of the major test prep companies are also hard at work updating course content in anticipation of the new exam.

Here is an overview of their offerings:

KAPLAN

Cost: \$1,549 for on-site course; \$649 for online course; \$449 for GMAT On Demand

A test prep factory, Kaplan is used to seeing changes to standardized tests and reacting to them, says Andrew Mitchell, director of the GMAT program for Kaplan in New York. "Part of our philosophy is we teach what you need to know," he says. "The majority of the curriculum won't be obsolete. We'll need to add to it."

The GMAT team expects the integrated reasoning section to have similarities to the data sufficiency questions already found on the GMAT or the GRE's data integration questions. "If this is true," Mitchell says, "we will teach it early and return to it repeatedly, because it's foreign, and most students need improvement in this area."

Kaplan, a unit of the Washington Post Co. (WPO), released its revised curriculum with a new set of online, on-demand videos called GMAT On Demand in January. The video workshops target specific topics, such as geometry and data sufficiency, Mitchell explains. This gives students the ability to have a more customized experience, because they can focus on their weaknesses at times that are convenient for them.

"New developments in the industry have pushed us in terms of what's possible in personalized learning, which cannot be underestimated," says Mitchell.

The Kaplan flagship course, called GMAT Advantage, is the right choice for about 80 percent of GMAT test takers who sign up with Kaplan, he says. One benefit of the course: Kaplan students get to take a GMAT practice exam in an actual testing center.

Bottom Line: Students who need repetition to be a part of their study routine and are looking for a company that has proven experience in teaching standardized tests in general might prefer Kaplan. With Kaplan, test takers can also choose the type of course—from the flagship class to on-demand videos—that is right for them. On the downside, it is a bit pricey.

KNEWTON

Cost: \$690 for traditional online course

With about 300 to 400 students per month, Knewton offers a variety of online tools to help prepare soon-to-be test takers, says Bradley McIlquham, director of academics at Knewton in New York. In addition to the traditional online course—which includes 36 hours of instruction, for example—the company offers a more targeted way to fill in the gaps in students' knowledge. Instructors pose a question online, then follow up with those who got it wrong, giving them the extra help they need. "We have many online resources, more than you could fit in a backpack," McIlquham says.

Known for its efficiency and convenience, Knewton's offerings "are substantially the same as they have been: an accurate gauge of what students will encounter on test day," he says. Knewton has not announced any new programs or curriculum changes it is implementing in response to the new test.

Bottom Line: Knewton is the perfect choice for people who cannot make it to a physical classroom or who are on a budget because of its exclusively online offerings and low price. Although the school provided students with a sample integrated reasoning question, the company has not yet decided how to handle the upcoming GMAT changes. Since the revised test won't be launched until June 2012, there is still time.

MANHATTAN GMAT

Cost: \$1,490 for traditional course; \$1,090 for online course; \$590 starting price for self-study

Pumping up students' skills, such as their ability to estimate quickly, is at the top of Manhattan GMAT's to-do list as it awaits word from GMAC about specifics of the new section, says Andrew Yang, president of Manhattan GMAT in New York. The company is already gearing up, he says, for the technical changes it will have to make to accommodate the new questions, some of which will require the use of tools such as spreadsheets. "We're bulking up online tools because the new section is hard to work out on paper," Yang says.

Manhattan GMAT, which was acquired by Kaplan last year, hasn't changed the format of its courses, but the company constantly tweaks material to improve content, says Yang. Asking students what they need to succeed, he says, serves the company well. For example, students on the go want convenience, so they can download flashcards to their iPhone.

"We think students want everything—the best class instructors, books, tutoring, online offerings, and iPhone applications," says Yang. "We've been offering the best we can on all platforms."

Manhattan GMAT's in-person and online courses include six computer-adaptive practice tests and the ability to schedule weekly 30-minute phone or online sessions with an instructor, who has scored in the 99th percentile of the GMAT, according to the Manhattan GMAT website.

More disciplined students can opt for self-study, which includes recorded class sessions and two private phone sessions with an instructor, in addition to study materials, according to the site.

Bottom Line: Manhattan GMAT is still well-known for the quality of its instructors and materials. A dedication to providing practical content, such as the iPhone applications, helps the company score with test takers. At this point, the company appears ahead of the curve when it comes to preparing for the test changes. One negative: Test takers have to be willing to pay more than they would elsewhere.

MANHATTAN REVIEW

Cost: \$850 to \$1,550

Tracy Yun, chief executive of Manhattan Review, says the New York company is preparing to devise practice questions for the new GMAT later in 2010. Starting around March 2011, during the math portion of the course, instructors will devote more time to integrated reasoning, she says. "The data will be taken from real world reports," says Yun. "To some extent, students will be able to use common sense to come up with answers."

Recently, Manhattan Review started to allow students to attend classes on an unlimited basis. If a student feels he needs more preparation, he can take the course again within 90 days, in person or online, at no additional cost. "This helps students alleviate stress if they feel restricted by time constraints," she says.

At Manhattan Review, courses range from one day to eight weeks and are available in 60 cities in 10 countries. As a bonus, anyone can receive a free MBA candidacy analysis. Says Yun: "We're focused and flexible."

Bottom Line: The free MBA candidacy analysis helps applicants come up with strategies for their applications, including their GMAT studies. Other test prep providers that offer a similar service charge for it. Also, having a timeline in place for adding integrated reasoning into the curriculum helps Manhattan Review stand out. Some of the offerings, such as the one-day course, while convenient, might have limited utility.

PRINCETON REVIEW

Cost: \$1,249 for either classroom or online course

One of the major players in the test prep industry, Princeton Review's strength lies in its ability to give students both content knowledge and strategy pointers for improving GMAT scores, says John Fulmer, national content director for GMAT at Princeton Review, which is headquartered in Framingham, Mass.

"You need a strategy to apply to your knowledge, which will only take you so far [by itself]," he says. "We arm students with strategy."

As students prepare for GMAT combat, the company says it's preparing for the upcoming changes to the exam. Fulmer says both course content and practice tests will be revamped to include questions similar to those in the GMAT's new integrated reasoning section. "Princeton Review has a good track record for adapting to changes to standardized tests," says Fulmer. "We did that in the past with the GMAT, when it became a computer-adaptive test."

In the meantime, Princeton Review in March 2010 launched its revamped GMAT Live Online course, which features 22 hours of instruction from two instructors. It also began offering a

standalone GRE/GMAT math fundamentals workshop, which offers refreshers on basics from adding fractions to understanding ratios.

"GMAT students are very busy, and they responded well to the online course," Fulmer says. "We've experienced growth in this area."

Bottom Line: Little is known about how Princeton Review plans to modify its curriculum to help students on the new integrated reasoning section. If it approaches the new questions with the same formula it has been using all along—content knowledge plus test-taking strategies—test takers will benefit.

VERITAS PREP

Cost: \$450 to \$1,750

With a longer course than most (more than 40 hours of classroom time) that has students beginning with the basics, Veritas Prep expects to fit in class work on the new section of the GMAT without a hitch, says Chad Troutwine, co-founder and CEO of Veritas Prep, which is headquartered in Malibu, Calif. "You won't just be solving math problems," he says. "You'll be making decisions based on the information you've been given."

As GMAC releases sample problems, Veritas Prep will come up with samples of its own to share, Troutwine says. "We don't teach you flashcards. We teach you how to think, and we'll continue to do that."

Veritas Prep recently began offering a concierge for all clients who want help beyond the classroom, says Troutwine. All classes also receive a three-hour MBA admissions workshop. Now, the focus is on customization: "We want to be known as a company that offers more personalized experiences to customers," he says.

Bottom Line: A new commitment to customization shows that Veritas Prep is paying attention to trends in the industry and aims to please customers. The longer courses and expertise of instructors probably will help students trying to conquer a new section of the test and be among the highest scorers. Still, the steep price will turn some students away.

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