

Career Journal: Business schools scrap cookie-cutter curriculums --- Stanford, others aim to tailor course work to diverse skill sets

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Sean Harrington, a second-year M.B.A. student at Stanford University, sometimes "zoned out" in his operations course when classmates struggled with material that was old hat to him. Familiar with manufacturing operations from the bicycle company where he had worked, he would have appreciated a more engaging course.

"I didn't feel as challenged and didn't learn as much as I could have about things like supply-chain management," says Mr. Harrington, co-chairman of the business school's student academic committee. "It's not a great feeling when you're investing so much time and money in a degree."

Stanford has been listening to Mr. Harrington and other students and alumni. Starting next fall, the business school will retool the M.B.A. curriculum to provide a highly customized experience. It plans to offer at least three class options in all of its 11 first-year foundation courses -- from accounting to information technology to microeconomics -- to better match the increasingly diverse backgrounds of its students.

"We like having someone who's been on the factory floor and someone who has managed an equity fund, but we have been pretty much putting everyone through a one-size-fits-all curriculum," says Garth Saloner, the professor who led Stanford's curriculum task force.

Recent classes have been truly eclectic, with such students as the Algerian founder of a European sushi chain, a Chinese television executive, a U.S. Army ranger, a European monetary-policy adviser and an Olympic medalist in women's ice hockey. In terms of business experience, the class of 2007 had worked in 61 different industries, compared with 46 for the class of 1999.

M.B.A. programs, including Stanford's, have long offered "turbo" accelerated versions of some courses, particularly finance and other mathematics-intensive subjects. Stanford's new approach promises greater personalization. In information management, for example, students could be placed in a class on basic concepts in computing and communication technology, intermediate classes on the role of technology in markets and supply-chain management, or an advanced class on electronic commerce.

Stanford's makeover comes as many schools are re-evaluating their curriculums in the wake of criticism about the effectiveness and relevance of M.B.A. programs. "Stanford's curriculum is another step in business schools' long journey toward greater flexibility to suit the needs of their customers -- the students," says John Fernandes, president of AACSB International, the business-school accrediting agency. When AACSB recently surveyed business-school deans, nearly 25% said they intended to revise the curriculum.

One of the most sweeping changes is taking place this fall at the Yale School of Management. It revamped the M.B.A. program to give students a broader, more integrated view of how finance, marketing and other functions blend together in the business world.

The Sloan School of Management at Massachusetts Institute of Technology plans curriculum changes, too, and is watching what its peers are up to.

Stanford's new curriculum will mean an initial one-time cost of about \$5 million, plus \$7 million to \$10 million a

year in additional expenses. For its smaller classes and seminars, the school will need both more professors and more space. Dr. Saloner expects the school to increase its current full-time faculty of 100 by 10% to 20%. Stanford also plans to construct a \$275 million, eight-building management center.

During the first quarter, students will take the same courses. At that time, faculty advisers will get to know students' abilities, experiences and aspirations, and then help craft individual study plans for foundation classes. Students also will be assigned to courses based on placement exams.

While many students probably will seek the best personal fit, some overly confident, ambitious people may resist the basic-level classes.