

The Online MBA in Entrepreneurship Explained



Even though some people argue that entrepreneurship cannot be taught, business schools are giving it their best shot with programs aimed at helping students launch startups. Actually, while most of the coursework is targeting those who want to be their own boss, some programs are also offering general management training and introduction to an entrepreneurial mindset, which can be applied to traditional jobs.

"These skills are important not only for those seeking to establish a new venture, but are increasingly critical in a

wide variety of professional careers given today's hyper-competitive marketplace, where rapid technological innovation and globalization has led to corporate downsizing and a dramatic change in the very nature of work," says Bruce Bachenheimer, clinical professor of management and director of the Entrepreneurship Lab at Pace University.

As more applicants and employers show an interest in the entrepreneurial spirit, more business schools are trying to accommodate them. Most have entrepreneurship courses, but some offer full-fledged majors that involve core curriculum and electives geared toward those self-starters wishing to innovate.

Who is the right fit for an online MBA in entrepreneurship?

Many entrepreneurship students dream of launching startups, either on their own or with a small team. Often, they are self-starters, who can easily tap into their creative side. Some of them come into school with a business -- or at least an idea for one -- in hand. They are looking to get more training to proceed and grow their businesses. Others are simply looking to better understand how to scope out a need in the market, so they can help already established organizations stay competitive. All of them are willing to take informed risks in the name of progress.

"Someone with an open mind, interested in exploring opportunities, and thinking differently [is an ideal fit]," says Emily Gohn Cieri, managing director of Wharton Entrepreneurship at University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. "I think some of our most successful entrepreneurs have come knowing they wanted to do something in entrepreneurship but not knowing exactly what that was. They engage in meaningful discussion with their fellow classmates, exploring ideas and building incredibly strong relationships that carry well beyond b-school."

Some students also look to business school as a way to help them raise funds and network in the hopes of meeting potential investors, co-founders, teammates, and employees. Many of them see an MBA program as the ultimate incubator (and often schools actually have an incubator, replete with offices and supplies to boot).

"Without a background in business prior to enrolling (10 years of military experience), I feel the program really fueled my passion for creating and building an organization," says Scott Kiefer, a partner in The Oliver Group in Louisville and a 2001 graduate of the University of Louisville EMBA. "The real time exposure to venture capitalists, successful and not-so-successful entrepreneurs, and hands-on new venture pitches allowed students to test the waters before jumping into the deep end of being an entrepreneur."

Students may be hesitant about their own abilities at first, says Stewart Thornhill, executive director of the Zell Lurie Institute for Entrepreneurial Studies at University of Michigan. But, as they learn more, they gain confidence.

"When they get the bug, they're unstoppable and huge fun to be around," he adds.

What is the curriculum like in an entrepreneurship MBA program?

Of course, students will experience the basic core courses -- finance, operations management, marketing, etc. -- but they'll study these subjects through the lens of an entrepreneur. For example, Kiefer remembers there would be a heavier emphasis on angel, seed, venture, and private equity funding related to a startup when he was attending school. In addition, there are electives that help students better understand the various stages of launching an enterprise.

"The curriculum is organized around some version of the natural lifecycle of a business," says Thornhill. "We teach how to creatively spot and evaluate opportunities, start a team, and create a business model. Typically, you'll find a course line that spans from ideation to launch to growth."

What the top business schools offer, and what makes them stand out, is the ability to actually launch a startup in the much safer confines of a university. The Zell Lurie Institute at the Ross School, for example, offers financial help to early-stage companies who can't afford interns, so students can experience that kind of work firsthand. There's an on-campus incubator and an accelerator program designed to help Michigan startups move forward. The Dare to Dream granting program provides financial support and mentorship to student teams with promising ideas. In addition, Ross students participate in a Multidisciplinary Action Project (MAP), which has them working in teams to help startups address challenges and problems in their business. Many schools offer similar support.

Business schools often find success in connecting engineering, medical, and science students from other parts of the university to aspiring entrepreneurs to help them develop businesses based on new products and research. Student clubs -- for either aspiring entrepreneurs or the sectors that interest them -- also play a major role in students' ability to meet both people and ideas.

Many programs are shifting gears and providing a more cutting-edge approach to teaching entrepreneurship. They are nixing courses about writing business plans in favor of those that have students immediately testing their ideas in the market to determine what is worth pursuing as a business. This "just do it" curriculum made the cover of *Harvard Business Review* in 2013 and is influencing the entrepreneurship courses at many top business schools, so expect to see more of it.



What can you do with an MBA in entrepreneurship?

Since most business schools provide entrepreneurship students with basic business training, graduates end up in a wide range of roles and industries. Most do not start a business right out of school. As more recruiters seek out those with entrepreneurial backgrounds, many different options have become available, says Cieri.

"We take a long-term and broad view on entrepreneurial education -- it's not just for students interested in starting business when they graduate," she adds. "Over the past four years, just under 10 percent of the graduates have started their own business upon graduation. In addition, students secure jobs at early stage companies, many of the larger technology companies (Google/LinkedIn/Amazon etc.), and still others will take more traditional jobs like consulting and a few in VC/PE."

Business school isn't the right place for every entrepreneur. Doing research, knowing your limitations and what you need to move forward with your career plans, and understanding just what an MBA in entrepreneurship means can help you make the right decision for you.

"An MBA from a top-tier school provides strong branding, a stellar network and a good business foundation, thus reducing the risk [involved in being an entrepreneur], but it also adds a meaningful debt load, in many cases," says Eric Allen, president of the startup Admit Advantage and a 2004 graduate of Wharton. "Candidates interested in pursuing entrepreneurship need to understand the financial and personal commitment involved, and if they are ready, an MBA in entrepreneurship is a great place to start."

If you have the guts to be a pioneer -- either by starting your own business, working for a startup, or helping already established businesses innovate -- then you might want to consider an MBA in entrepreneurship. Just remember that it requires guts and lots of hard work to create something of nothing. It may not work out in the end, but no one will be able to say you didn't try.

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