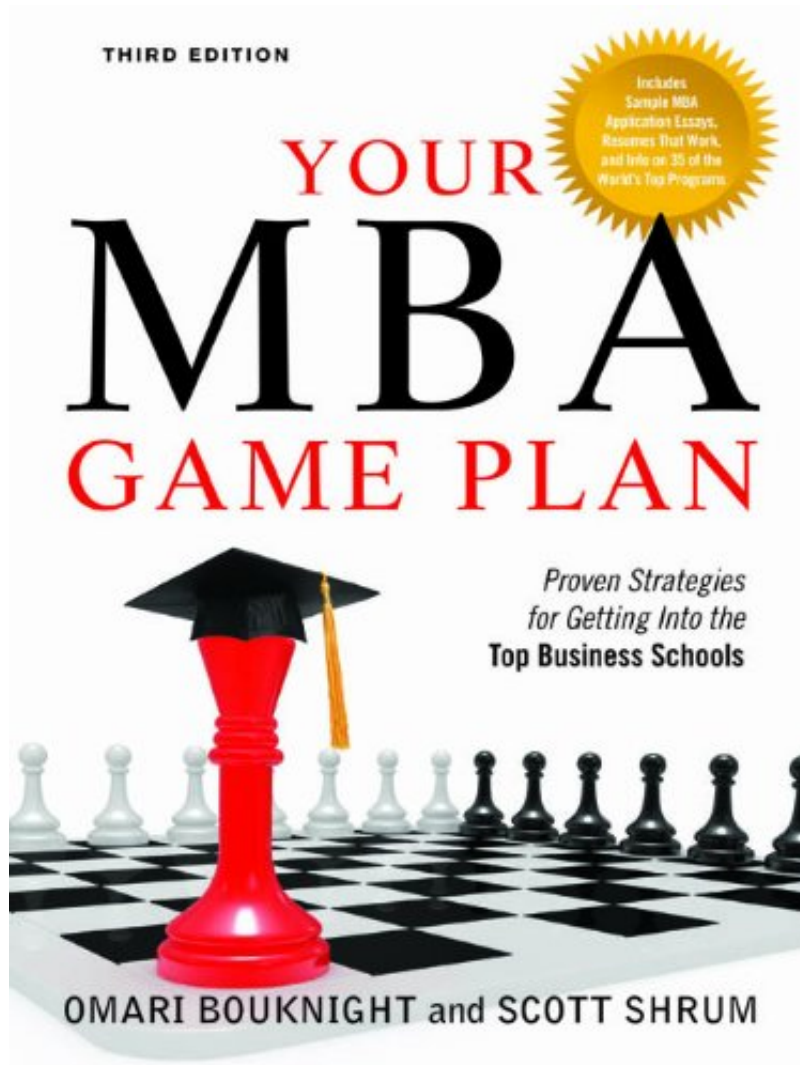


# Your MBA Game Plan, Third Edition

by

Omari Bouknight



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## Synopsis

The MBA has rapidly become the world's most desired degree, with graduates of top business schools landing six-figure pay packages in private equity, high-tech, investment banking, and management consulting. As a result, the competition for admission into select programs is fierce; some schools admit less than 10 percent of applicants. This third edition of *Your MBA Game Plan* includes even more sample essays and resumes from successful applicants, fresh insight on 35 leading business schools from around the world, and advice specifically tailored to international applicants. It will show you how to:

- Select target schools and highlight the personal characteristics and skill sets they seek
- Navigate the GMAT or GRE question
- Assess your own candidacy with the objective eye of an MBA admissions officer
- Craft compelling essays and resumes that highlight your most salient attributes and make you stand out to the admissions committee
- Avoid the mistakes that ruin thousands of applicants' chances each year
- Perform flawlessly during your admissions interviews

## Sort review

Like an Old Testament prophet, the photographer Danny Lyon has agitated for his fellow man to pursue justice and freedom. This was not always a popular message, nor a lucrative one, but that wasn't how he saw his role. —*The New York Times* Armed with a Triumph, a Nikon, and a unique dual perspective as both participant and observer, Lyon was able to access and portray a disarmingly intimate, familiar, and diverse subculture. —*LA Weekly* A seminal work in the modern photography canon —*Time* Whether shooting civil-rights protesters, motorcycle gang members or Texas inmates, the photographer empathized with his subjects—sometimes getting so close, he took up their cause. —*The Wall Street Journal* Mr. Lyon...did more than anyone outside Hollywood to establish the image of the outlaw biker. —*The New York Times* Wheels blog About the Author Danny Lyon is highly regarded as one of the most influential documentary photographers of the last five decades. His many books include *The Movement* (1964), *The Destruction of Lower Manhattan* (1969), *Conversations with the Dead* (1971), *Knave of Hearts* (1999), *Like a Thief's Dream* (2007), and *Deep Sea Diver* (2011). Widely exhibited and collected, Lyon has been awarded Guggenheim Fellowships twice and National Endowment for the Arts grants ten times.

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## Look inside the book

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We've been humbled by the number of business school applicants whom we've helped to succeed since the first edition of this book was published in 2003. In less than a decade, what started out as a simple idea grew into a book, which grew into an online service helping applicants improve their application essays and resumes, which has since merged with one of the world's largest GMAT prep and admissions consulting services, Veritas Prep. Long before Facebook and Twitter became household names, applicants all over the world were spreading the word about Your MBA Game Plan. What humbles us even more is how much more we have learned from our readers and other business school applicants. The MBA admissions game is constantly evolving, and by helping thousands of applicants sort through their own application strategies, we have learned far more than what we knew back in 2003: Our readers are savvier about the process, and they in turn have made us more insightful, which helps us assist new applicants even more. It's a virtuous cycle.

What's changed since 2003? For one, the MBA admissions game keeps getting more sophisticated. Thanks to books such as ours, other admissions consultants, online communities, and so on, the average applicant knows much more than the average applicant did eight years ago. And the mix of applicants has changed. Though bankers from New York are still a very common sighting among MBA applicants, more and more engineers and IT professionals from Asia are turning up in the applicant pool, making it ever harder for those applicants to stand out from the pack.

What else has changed? Admissions interviews continue to grow in importance. Many schools have radically redesigned their academic programs, throwing out the traditional core classes in favor of integrated curricula that put a great deal of emphasis on application-based learning and provide a solid dose of ethics. The economy went from ice cold at the start of the millennium to scorching in 2006 to teetering on the brink of a worldwide economic collapse in 2008, taking the job market on a wild ride with it. All the while, people kept taking the GMAT and applying to business school, mostly undeterred even when job-placement statistics looked grim.

But the more things change, the more they stay the same. Many applicants still miss the mark, focusing too much on their hard "stats" such as their GMAT score and GPA, and not enough on the story of who they are. They worry about having "enough" extracurricular activities in their applications, although just demonstrating a significant impact with one activity would serve them best. They ask their CEOs to write their letters of recommendation when a thoughtful, detailed letter from their immediate supervisor would help them far more. Or, perhaps worst of all, they choose which schools to apply to based on the rankings and nothing else, doing no more research than picking up a copy of U.S. News & World Report.

Since writing the first edition of this book, we've been in direct contact with hundreds more business school applicants. Many of them still fall short on at least one of the two goals that every applicant has: to show fit with an MBA program and to stand out

versus the competition. The reason for these “misses” is usually not just the GMAT or some other application item that’s easy to spot. The problem usually lies deeper in a person’s application strategy, such as failing to show the admissions committee what makes that person unique or interesting, or failing to demonstrate sufficient enthusiasm for a given program. Unfortunately, many such applications are destined to fail before they’re ever even submitted. Though the competition is tougher than ever, we believe that no one should be doomed to churning out applications that have zero chance of success. So, we’re back with the third edition of *Your MBA Game Plan*. Although the core MBA Game Plan message hasn’t changed (you must always demonstrate fit with a school and stand out from the pack), we’ve built on the story and taken it even farther. We now profile more top-ranked business schools than ever before, including more programs outside of the United States, and have completely revised the other schools’ profiles to include updated strategies. We’ve added even more MBA admissions essays, we have taken a closer look at certain applicant profiles in response to the rapidly evolving applicant pool, and, we’ve worked the countless other lessons we’ve learned during the past eight years into every other part of this book. Our goal remains the same: to help you get into the business school of your dreams. We’ve been in your shoes, and hope to share with you what we’ve learned as we applied to business school in 2001 and in the years since then. (Wow, time flies!) We don’t want to see you make any of the most common mistakes that applicants make every year. If you can make it easy for admissions officers to see that you have a distinctive profile and would fit well with their schools’ cultures, then you’ll quickly get ahead of other candidates. And getting ahead is probably what you had in mind when you picked up this book in the first place. Best of luck to you!

Scott and Omari May 2011

*New Game, New Rules*

To my relief, the cab slowed down and the driver waved me over. I had been on the verge of running for the last 30 minutes, trying to reach my interview with Harvard Business School on time. Sliding into the back seat of the taxi, I heavily exhaled directions to the admissions office, rejuvenated with confidence knowing that I would not arrive to the interview late. Now all I had to do was differentiate myself from the other 9,000 applicants and prove to the admissions committee that I embody HBS’s culture and mission. Suddenly, it hit me: This would be no small task. In many ways, the on-campus interview is a wake-up call. For many applicants, it is the first time that they interact directly with the competition and with their target schools. Stepping into the admissions office, my alarm went off as I began to discuss experiences, backgrounds, and objectives with other applicants who were waiting to interview. The conversations were enlightening, as gossip and advice on the application process were freely swapped. More so, however, these conversations were humbling. I spoke with a military pilot who had escorted the president around the country, a scientist in biotechnology who was working on a cancer-fighting antibody, and an Internet entrepreneur who had executed a multi-million-dollar initial public offering. What did I have to offer? I no longer believed my family’s frequent promises that I would be admitted. They obviously didn’t understand what I was up against. “Your interviewer is ready to see you now,” the receptionist called out to me. Moments later, I was sitting across from an admissions

officer. A 30-minute conversation ensued in which we discussed all aspects of my application, except for my GMAT score and GPA. Indeed, the interview was very similar to the several others in which I took part. Because most applicants to top business schools have the ability to succeed in the curricula, GPA and test scores are often ruled out as differentiating factors. So what remained to separate me from the thousands of other applicants? The admissions officer asked questions about my story. What were my career goals, and how would attending business school play a role in meeting those goals? How would my professional and personal experiences enhance the classroom dynamic? In what ways had I acted as a leader to my peers? Fortunately, I was ready. My responses were well crafted and were supported with specific details. These responses were all part of a strategic approach that I developed to target the schools to which I applied. The interview transformed into a platform on which I established my case. The admissions officer became my audience, measuring my storyline against other applicants' stories and against the school's sense of "fit." By the end of the interview, I felt satisfied. I had covered each of my points and made a convincing case for why I belonged at HBS. Exiting the interview, I didn't concern myself with finding a taxi. I wanted to savor my victory. Thanks to my preparation, I was one step closer to being admitted.

The Increasing Popularity of Business School Fueled by steadily rising post-MBA salaries and a burgeoning global economy that is sending ever more international business school students to American schools, the number of applications to top schools continues to climb. Despite a two-percent, year-over-year drop in applications to traditional two-year MBA programs reported by the Graduate Management Admission Council in 2010 (an almost inevitable decline after several years of strong growth during the last recession), the overall trend is undeniable. Admissions rates at top business schools continue to creep downward as more and more young professionals decide they want a top-tier MBA to bolster their career prospects. Over the past decade, the rules of the business school application game have significantly changed. As a result of the overall increase in applications, the competition among applicants has intensified. All top-10 MBA programs (as ranked by U.S. News & World Report in 2010) have a mean GMAT score and GPA greater than 705 and 3.4, respectively, and these statistics continue to climb. Meanwhile, the number of seats at most schools is not climbing, and, in fact, some top schools have made fewer seats available to traditional full-time MBA applicants. The result is that schools are more closely examining all aspects of the MBA application beyond the basic statistics. Many applicants, however, have responded to this increased competition by merely focusing on improving their GMAT scores and other "hard" stats. U.S. News, Bloomberg Businessweek, and other magazines prominently feature a school's average GMAT score next to its name, so it's only natural that applicants focus on this obvious component of the application. But while the GMAT may be the first challenge in the application process that must be navigated, high scores alone certainly won't win the business school application game.

MBA Application Strategy Traditional strategic analysis examines the approach of a decision-maker given his environment and the tactics of other decision-makers who are in pursuit of similar

objectives. As an applicant, you must succeed in an environment that demands differentiation against the competition and proper fit with the programs to which you apply. The ultimate questions that you as an applicant must answer are: How do I measure against the competition? How do I measure against my targeted business schools? In our admittedly subjective estimation, after years of experience, we estimate that the probability of gaining acceptance to top business school programs looks something like this: The rest of this book focuses on developing answers to those two questions and getting you to the upper-right cell. It will do so in a functional and comprehensive manner, highlighting all aspects of the application process. You will learn how to position yourself based on your experiences and your target schools, how to write effective essays, and how to execute your application strategy.

### Understanding the Competition

When Omari first started the business school application process, one of the first pieces of insight he was given dealt with the number of candidates applying with his professional profile: If you want to gain admittance to a top program, you must first find a way to differentiate yourself from the thousands of other consultants who are applying. This is good advice for any applicant, regardless of the profile. Therefore, it is helpful to get into the minds of admissions officers and of other business school candidates with the knowledge that these candidates will have strong applications that cross the officers' desks before and after your own application. At a high level, there are two aspects of your application that admissions officers will compare with other candidates' applications: your profile and your career goals.

### Your Profile

The first aspect of differentiation that you must understand as a business school candidate is that all applicants have an Achilles' heel. We all have a weakness in our profile that will show up in our applications; it's just a matter of whether or not it is appropriately addressed. Whether the issue is number of years of work experience, lack of community service activities, low GPA, poor writing ability, low GMAT score, unconvincing interview skills, or overconfidence, all candidates have an aspect of their profiles that, unaddressed, could lead to the dreaded "ding," as rejections are commonly called.

### Your profile consists of your academic background, professional experiences, and personal interests and activities. As much as possible, the components in your profile should be multifaceted and consistent with an overall theme:

### Multifaceted

Admissions officers look for candidates who demonstrate multiple dimensions through various interests. A common question that is asked during business school interviews is: "Outside of your professional activities, what are your personal interests and endeavors?" Top business schools want to ensure that they do not merely admit workaholic drones, but rather candidates who lead interesting and inspiring lives.

### Consistent

A while back, we spoke with Carrie, an applicant who was declined admittance to the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. During her feedback session with an admissions officer, one of the messages that Carrie received was that she lacked community service experience. Actually, Carrie did have community service experience, but it wasn't relevant experience. It didn't fit with the overall message that she conveyed in her application. The community service activities in which Carrie took part appeared to be events in which she participated purely so that they could be posted on her resume. Admission committee

members are savvy enough to detect when an applicant's attempts to enhance her profile are contrived, so you therefore need to weave the components of your profile into your story in a logical and consistent manner. The second and third chapters of this book will assist you in differentiating your application story from the competition. Chapter 2 will outline the characteristics that admissions officers value, and show you how to demonstrate these characteristics in your own application. In highlighting those characteristics, you will ensure that your profile is multifaceted and consistent with a targeted story. This approach impresses top business schools, as they are searching for candidates who will add something unique to the classroom dynamic. Chapter 2 will also show you how to overcome certain weaknesses that your application may contain. Specific profiles will be covered in Chapter 3, which details each profile's typical strengths and weaknesses, and provides guidance on how to overcome the stereotypes that admissions officers tend to associate with each profile.

**Your Career Goals** Where you are going is just as important as where you are coming from. Admissions officers often cite candidates' inability to articulate their postgraduation goals—and how the business school's curriculum will support those goals—as a contributing factor in a candidate's rejection. As you communicate your career goals, you should convey an overall story that makes it easy for the admissions committee to see why an MBA makes sense for you. Typically, the career goal aspect of your story will either describe your motivation to make a career change or your intent to bolster your current career direction. Whichever career path you intend to pursue, the messages you communicate in the application should reflect innovation and an entrepreneurial spirit. That doesn't mean that all applicants should strive to start their own businesses, but rather that business schools are looking for candidates who want to contribute a fresh perspective and new insight to their chosen professions. Use the application as a forum in which to display ambition and ingenuity as you discuss future objectives. Additionally, you should discuss the ways in which the targeted school's specific curriculum will aid you in achieving those objectives.

**Chapter 4** will provide you with details on each component of the application process. Your story should be reflected in each of these components.

**Understanding Your Business School Targets** Most business schools look for similar qualities in their applicants. They want students who demonstrate academic aptitude, leadership, an ability to work well with peers and subordinates, integrity, and ambition, just to name a few. So, does this mean that the applications to your target schools should be the same? Of course it doesn't. Each school tends to emphasize certain traits over others, and looks for examples to support these traits. A quick look at the essay questions from a few business school applications tells you that each school asks about these qualities in different ways. Here's the irony: Each school claims to look for a unique type of candidate, yet it seems that every year there are some applicants who manage to get into all of the top programs. Do these candidates really have every trait that all of these schools are looking for? Probably not. More likely, they understand the emphasis that each school places on specific traits, and they know how to highlight those traits in their application. Successful applicants know that MIT Sloan values analytical ability, and they therefore stress



their methodical approaches to business problems. They know that Fuqua really does pride itself on its teamwork-oriented culture, and they highlight the success they've had while working in teams. These may seem like obvious examples to an applicant who's done some basic school research, but this is an area in which many applicants stumble. They either don't give enough thought to highlighting the traits that each school looks for, or they "tack on" one trite example in a half-hearted attempt to meet the requirement. The result is almost always a rejection because the applicants failed to demonstrate proper fit with their target schools.

**What Is "Fit"?** In short, "fitting" with a school means demonstrating that you have the ability to succeed there, you are someone the school would be glad to have as part of its community, and you will serve as an ambassador for the school after you graduate. In order to convey proper fit with a school, you should demonstrate that: You understand what the school stands for and why it is important. When you say "Darden preaches leadership," you are able to give examples of what leadership means to you and explain why you want to further strengthen your own leadership abilities at Darden. You embody the traits that the school most wants to see in its students. You don't need to have climbed Mount Everest to have demonstrated accomplishment or aced the GMAT to demonstrate quantitative excellence. You do need to be able to illustrate how your everyday life is peppered with examples of the traits for which the school looks. You will become very involved in your business school, from contributing to class discussions to running student organizations to being an active alum 20 years from now. One great way to communicate this is by pointing to similar experiences with your undergraduate university. You are the kind of person with whom your classmates would want to work on a team project at 3 a.m. Exhibiting a penchant for working in teams and a sociable personality will establish the basis for this.

One other extremely important question that an admissions officer asks about every applicant is: "Would he actually attend this school if he were accepted?" Admissions officers assume that you're applying to multiple schools, and they know that their school may not be your first choice. But you need to convey enough knowledge and enthusiasm about the school to convince admissions officers that you would strongly consider attending their school if you were accepted. The history of the business school admissions game is littered with stories of people with stellar credentials who were rejected by "safety" schools. If you don't sound sincere about wanting to attend a given school, you can expect that school to return the favor by not wanting you.

**Demonstrating "fit" in your application** Your entire application should spell out how well you fit with your target business school. Practically speaking, though, the parts of the application that will do this the most are your essays, recommendations, and interview. Think of these as your opportunities to talk about how your background and future direction correspond with what the school has to offer, and to discuss them in a way that lets your personality come through. Yes, you will answer different questions for each school, but admissions officers inevitably want to get to know what makes you tick, and they do it through the questions that they ask. In essays, admissions officers most want to hear about actions that you have taken to solve a real problem or reach an actual goal, not what you would do in a hypothetical situation. They also want to hear what you learned from

your experiences. Be as specific as possible in describing what you have accomplished and what you have learned in the process. The same goes for recommendations. Almost everyone finds someone to write a positive recommendation for them, but a truly great recommendation will support your positioning by providing specific examples of how you demonstrated leadership, succeeded as part of a team, and so on. We can't emphasize this enough: Be as specific as possible! Doing so will help make it easier for an admissions officer to picture you making a positive impact at your target school and beyond. Before you put together your applications, you should know exactly what you want them to communicate. Chapter 6 will help you build your game plan, which will bring out the messages that you want to convey to each of your target schools.

### Selecting Your Schools

As important as it is to establish proper fit in your applications, you must first select the schools to which you will apply. The game is reversed, as you must decide which schools fit you rather than having the schools decide that you fit them. Selecting schools should be an introspective process. You should be warned, however, that people who don't even know your name will have an opinion on where you should apply. Also remember that school rankings are just one piece of information to consider. Certainly rankings can be helpful tools in getting familiar with the schools' perceived strengths and weaknesses. Still, it's important that you do your own research. After all, no magazine or newspaper knows what really matters most to you. Do not be enticed by prestige alone. Though it certainly may be a factor in making your selections, there are plenty of other criteria that should be considered. Some of the selection criteria that you may want to use in evaluating schools include: Curriculum emphases. Typical career paths of graduates. Teaching style. Student culture. Compensation upon graduation. Financial aid opportunities. International perspective and access. Geographical location. Facilities. Diversity. Cost of tuition and living. Class size. Use of technology. Fortunately, there is an abundance of resources available to help you evaluate these criteria. Some of the steps you should undertake are: Visit business school Websites. Review curriculum information. Speak with current students and alumni. Speak with faculty. Attend business school forums. Visit the schools and sit in on classes. We will discuss some of these resources and criteria in more detail later. We will also assist you in your evaluation of programs. Chapter 5 takes a look at the business school selection process and provides an overview of 35 top global business schools, with perspectives on how to gain admittance to them. Finally, we've compiled a list of frequently asked questions (FAQs), which you will find at the end of most chapters. These are questions that we've heard a number of applicants ask. The FAQs have been placed in different chapters depending on their topics.

### The Business School Decision

The decision to apply to business school is likely to be one of the most important decisions you'll make in your career. For full-time students, the investment will likely be in excess of \$150,000 before you even take opportunity costs (the salary you would have earned during those two years) into consideration. And with more than 70 percent of MBAs having to take out loans to pay for at least a portion of their education, it's clear that you shouldn't just wake up one morning and decide that you want to go to business school. Interestingly, that seems to be

exactly the way some business school applicants arrived at their decision. Others (read: investment bankers and consultants) scheduled “apply to business school” in their Outlook calendars four years ago as if it’s as routine as scheduling a haircut. Regardless of how you arrived at this decision, you should really spend some time thinking about what you want to get out of the business school experience. The bottom line is that you absolutely have to be passionate about attending business school before making the decision to apply. Sure, the thought of going \$150,000 into debt is intimidating, but there are plenty of ways in which you can balance the costs of business school, including a large salary at the end of the rainbow. Perhaps the more daunting factor is the admissions process itself. Indeed, you must be passionate about earning an MBA, because the application process will deter anyone who isn’t dedicated to getting in. Certainly, this book will help you with every step in that process, but we can’t do much to instill the dedication that it takes to get in. That part is up to you. Thankfully, business schools come in all sorts of shapes, sizes, and colors, so you should be able to select an MBA program that fits your needs. Here are some of your options:

**Full-time:** As the title would suggest, full-time programs are the most involved option. Most MBA programs in the United States run for two years (although some one-year programs do exist), and require students to leave their professional positions. Many programs outside of the United States offer one-year programs, which are beginning to appeal to more and more students, given the reduced costs. Students like the full-time option, because it gives them full exposure to the business school experience. Certainly the opportunity costs are higher than with most other options, but the experience is richer, because of the amount of time spent with classmates, faculty, and speakers. Generally, full-time programs are seen as a good option for people who are considering some type of career transition, be it a new industry, function, or position. One of the benefits of full-time programs that allows this transition to occur is the summer internship. There is often heated debate over whether there is actually any financial benefit to attending a full-time program. Although there is no clear answer, our personal experiences have shown that in addition to making a career transition, there are great intangible benefits to being surrounded by intelligent, motivated people for two years. This book’s focus, in terms of providing application strategy advice, will be on full-time programs. The application processes for part-time and distance-learning programs, however, are very similar. You can still benefit from the advice in this book should you decide not to apply to a full-time program.

**Part-time:** If you are satisfied with your current career path and can’t fathom the thought of breaking away from the workforce for one or two years, a part-time program might be what you’re looking for. Part-time students generally follow the same curriculum as their full-time counterparts, but take all of their classes during the evenings and on weekends. Most part-time students take three to five years to finish their degrees. Many part-timers report that the class load combined with their normal work load can be intense at times, but they are happy not to have to take on the extra debt load or forgo their regular income.

**Distance-learning:** These programs quickly rose in popularity as people became more comfortable with taking classes online. Typically, students will download course material

and assignments from the business school Website and have access to faculty via the Internet. In some cases, students will occasionally meet in the classroom to discuss course material. Distance-learning programs are normally one to three years in length and feature curricula similar to that of full-time programs. The benefits are that you can continue your career in a location that isn't within close proximity of the program in which you're enrolled. More and more business schools recognize the value of this option, and more programs are offering online learning options every year. Be aware that a large trade-off you make in choosing a distance-learning program is that you will miss out on the opportunity to be surrounded by exceptional peers from all walks of life. If you are comfortable with this trade-off and are mostly interested in the hard skills that an MBA can deliver (especially if you want to move ahead in your current job, rather than find a new job), then a distance-learning option may be right for you. Just be aware that most online-only MBA programs don't carry anywhere near the cachet that their traditional counterparts do.

**Executive MBA:** Executive MBA (EMBA) programs are similar to part-time programs in that they normally appeal to professionals who are further along in their careers than typical full-time applicants, and allow them to keep working full-time while earning their degrees. EMBA programs also sometimes resemble distance-learning programs in that they can give students multiple, flexible options for study. The main difference is that EMBA students are typically even further along in their careers than are students in the other program types. Also, the vast majority of EMBA students are sponsored by their companies. EMBA programs generally follow similar curricula as full-time programs and can take anywhere from two to five years to complete.

**Other executive programs:** For those who are further along in their careers and have specific aspects of business they would like to learn more about, executive education programs might be the way to go. Executive education programs generally run for one or two weeks and provide established executives with the opportunity to improve their competency in one of a variety of business topics from mergers and acquisitions to leading change in an organization to supply chain management. Their short length allows executives to rapidly get educated in an area without infringing upon their work schedule. These programs are also a nice way to get up to speed on a business topic without enduring lectures on topics with which you are already familiar. Executive programs are, however, notoriously expensive. You can expect one these programs to set you or your company back anywhere from \$3,000 to \$35,000. Additionally, you won't receive any type of degree for your participation. At best, you can hope to receive some type of certification. Still, you will enjoy a fairly simple application process. Most applications request information on your professional background only (no GMAT, no essays, no interview, no recommendations, and so on) and can be accessed directly from business schools' Websites. Overall, executive education programs are much more interested in your ability to pay than your qualifications. So, if you're reading this book in order to develop a strategy to get into an executive education program, you can stop right now.

**PhD:** If you are enamored at the thought of teaching business concepts, then you should consider going the PhD route. Business schools are always looking for fresh talent, knowing that faculty strength is

a major differentiating factor in the eyes of applicants. PhD programs generally take four to five years to complete and, in many cases, require you to take some MBA coursework before specializing. Although you will be in school much longer than with a fulltime MBA program, you will receive considerably more financial assistance. You should know, however, that PhD programs can be extremely difficult to gain admittance to, even more so than their MBA counterparts. Many PhD programs at top schools only take a handful of students per specialty each year. Additionally, landing your dream faculty position can be much more challenging than landing your dream business job because faculty spots at top schools are always limited. Beyond thinking about what type of program you want to attend, you should also consider whether you want to apply for a dual degree program or a specialty program. Dual degree programs give you a chance to earn an MBA degree and another advanced degree in less time than it would take to complete both degrees separately. Unfortunately, there are rarely two-for-one deals on the price of pursuing a dual degree, but you may qualify for additional financial assistance. Some of the most popular degrees to combine with an MBA include: Law. Public policy. Education. International studies. Engineering. Medicine. Health administration. If you decide to pursue a dual degree, you should make sure that you understand how the extra degree will be beneficial. Be wary of pursuing a dual degree merely for the prestige of getting additional letters after your name. In fact, some companies might be slow to consider you during recruiting, because of the fear that they'd have to compensate you more for both degrees, or the expectation that you're more likely to jump ship and chase other opportunities within a couple of years of being hired. Also, know that a dual degree may actually provide you with less flexibility. If, for instance, you get a dual degree in business and medicine, then firms outside of healthcare will immediately ask why you're interested in them, given your background. With that said, if you have a firm understanding of how the additional degree fits in with your career goals, are willing to pay the extra tuition, and don't mind spending the additional time, then a dual degree may be worth pursuing. As you get older, start a family, and so forth, it will only get harder to step away from the workforce to gain yet another advanced degree. So, you may as well do it now if you're certain that's what you want. Apart from dual degree programs, several schools offer specialization programs within their core business school curricula. These programs generally require you to take a few required MBA courses before following the specialization component of the curriculum. Examples of specialization programs include: Financial engineering. Systems engineering. Accounting. Healthcare. Manufacturing management. Specialization programs are nice from the standpoint that they signal your dedication to a particular field. Recruiters from those areas tend to like that level of dedication, so if you're comfortable aligning yourself with a particular industry or function, you should consider specializing. Naturally, the flip side is that you are narrowing your business focus rather than broadening it. Also, specialization programs can sometimes be more difficult to gain acceptance to than their general management counterparts. Nonetheless, participants in these programs who have a clear career direction consistently speak highly about their experiences. So there you have it: a whole world of opportunity from

which you can select. It is of course a big decision to make. But once you make the decision to apply, we'll be with you the rest of the way.

#### FAQs

**How specific should I be in discussing my career goals?** Simply espousing generalities with regard to your career goals will not win you the gold. Although you don't have to state what exact job title you expect to hold in five years, it is important that you convey a career direction in your application. Establishing a direction shows that you know what you want to get out of business school and aren't simply trying to boost your salary. As a general rule, you should be as specific as you feel comfortable discussing. In other words, don't discuss a career path in your application that you can't speak intelligently about. Overall, your career goals should make sense in the context of your application story and should be compelling, answering the question of why you want an MBA to pursue that career path. You should also be able to discuss how your career goals will have an impact on an industry, individuals, or society in general.

**What if I'm not sure what my career goals are?** Use the application preparation process to gain a better understanding of your talents and ambitions. Talk to your friends and family about what they see you doing and match that with your background. Refine your ideas as you investigate business school curricula until your application story takes shape. Odds are that by the end of the business school application process you will have a much clearer picture of what your career goals are. You just don't want the admissions committee to view you as an aimless vagabond. This is particularly true if you come from a less business-oriented background, in which case having a concrete story for why you need an MBA is even more critical than for a typical applicant.

**If I apply to business school saying I want to pursue one career, but then pursue something else once I'm in, will that matter?** No one will care! Though MBA admissions officers do want to see a great deal of introspection and professional maturity in your application, they also know that you're still only a few to several years into a career that will last for decades. Whether or not it feels like it, you're still a mere pup in the grand scheme of things. Part of the value of attending business school—especially a two-year, full-time program—is the ability to explore new ideas and possible career paths. If you start out thinking you want to go into healthcare marketing and end up being a management consultant, that's completely fine. We're mainly concerned with discouraging you from saying you want to pursue a path in something such as social entrepreneurship simply because you think that's what admissions officers want to hear. Speak the truth when you apply, but know that, if you're admitted, you've also earned the right to shop around and consider as many career options as you please.

## 2 The Four Dimensions of a Perfect Applicant

Becoming the perfect business school candidate is as much an exercise in understanding and cultivating your relative strengths as it is in identifying and addressing your relative weaknesses. We all have strengths. The main challenge is to reveal your strengths in your applications and convince admissions officers that those strengths aren't outweighed by your weaknesses.

For every Superman there is a kryptonite. For every applicant there is a weakness. That's okay! This is the first reality that must be understood as you develop your position and become the "perfect applicant." Remember: A 780 on the GMAT does not blind admissions officers to generic career goals any more than a

great stereo system makes up for a car that's missing an engine. To avoid this type of imbalance, you must express all four dimensions that every business school looks for: Leadership Probably more than anything else, business schools want to be known as institutions that produce leaders in their fields. Admissions committees are therefore in search of applicants who display leadership ability in all facets of their lives. This doesn't mean that you need to have served as a captain in the Army or have started three new nonprofit organizations. Candidates who successfully demonstrate leadership in their applications exhibit how they have provided others with direction, shown initiative, and managed difficult situations in their professional, personal, and academic careers. And, above all, they need to show how they have made a positive impact on the organization and community around them. It is not enough to merely state that you are a leader; you must provide examples of demonstrated leadership. Ultimately, the admissions committee should identify you as a high potential leader because of supporting details rather than overt statements. A good rule of thumb is "Show, don't tell."

Innovation Innovation is a combination of traditional intellectual ability and creativity. Naturally, the former is reflected in the "hard" statistics such as your GMAT score and grade point average, but admissions committee members also look for the latter. Applicants who are visionaries are generally successful in establishing the trait of innovation. Innovation, in this case, can be as simple as finding a new solution to an everyday business problem. Past behavior is a terrific predictor of one's future behavior in similar settings, and admissions officers look for applicants they can envision doing bold, new things down the road. Stories that demonstrate this sort of professional creativity will help your cause here.

Teamwork The success that Kellogg has had with integrating teamwork throughout its curriculum has spread through time to the other top business schools. Kellogg's success with a team-oriented curriculum has been supported by the way in which most companies now operate. Because companies utilize teams for virtually all of their functions, business schools are in search of applicants with strong team skills. A team-oriented attitude is now a baseline expectation of every applicant. This includes basic social skills and a willingness to share successes and take accountability for failures. Though top business schools are certainly known for being competitive environments, operating in teams has become an integral part of conducting business, and as such is a key aspect of the business school experience.

Maturity Work experience has become a vital part of candidates' applications. On average, admitted applicants to the top business schools have almost five years of full-time work experience. Although some top programs have made a deliberate effort to admit more people right out of college during the past several years (most notably Harvard Business School, with its HBS 2+2 Program), this remains the exception and not the rule. More important than the length of one's work experience, however, is the quality and depth of that experience. Top business schools are in search of candidates with multilayered experiences inside and outside of the workplace. An important aspect of the business school experience is that students teach one another based on their backgrounds. It is often said that everyone at business school, including faculty, is both a teacher and a student. Admissions committees therefore try to identify "mature"

candidates who display professional maturity and integrity throughout their applications. As an applicant, your goal should be to weave each of these dimensions throughout all of the application components. In general, application components consist of: Data sheets. Essays. Recommendations. Resume. Transcript. Interview. In Chapter 4, we will step through each of these components in detail and show ways in which successful applicants have expressed the four dimensions. To help you gauge how well your profile supports these dimensions, you should take an inventory of your activities and achievements. This will allow you to identify your strengths and weaknesses and address them accordingly. Activities and achievements that typically support the four dimensions include the following:

**Community Service** Through time, community service has evolved from a nice-to-have to a must-have on the application. During feedback sessions with rejected applicants, admissions committee members frequently mention that they wish they had seen more in the way of community involvement. It should be stressed, however, that this is a quality (not quantity) activity. You shouldn't merely write down every humanitarian act that you've ever performed. Nor should you try to join half a dozen community service organizations six months before applying to desperately demonstrate that you have a heart. Rather, it is important to show that you have aspirations of helping society as a whole and not just your personal bank account. Your goal should be to demonstrate deep impact through a few activities, not broad impact across many. Community service is a great way to express all four of the dimensions that you will need to demonstrate in your application, but it can especially be powerful in communicating maturity and leadership abilities.

**GMAT Score** Although your GMAT score alone will never get you into a business school, it certainly can keep you out. As a general rule, if your score falls below a school's middle-80-percent range of scores, you will have to overcome long odds in order to be considered a contender. On the flip side, a GMAT score close to a school's mean indicates that you have the intellectual horsepower to excel in the business school classroom. Naturally, achieving a strong score on the GMAT gives you points in the innovation department. To avoid having to overcome a low score, you should review our section on the GMAT in Chapter 4. In that chapter we also answer the question of whether you should take the GMAT or the GRE, which many top MBA programs also now accept.

**Hobbies and Extracurricular Activities** Any hobby that can support one of the dimensions or give the admissions committee insight into your personality is worth mentioning. At the end of the day, business schools are looking to admit people, not numbers, and discussing hobbies is a great way to differentiate yourself from the competition. These activities can also display your strengths in areas such as teamwork and innovation. As such, it isn't really important what the hobby is, but rather what the hobby says about you as an applicant. Do you like fly fishing? Great. Now tell the admissions committee why. Your target business schools are more interested in the reason than you might realize.

**International and Cultural Exposure** As the trend of globalization continues and the world gets smaller, business schools want applicants who will have global impact. Use every part of the application as a platform to highlight your foreign language skills, multi-national experiences, and cultural awareness. Examples of this can be as



grandiose as leading a business unit through a global merger across three continents, or as simple as working with a group of individuals with diverse professional and educational backgrounds. In general, including international or cultural experiences displays a willingness to operate outside of your comfort zone. In this way, it will help you to support the maturity and teamwork dimensions.

**Professional Experience** For most applicants, professional experience will be the primary driver of the application. It is what admissions officers care about most of all (what better way to judge how successful you will be 20 years from now?), and it will permeate your essays, recommendations, interviews, and resumes. Because it has such wideranging usage, it should be utilized to support all four dimensions.

**Undergraduate and Graduate Transcripts** Although your undergraduate and graduate transcripts can't be altered, you can emphasize different aspects of them to support your position. Perhaps you took myriad courses outside of your major during undergrad. You could use that multi-discipline approach to support your desire to attend a business school that focuses on general management. Naturally, a high grade point average (GPA) helps to support the innovation dimension and indicates your ability to succeed in a rigorous academic environment. A low GPA can be overcome, to a point, with a terrific GMAT score and successful post-college coursework.

**Analyzing Your Strengths and Weaknesses** Odds are, you have some notable strengths that will make you a solid student and worthy contributor in business school, but you also have some weaknesses that might keep you out of your ideal school if they go unaddressed. That puts you in a pool that includes probably 99 percent of all business school applicants. This section will show you how to systematically identify and capitalize on your strengths while rooting out and neutralizing your weaknesses.

**The Grid** Surprisingly, many applicants don't spend any time analyzing or even just writing down their strengths and weaknesses. This might seem like a trivial task—especially because you know yourself better than anyone—but remember that your goal is to sell yourself to someone whose only contact with you is through your application and possibly a 30-minute interview. Therefore, you need to organize your thoughts and make sure that you know exactly what traits you will emphasize for the admissions committee. It helps to start by drawing out the four dimensions and activity/achievement categories in a grid, like the one here:

**Figure 2.1** Next, list your activities and achievements, according to the categories, that bring out one or more of the dimensions. This process shouldn't happen in one 10-minute session. Rather, it will likely take a few minutes here and there as other activities and achievements come to mind. Ideally you can give yourself days or even weeks to make this happen. Some things to think about when you are looking into your past are: In what extracurricular activities did you participate while in college? For what did you volunteer? To what positions were you elected? How have you gotten involved in your community since graduating from college? What have you enjoyed about these experiences? What have you learned that you didn't learn in school or on the job? What do you like to do in your spare time? What do you enjoy about each of these things? How have they helped you gain a new perspective or exercise your creative side? Where have you traveled? What languages do you know? What have you learned from your friends of different backgrounds? What have you

done on the job that might exhibit one or more of the four desired dimensions? Did you lead a team, identify a problem and find a creative solution, deal with a problematic coworker, and achieve a goal that no one thought was possible? What about your undergraduate academic experience might stand out? Did you study abroad or develop your own independent study? Did you dedicate yourself to one academic field, or did you pursue multiple interests? What awards did you receive? Start by being fairly generous with yourself. Put everything that comes to mind in the grid. You can pare down the overlaps and the weaker examples later. Also, you may have participated in some activities that don't fit neatly into any of the previously mentioned categories. As long as they help bring out one of the four main dimensions that you want to demonstrate, include them. You can create a catch-all "other" category if needed. When you are done, your grid may look like an expanded version of this: Figure 2.2 Note that you will likely have more Xs in some categories than in others. That's perfectly fine. The idea is not to have a completely full grid, but rather to use the grid as a tool for visualizing what your strengths and weaknesses are. Hopefully, your activities and achievements will complement each other and help fill in each column of the table to some degree, but don't worry if this doesn't happen when you first fill it out. Also note that some activities may only demonstrate one dimension while others may demonstrate three or four of them. That doesn't mean that the former is less valuable than the latter. Keep in mind that the most important thing is to adequately demonstrate all four desired dimensions. An activity that provides your only strong example of leadership may end up being the most important piece of your application story, rather than an example that shows that you demonstrated all four dimensions moderately well. After you are confident that you have covered everything in your background that is relevant to your application, start to trim the list if needed. If you have 10 examples that demonstrate teamwork, try to evaluate them through an admissions officer's eyes and rank them from most important to least important. The question you should ask yourself in order to rank them should be: "How effectively does this achievement or activity demonstrate what I am trying to show?" It's tempting to include glamorous examples over more common ones, but being one small part of a CEO's task force on cost-cutting may do less to show off your traits than having led the solution of a tough problem within your own department. Also look for activities and achievements that overlap. If you have done four things that all demonstrate leadership and maturity, you won't need to mention all four of them in your application. Just one or two will do.

### What to Do About Your Weaknesses

In the event that you look at one row or column of your grid and see a lot of white space, don't panic! Most applicants will encounter this challenge. Remember that the table isn't the end, but rather it is the means for identifying what you might need to work on while you build your application. Following are some areas where applicants typically have some holes in their grids, and some ideas for bolstering your position in each.

#### Community Service

Not everyone has done a lot of community service, and it can be tempting to want to volunteer for five nonprofit organizations in the months leading up to your application deadline. Admissions committees can see right through this, however, so don't waste your time in a last-ditch attempt to look "involved." If you simply do not have any

community service activities to point to, look for other activities in your background that will demonstrate similar characteristics. Starting a volleyball club at the local gym won't solve world hunger, but it still shows that you like to get involved and can motivate others to do the same. If you find that your application still lacks the altruistic angle that a community service activity might demonstrate, then be sure to bring out your human side in other ways, such as more subtle examples of how you helped a family member or someone on the job solve a problem. The bottom line is that you want to show that you like to get involved in the community around you, and that you are more than a GMAT score and fancy resume. If you still have time before you begin the application process, be on the lookout for community service opportunities. Mentoring programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters are great ways to show your willingness to give back to the community. Just remember that the key is to make a strong impact in one or two areas, not to simply sign up for half a dozen activities. That single word—impact—should be your guiding light. Activities that give you the opportunity to say "That would not have happened if I hadn't been there" are the most powerful examples of all. Another way to think of community service is as a powerful way to complement your work experience. If you haven't had many opportunities to lead a team at work, for example, then showing how you did so as part of a volunteer organization is a great way to demonstrate leadership abilities. MBA admissions officers know that most applicants are young and may still have somewhat limited work experience, so they're adept at scouring your entire background for evidence of high potential. This doesn't only apply to leadership examples; community involvement, though most often associated with leadership and a desire to make the world better, can give you opportunities to demonstrate all four of the key applicant dimensions.

### GMAT Score

The good news about the GMAT (or GRE, for those schools that accept it) is that it is one of the few achievements that you can work on and improve in a short amount of time (compared to community service or an undergraduate transcript from five years ago). The bad news is that some applicants can spend months studying for it and still fall short of their goal. If your GMAT score makes you look weak in the quantitative or verbal departments, be sure to bring out other examples in your application that will counterbalance these weaknesses. If your quantitative score is low, highlight any tough analytical courses that you took as an undergrad. Or show how you use your quantitative skills to unravel tough problems on the job, or even as part of a volunteer opportunity in which you participated. Remember that demonstrating an analytical skill set doesn't have to mean showing that you know calculus. There are practical, everyday activities that can help you demonstrate your ability to break down a problem or your comfort with using numbers to make decisions. The bottom line is that you just need to show that you won't be helpless two weeks into your first-year finance course. If your verbal score is low, then you will need to work extra hard to highlight your communication skills. You can do this through your essays and your interviews. Keep in mind that admissions officers will be suspicious of someone with poorly written Analytical Writing Assessment (AWA) essays on the GMAT, but terrific application essays; that kind of application is often covered with fingerprints from a professional editor or admissions consultant.

Remember that getting some help is okay, but the application you submit must be your own work. You can also enlist support from your recommenders to address weaknesses in both the quantitative and/or verbal section. They may be able to provide examples that offset some of the concerns that your GMAT score raises. If your undergraduate transcript and your job don't help, consider enrolling in a statistics, finance, public speaking, or accounting course in a local community college. This shows a dedication to education and will impress the admissions committees. Many business schools are happy to suggest what kinds of courses they would consider as useful preparation for their programs.

**Hobbies and Extracurricular Activities** This is usually the part of the application that gives applicants the least amount of trouble, as most of us have enough interests to keep us busy outside of school or work. Look at how your hobbies relate to your other activities, and they hopefully will provide a well-rounded picture of you as a person. If you already have the four desired dimensions covered reasonably well by your other activities and achievements, then use your hobbies as a way to provide a little extra depth and color to your application. Even seemingly silly or frivolous hobbies and interests can help in this way. If your hobbies truly don't add anything new, then de-emphasize them and let the other parts of your application stand on their own.

**International and Cultural Exposure** For many people, this is a clear-cut, have-or-don't-have issue. If you haven't worked, studied, or traveled abroad, don't despair. Business schools like to see experience in this area, but realize that not everyone has had a chance to see the world. If this is the case for you, be sure to emphasize the success that you have had in working with people of various backgrounds or even different points of view from your own. Even two people from the same school who work for the same company have a lot of differences between them. Show how you have overcome these differences to build success, and, even more importantly, demonstrate that you value these opportunities to grow and push yourself outside of your normal comfort zone. The more easily admissions officers can envision you successfully working on a study team with four other people from four different countries, the better your chances will be.

**Professional Experience** People who worry about their professional experience are usually concerned with either the quality or quantity of the work that they have done. If you are worried about the amount of work experience that you have, take comfort in the fact that many business schools are actually pursuing younger applicants. They will still be interested in you as long as you have demonstrated success on the job, increasing responsibility in your assignments, and a true understanding of what an MBA can do for you. If you are still an undergrad and are looking to go right into business school, your best chances of demonstrating leadership and maturity will be in your extracurricular activities and anything else where you took charge and made something happen outside of the classroom.

Ultimately, though no applicant wants to hear "Wait till next year," the quantity problem can be solved by simply waiting another year or two before you apply. Or, if you apply and are rejected, you can apply again after gaining a couple of years' worth of terrific new experiences.

On the flip side, particularly as some top schools take an interest in younger applicants, there is such a thing as too much work experience. There's no cut-off in

terms of years of experience, and every school will take great pains to point out that a couple of students in its entering class are pushing 40 years of age, but anyone with more than seven or eight years of work experience will invite questions along the lines of “Why are you only applying now? What took you so long to discover that this is what you want to do next in your career?” No school will judge you based solely on your age, but if you strike admissions officers as someone who’s applying now just because his or her career is stagnating, then your chances of success will be low. Or, the school may decide that a part-time or executive MBA is ultimately a better fit for you. Quality issues around work experience can be tough, but these can be overcome, at least in part, with your other application components. Do you feel as though your career is starting to plateau? Think about why this has happened and how an MBA will help you address the issue. Maybe your career progress has slowed because you lack important managerial skills that an MBA will give you. The important thing, in this case, is to demonstrate that your lack of upward mobility does not correspond to a lack of ambition or aptitude for success. Does your work not seem interesting or exciting enough? Don’t worry too much about this issue, as business schools love people from a variety of backgrounds. Being a foreman at a corrugated box factory may seem dull to you, but if you can highlight what you have learned about business on the job—and what you still have to learn—then you can make a strong case for yourself. Some applicants have holes in their work records, as they took sabbaticals to travel, to care for a sick loved one, or to simply try new things. As long as you have a legitimate reason for such a hole and can convince the admissions committee that you are indeed ambitious and committed to studying business, they will appreciate the unique perspectives that these experiences will give you. It is always better to hit these holes head-on than to try to hide them and hope admissions officers don’t notice them.

**Undergraduate and Graduate Transcripts** If your transcript shows weakness, don’t worry. Not all “weak” transcripts are equally bad, and there are some things you can do to help yourself. A Stanford admissions officer once said about transcripts, “We’re forgiving of slow starts, but not as forgiving of slow finishes.” Most business schools have the same attitude. If you got off to a rough start your freshman year but showed steady improvement while in college, then you are probably in good shape. Admissions officers aren’t itching to reject you because of a bad choice you made while you were still a teenager. They like to see that you got more serious about your work and were able to turn the academic tide. If you were consistently poor or did worse as time went on, however, your challenge will be to convince the admissions committee that you’re serious about academics and have the brainpower to succeed in business school. The former can be accomplished in your essays, where you will discuss what it is that you expect to get out of an MBA curriculum. The latter can be made up for by the GMAT or, if that is also weak, by earning strong grades in part-time courses at a local school. Your transcript(s) may also be weak because you were simply too involved in extracurricular activities as an undergrad. Use this opportunity to turn a weakness into a strength by demonstrating your commitment and initiative at your undergraduate school, and making the case for why you will be equally involved in business school. You must balance

that out, however, with a demonstrated understanding of the importance of academics in business school. In other words, you should try and convince the admissions counselors that you will get the school/ activities mix right this time around.

### Final Word on Strengths and Weaknesses

In general, a winning application strategy counteracts your perceived weaknesses with examples that show your strengths in those same (or similar) areas. The more that each part of your application can naturally complement and support the other pieces, the better off you will be. Some applicants will use the extra essay—which many schools provide as an option in their applications—to directly address a weakness such as a low GMAT score or undergraduate GPA. This is fine, but think of it as a last resort. One risk of devoting an entire essay to a weakness is that it highlights the very issue that you're trying to neutralize. There are times when the extra essay does help, however, and we will discuss these types of situations more in Chapter 4.

### A Conversation With Soojin Kwon Koh

Soojin Kwon Koh is the Director of Admissions and Financial Aid at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business. Consistently ranked as one of the top-10 business schools in the United States, Ross is often acknowledged for its innovative curriculum and for turning out some of the most sought after business school graduates in the world. We checked in with Soojin to get her perspectives on the application process and advice on what applicants can do to improve their chances of gaining acceptance to the top business schools.

### What's your take on the GMAT? Why is it important?

In general the application review process is all about adding dimension to what is an inherently two-dimensional evaluation. The GMAT is one of the primary factors we use to predict an applicant's propensity to perform well in the academic program. I don't think that it's necessarily a good predictor of how well an applicant will do in the career of her choosing, but in addition to the GPA, it does help to quantify intellectual capacity. It also allows many applicants to make up for less-than-stellar GPAs. Lastly, as a standardized measure, it puts applicants on similar footing, whereas GPAs come with a certain amount of bias depending on the undergraduate curriculum.

### For applicants who have a relatively low GMAT, what do they have to do to at least be considered?

Strong work experience and undergraduate GPA help. Strong essays really make a difference. We also take a close look at the applicant's career goals and reasons for wanting to pursue an MBA. Does the applicant have clear reasons for wanting to get an MBA? Does he have a clear thought process? Has he demonstrated passion for pursuing an MBA at Ross? These three attributes can help put an applicant into the running. It does make the process a bit easier though when the applicant at least scores within the range of traditionally accepted applicants.

### What does it mean to evaluate an applicant for fit?

Every school probably evaluates fit a little differently. We're looking to confirm that who the applicant is and aspires to be fits well with the Ross mission. In addition to having the appropriate level of intellectual capability, the applicant must exhibit attributes that are consistent with our culture, which is team-oriented and collaborative. If you're a person who prefers to work and excel on your own or generally just don't perform well in teams, then it's a major red flag for us. We also look for passion. That is a real desire to go out and make a difference. It's most impressive when

an applicant communicates that she has the skills and motivation to pursue her dreams and she truly understands how Ross fits into that picture. So, it's important that the applicant truly understand what a school is all about and evaluate what role she might play in supporting that school's mission. Would you encourage applicants to reach out to and spend time with current students so that they can get a better sense of a school's culture? Absolutely. Students are the best reflection of what it's like to go to school here. Getting students' perspectives on the school's culture can definitely give applicants a good idea of what day-to-day life is like. How do you evaluate recommendations? Aren't all recommendations glowing? In recommendations we're looking to see whether the applicant truly is who she claims to be. We're looking for consistency. One thing we stress is for recommenders to provide specific examples. It's not enough for recommenders to simply say that an applicant performs at a high level. We want to know exactly what the applicant has done to merit such high praise. Anecdotes, tangible results, and specifics go a long way. It also helps to see how the applicant really goes above and beyond. It shows that the applicant is passionate about her work and is inclined to contribute a great deal in the future. You would be surprised how many poor recommendations we receive. Some recommendations have maybe five lines and answer each question with one sentence. Obviously this type of recommendation does not send a positive signal with respect to the applicant's candidacy. Some recommendations might look positive at initial glance, but a closer read reveals veiled criticisms. It's interesting to me that that the applicant would not have picked up on the nature of the relationship before requesting a recommendation. That, in and of itself, is a signal. How then would you recommend that applicants manage their recommenders? We recommend that the applicant sit down with his recommender, explain that he is thinking about going to business school, explain why, and then discuss his intended career track and why. Moreover, the applicant can spend some time talking to the recommender about their working relationship and what he's accomplished through time. There is a fine line, however, as applicants have to be careful not to start coaching their recommenders and providing them with too many specifics. Because we require two recommendations, if both cite the same exact specifics then we question whether the recommenders have been coached on exactly what to say about the applicant. What is one of the top mistakes that applicants tend to make? One of the major mistakes is not clearly laying out what the applicant wants to do from a career standpoint and then laying out where the business school fits into the picture. A lot of applicants just apply to business school without taking the appropriate time to reflect on their career goals and on where we fit into the plan. For many, it just feels like the next natural step. Successful applicants tend to be much more reflective and consider the pursuit of an MBA as significant turning point in their lives. We want applicants to treat the application process with that level of significance. So we ask, "Why is an MBA from Ross necessary for this applicant?" We check to see whether the applicant has really researched us or whether she is simply applying to all of the top-ten schools and saying the same thing to all of them. If that's the case then we tend to discount the probability that you will really take advantage of all the different opportunities that we offer here.

These opportunities would be wasted on someone who is looking to merely check the MBA off her list, so we tend to avoid box-checkers. We want applicants who are really going to come and embrace everything that is available. So, what level of specificity is adequate when discussing career goals? I would say as specific as is honest. We recognize that most students won't go on to do exactly what they discuss in their essays. What we're looking at is the applicant's thought process. We want to get into the applicant's head and heart to understand their motivations and what drives them. If the career goals are well thought out and make sense in the context of what we offer as a school, then the applicant is on the right track. We definitely don't want people to offer up career goals that simply sound good or are trendy. Rather, we want to see that they've spent some time researching their options, have made an initial choice and can defend it as a viable career objective. Certainly the more specifics the applicant can give, the more interesting an essay or discussion will likely result. How would you recommend that applicants that come from traditional "feeder" industries (for example, consulting and investment banking) differentiate themselves? In addition to academic and professional track record, we look at extracurricular activities. Extracurriculars such as community service, international experiences, entrepreneurial ventures, or activities related to sustainable development can be great indicators that the applicant would be a good match and we have evidence that the applicant would get involved with activities here on campus. Additionally, it provides us with some comfort that the applicant will be a good Ross alum even after they've graduated. Are there major mistakes that you see among international applicants? Oftentimes, we receive a number of applications that are virtually identical in terms of academic and professional experiences to international applicants. While it differs a bit from region to region, it's critical that the international applicant understand that the application process requires so much more than simply a high GMAT score or an impressive resume. At a certain point, you know the applicant is smart, but so are the next 200 applicants from their country, so you have to go beyond that to differentiate yourself. We're trying to achieve diversity here; not just in gender, ethnicity, geographical region and professional background, but also diversity in thinking. The last one is important, because we expect that each student will bring a slightly different perspective to the table. If an applicant sounds like hundreds of others, there isn't much of a reason to bring him in, even if his scores are off the chart. We know that diversity of thought can have a powerful impact on the ability to learn, so we are very careful to evaluate that and it's critical that applicants consider how they're different and what they will bring, as unique individuals, to the table. What does it take for an undergraduate applicant to be successful? In all of our applicants, we look for people who can make significant contributions to classroom discussions as well as to team-based assignments. As such, for an undergraduate applicant to obtain admission to Ross, he really needs to have outperformed his peers not only academically, but also in extracurriculars and hopefully also in business. The applicant may have started his own business or played a starring role in significant internships. No matter what it is, the applicant must be capable of significant contributions such that his classmates truly benefit from his presence on campus. What makes for a great essay? Great



essays are the ones where you can see an applicant behind the words. After reading 500 words, if you feel as though you've really gotten to know the applicant a little bit better, then it's a successful essay. Whether there is heart, humor, or an experience that is different, a good essay is memorable and interesting. It doesn't need to be poetic or overly eloquent, but we do want to know that there's a human with interests and passions behind it.

**How important is the interview?**  
It's another dimension that we use to characterize the applicant. The interview is a great opportunity to assess the enthusiasm of the applicant. It's relatively easy to assess characteristics such as energy level, body language, eye contact, and knowledge about the school. So, it definitely helps give us a sense of fit. It helps us to understand whether this is the kind of person who will work well on a team and think on her feet. But, it's not typically the aspect of the application that makes or breaks a person. We have non-admitted applicants call all the time requesting to re-interview, but it's rare that the interview is the only problem.

**Any trends that you've seen among applicants that concern you?**  
Yes, it appears that there some applicants who are using essay consultants who actually write essays on behalf of applicants. And it's plainly obvious in many cases. With some international applicants, in particular, when you compare the GMAT writing samples to the essays, it's clear that they've crossed the line in terms of having someone else do the writing for them. I've seen essays on par with something that could be found in *The New Yorker* and it's such a red flag. I mean, I don't even think our staff could write as eloquently as some of these essays. We don't expect that essays read like Hemingway's work, but they should be authentic. It's almost refreshing to read essays from an international applicant that are flawed here or there, rather than some of the fake submissions that cross our path. We want to hear from applicants themselves and hear their voices.

**Any other parting thoughts?**  
I'd love to get people to write so that we can really get to know them. When you're reading thousands of applications, it's refreshing to get the ones that come to life in your hands. You think, wow it would be great to have this person here, because I can see that there is something about them that shows they would make a real contribution here and make great contributions after they leave.

**FAQs**  
**How important is the strength of your undergraduate/graduate school's brand to the admissions committee?**  
Overall, what you did in college and what you've done since then are more important than what school you went to. Still, business schools do take your college's brand name into consideration, especially when considering your grades. Some schools are known to pay more attention to this than others. However, this should not be a major consideration when you apply. For every Princeton and Yale grad prowling the halls of top business schools, there is also a student from a lesser-known school. All schools love to brag about the number of undergraduate institutions that are represented by their classes (the numbers generally range from 80 to 200). You definitely shouldn't spend all of your time trying to sell your school if it is not a well-known one. You should, however, be able to explain why you decided to attend the schools listed on your transcripts and discuss their merits. Beyond that, however, keep the focus on you. At the same time, if you did go to a college with a great reputation, don't rest on your laurels and expect to gain admission based on reputation alone.

It's an asset, but one that will quickly fall by the wayside if your other application components are mediocre. What if I have been laid off from my job? First of all, don't panic! Getting laid off does not squash your chances of getting into a top business school. There are several things that you need to do. Most importantly, you need to convince the admissions committee that you're not simply applying to business school because you're out of work and have no better option. If admissions officers sense that this is the case, then you will have squashed your chances. You can combat this perception by highlighting your career goals and how business school fits into the picture. Also, while you absolutely should not dwell on the fact that you were laid off, acknowledge that it happened and be prepared to explain why (hopefully it's something out of your control), and move on. Admissions officers understand that even great employees sometimes lose their jobs. Also, you will need to work extra hard to weave professional success stories throughout your application, to make it clear that you are a "winner" who just happened to get caught up in bad circumstances. Recommendations are especially important here, particularly if they come from your ex-boss who regrettably had to let you go. Showing that you were a positive contributor and that you left on good terms will help a great deal. Finally, show that you've been productive in your time off. A Tuck admissions officer once commented that she couldn't believe how some laid-off applicants were content to do nothing for a year. Even things outside of your career such as pro-bono work or volunteering can show that you're not someone who's content to just sit back and take it when life deals you a bad hand.<sup>3</sup>

### Applicant Profiles

What you communicate in your application will be largely dictated by who you are and where you want to go in your career. However, just as important in the eyes of business school admissions officers is where you have been. If you are an investment banker, for example, they will assume that you have more in common with other banking applicants than with military or nonprofit applicants. This means that, beyond what you tell admissions committees about yourself, they may assume that you have many of the traits (both positive and negative) that a typical banker has. It is your responsibility to be aware of these commonly held stereotypes and to take advantage of the good ones while overcoming the bad ones. Although business schools rarely say so explicitly, it makes sense that your stiffest competition will come from those who are most like you. Schools don't necessarily operate off of hard quotas when admitting applicants with various professional backgrounds, but they can only take so many consultants—or so many accountants, scientists, international applicants, and so on—before their classes start to become homogenous. So, you will be compared to other applicants with backgrounds similar to yours, and your job will be to stand apart from these other applicants. This is a core part of any winning application game plan. This chapter will help you achieve this goal. We will examine 11 of the most common applicant profiles, highlight some perceived strengths and weaknesses for each, and discuss ways that an applicant with a given profile can set himself apart from others with the same background. Naturally, much of the advice that applies to one applicant profile may apply to another. Also, there's a good chance that you don't fit explicitly into one of these profiles. For example, many people who studied engineering in college go into management

consulting or investment banking. Those applicants may need to think through the pros and cons of more than one profile. Still, getting a sense of how admissions counselors think about various profiles will help you in creating your differentiated position. We recommend using this chapter in conjunction with your strengths/weaknesses analysis from Chapter 2 to develop your application strategy. Above all else, your application needs to reflect who you are. Beyond that, use the material presented here to separate yourself from the pack. A special note for applicants from other countries, particularly those from Asia: During the past decade, the number of people in Asia (especially India and China) applying to top U.S. business schools has surged dramatically. This speaks volumes with respect to the growth in this part of the world and the important role that it will surely play in the coming decades. But, if you are one of these applicants, this means that the job of standing out from the pack has become much more difficult than it was just five years ago. We have expanded the “International” profile in this third edition of the book to address this important trend and to help applicants who fit this description. If you come from this part of the world, pay special attention to that particular section. Finally, one of the hottest topics among MBA admissions experts in recent years has been business schools’ growing affection for younger applicants. Though many admissions officers will vehemently deny that they’re trying to “get younger” or that there’s such a thing as an applicant who’s “too old,” the writing is on the wall at some top business schools. In this third edition of this book, we take a close look at the the root cause of this trend, and we discuss how you can use this to your advantage if you are still in college or you have only been working for one or two years.

1. Consulting In many ways, consultants are made for business school. (Here we use the term consultant to refer not only to management consultants, but also those in other fields where their primary jobs involve project-based work for clients.) As a consultant, you most likely have a strong academic background, have had multiple experiences with myriad companies, and have finely tuned analytical and interpersonal skills. Additionally, you have direct access to a cadre of business school graduates through your firm, who serve as great advisors on the MBA admissions process and the life of a business school student. Unfortunately, you will go up against thousands of other consultants who also are working hard to get into a top-ranked MBA program. As a result, it can be extremely difficult to differentiate yourself as a consultant. Consulting firms often have standardized analyst programs that “feed” business schools with applicants after they’ve had two or three years of experience. Through time, many business schools have become somewhat wary of these programs, because of their tendency to produce applicants who are simply looking to “get their ticket punched.” They therefore look closely for clues that you really understand what business school is about and that you have good reasons for wanting to be there. You can avoid the perception that you’re just trying to get your ticket punched by being explicit about how you intend to utilize an MBA to reach your career goals. By the way, returning to consulting is certainly a valid career goal. But if you do go down that path, you need to be sure to discuss how you see yourself having an impact on the organization. Do you see an opportunity to increase your clients’ revenues by implementing customer relationship

management programs? Then discuss how you want to capitalize on this opportunity by studying the intersection of marketing and technology. Want to bring a more global viewpoint to your organization? Then show how international study opportunities at your target school will give you that viewpoint. The bottom line is that you have to provide tangible reasons for wanting to attend business school. In many ways, this is even more important for applicants who want to return to consulting than it is for those who plan on switching careers. Earning an MBA may very well be a logical next step for you, but your reasons for wanting one will need to go deeper than “All of the partners in my firm have an MBA.” One way to ensure that your message comes through clearly is by avoiding consultant jargon in your essays and interviews (and by encouraging your recommendation writers to do the same in the letters they write on your behalf). Many consultants have a tendency to write essays that are high-level and ambiguous. Admissions counselors comment that consultants often fail to adequately explain their specific actions on projects and the results of those actions. To the extent that you can quantify both, you will stand out from the pack. Take a close look at Chapter 4 for additional guidance on how to write and interview effectively.

The average number of years of work experience at top business schools is approximately five, even as some top schools make a push to pursue younger applicants. Consultants, however, tend to apply to schools after only two to four years of experience. If you fall into this group, then you should expect to be questioned about it and should find ways to emphasize your maturity. One way to do that is by discussing activities in which you are involved outside of consulting. Because of the long hours associated with their profession, many applicants from consulting are unable to talk about anything that is unrelated to work. To the extent that you are able to weave activities outside of the consulting world into your story, you will create opportunities for yourself to show off your leadership abilities and maturity. Though you may be tempted to say “I can’t do any extracurricular activities because I’m so busy at work,” keep in mind that there are thousands of other consultants who do somehow manage to find the time to make a positive impact in their communities.

2. Creatively this header describes you, then you are what business schools and their students like to call a “poet.” Whether you were previously a teacher, psychologist, musician, writer, chef, artist, or anything else that falls into this category, you bring something to the applicant pool that few others do. The trick will be to appear different enough to be interesting, but not so different that admissions officers will suspect that you can’t hack it or fit in with your more business-minded peers. First of all, don’t let anyone tell you that you have no business applying. The fact that you want an MBA makes you qualified to apply. Whether or not you get in is up to the admissions officers who review your application, but the moves they’ve made in recent years—most notably, accepting the GRE General Test and introducing programs to try to sway more college seniors to consider business school—make it clear that they are very interested in working more creative types into their classes.

When you describe your past experiences, don’t simply write or talk about what you did. Go a level deeper and talk about why you have done these things. For instance, a sculptor got into a top business school by describing the satisfaction he got from turning his

ideas into something of substance. He then effectively tied it back to business, describing how he wanted to acquire the tools to do the same thing for business ideas. You don't need to be this explicit in tying your background to business (especially if it will end up sounding forced), but try to think in this way as you develop your application game plan. Admissions officers will value you for the unique perspective you can bring to the classroom, but it's up to you to show that you can connect the dots and apply your non-business experiences to business problems. Most schools look for leadership skills more than anything else, and odds are that you've had a chance to display these skills at some point in your life. The more recent, the better, but don't be afraid to bring up examples of how you uniquely made a difference in a situation when you were younger. Don't worry if the story has nothing to do with business; leadership examples are universal, and your application will be much stronger for it. Your letters of recommendation can be especially helpful here, especially if you can get people with business backgrounds to vouch for your leadership skills and business potential. Of course, business schools also look for a minimum level of quantitative skills, and this is one place where you won't get the benefit of the doubt. You absolutely must produce a GMAT (or GRE) score within range of your target schools' averages. Your best bet is to practice early and practice often, and give yourself enough time to take the exam more than once if needed. And plan on taking some pre-MBA courses in accounting and statistics before you apply. Doing so will demonstrate a sincere interest in earning an MBA, and answer questions in admissions officers' minds about you possibly applying to school as a dilettante who has nothing better to do. Taking these courses early will allow you to sell them in your application.

3. Engineering and Science Engineers (here we will broadly use engineers to refer to anyone coming from a science, mathematics, or engineering background) typically have strong quantitative skills, and that is one reason why you will find a good number of engineers at any top business school. In fact, at least a third of most top business schools' students come from engineering backgrounds. Being an engineer, however, you will find that you need to sell your interpersonal skills, and prove that you understand the "big picture" when it comes to business. Few engineers ever fail to make the cut in business school admissions because of their quantitative abilities. Even if you don't have an amazing GMAT score, you should be able to point to your undergraduate degree and recent work experience as evidence of these skills. Even better, you will hopefully be able to demonstrate strong problem-solving skills by virtue of the work you've done. Even if your past experiences seem ho-hum to you, an admissions officer will be interested to hear how you solved an important problem, and why you went about it in the way that you did. A good example can be as mundane as improving the flow rate through a valve by 2 percent, or contributing to a small enhancement in the efficacy of a new drug. Being explicit about the significance of the problem—and which of your skills helped you arrive at the solution—will go a long way toward selling these abilities. Many business-minded engineers also enjoy the advantage of having a good overall story for why they want to earn an MBA. Whereas a consultant or an investment banker may have to spend a lot of time proving that she isn't just getting her ticket punched for a higher salary, you can craft a strong story about how you've

mastered one discipline, and now you want to move on to achieve a broader view of how a business is run. Admissions officers will appreciate any evidence that you can provide that shows you understand the importance of the functions in a company outside of its research and development department. The stereotype that you will most likely have to overcome is in regard to your interpersonal skills. An admissions committee will look critically for evidence that you can reach goals that require you to work with others. Any teamwork examples that you can provide will help you a great deal here, particularly stories that demonstrate your ability to understand others' motivations and to deal with them constructively. These examples of empathy will go a long way toward showing your ability to grow into the role of a leader. You can also set yourself apart through extracurricular activities demonstrating your interests outside of the workplace. They can show your desire to actively seek out opportunities to make the world around you better, rather than simply waiting for an engineering problem to be handed to you. Examples of community service, volunteering at your church, or simply pursuing a creative or athletic passion outside of the office will help you distinguish yourself from the other engineers in the crowd.

#### 4. Entrepreneurship

Few applicants can say that they've built their own business, giving entrepreneurs a leg up in the business school admissions process. If you are an entrepreneur, the key will be to drive home the strengths that admissions officers typically associate with people like you, while addressing the questions of why you want a degree now and how well you will fit into the business school culture. Here we use the term entrepreneur broadly. As such, our advice can apply to people who have set out to build organizations in a variety of fields, from technology to hospitality to nonprofit. By definition, entrepreneurs are people who like to strike out on their own and make things happen. It doesn't take much imagination to see how you can spin a story rich in leadership, creativity, and ambition, no matter what your venture was. Whether you built a whole organization or simply created a new business opportunity within an existing company, you should have a lot of material to draw upon. When you discuss these experiences, be sure to not only talk about your accomplishments, but also about how you achieved them. Saying that you led your fledgling team to launch its first prototype on time is impressive, but it's more interesting to hear about how it happened. Stories about how you found the right people with whom to build your team, how you motivated them, how you managed personality conflicts among team members, and how you helped them overcome obstacles will all paint a great portrait of you as a leader. The most obvious challenge you will face is that you already set out to build a business, and only now are you applying to business school. Admissions officers will undoubtedly ask, "If you thought you could make it on your own two years ago, how come you now feel like you need to sit in a classroom and learn again?" Your reasons will obviously depend on your own situation, but a stronger answer will emphasize your desire to learn and move toward new goals; a weaker one will focus on your desire to get away from the start-up scene.

YOUR MBA GAME PLAN THIRD EDITION Proven Strategies for Getting Into the Top Business Schools  
By OMARI BOUKNIGHT and SCOTT SHRUM  
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Preface

We've been humbled by the number of business school applicants whom we've helped to succeed since the first edition of this book was published in 2003. In less than a decade, what started out as a simple idea grew into a book, which grew into an online service helping applicants improve their application essays and resumes, which has since merged with one of the world's largest GMAT prep and admissions consulting services, Veritas Prep. Long before Facebook and Twitter became household names, applicants all over the world were spreading the word about Your MBA Game Plan. What humbles us even more is how much more we have learned from our readers and other business school applicants. The MBA admissions game is constantly evolving, and by helping thousands of applicants sort through their own application strategies, we have learned far more than what we knew back in 2003: Our readers are savvier about the process, and they in turn have made us more insightful, which helps us assist new applicants even more. It's a virtuous cycle. What's changed since 2003? For one, the MBA admissions game keeps getting more sophisticated. Thanks to books such as ours, other admissions consultants, online communities, and so on, the average applicant knows much more than the average applicant did eight years ago. And the mix of applicants has changed. Though bankers from New York are still a very common sighting among MBA applicants, more and more engineers and IT professionals from Asia are turning up in the applicant pool, making it ever harder for those applicants to stand out from the pack. What else has changed? Admissions interviews continue to grow in importance. Many schools have radically redesigned their academic programs, throwing out the traditional core classes in favor of integrated curricula that put a great deal of emphasis on application-based learning and provide a solid dose of ethics. The economy went from ice cold at the start of the millennium to scorching in 2006 to teetering on the brink of a worldwide economic collapse in 2008, taking the job market on a wild ride with it. All the while, people kept taking the GMAT and applying to business school, mostly undeterred even when job-placement statistics looked grim. But the more things change, the more they stay the same. Many applicants still miss the mark, focusing too much on their hard "stats" such as their GMAT score and GPA, and not enough on the story of who they are. They worry about having "enough" extracurricular activities in their applications, although just demonstrating a significant impact with one activity would serve them best. They ask their CEOs to write their letters of recommendation when a thoughtful, detailed letter from their immediate supervisor would help them far more. Or, perhaps worst of all, they choose which schools to apply to based on the rankings and nothing else, doing no more research than picking up a copy of U.S. News & World Report. Since writing the first edition of this book, we've been in direct contact with hundreds more business school applicants. Many of them still fall short on at least one of the two goals that every applicant has: to show fit with an MBA program and to stand out versus the competition. The reason for these "misses" is usually not just the GMAT or some other application item that's easy to spot. The problem usually lies deeper in a

person's application strategy, such as failing to show the admissions committee what makes that person unique or interesting, or failing to demonstrate sufficient enthusiasm for a given program. Unfortunately, many such applications are destined to fail before they're even submitted. Though the competition is tougher than ever, we believe that no one should be doomed to churning out applications that have zero chance of success. So, we're back with the third edition of *Your MBA Game Plan*. Although the core MBA Game Plan message hasn't changed (you must always demonstrate fit with a school and stand out from the pack), we've built on the story and taken it even farther. We now profile more top-ranked business schools than ever before, including more programs outside of the United States, and have completely revised the other schools' profiles to include updated strategies. We've added even more MBA admissions essays, we have taken a closer look at certain applicant profiles in response to the rapidly evolving applicant pool, and, we've worked the countless other lessons we've learned during the past eight years into every other part of this book. Our goal remains the same: to help you get into the business school of your dreams. We've been in your shoes, and hope to share with you what we've learned as we applied to business school in 2001 and in the years since then. (Wow, time flies!) We don't want to see you make any of the most common mistakes that applicants make every year. If you can make it easy for admissions officers to see that you have a distinctive profile and would fit well with their schools' cultures, then you'll quickly get ahead of other candidates. And getting ahead is probably what you had in mind when you picked up this book in the first place. Best of luck to you!

Scott and Omari  
May 2011  
Preface

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throwing out the traditional core classes in favor of integrated curricula that put a great deal of emphasis on application-based learning and provide a solid dose of ethics. The economy went from ice cold at the start of the millennium to scorching in 2006 to teetering on the brink of a worldwide economic collapse in 2008, taking the job market on a wild ride with it. All the while, people kept taking the GMAT and applying to business school, mostly undeterred even when job-placement statistics looked grim. But the more things change, the more they stay the same. Many applicants still miss the mark, focusing too much on their hard “stats” such as their GMAT score and GPA, and not enough on the story of who they are. They worry about having “enough” extracurricular activities in their applications, although just demonstrating a significant impact with one activity would serve them best. They ask their CEOs to write their letters of recommendation when a thoughtful, detailed letter from their immediate supervisor would help them far more. Or, perhaps worst of all, they choose which schools to apply to based on the rankings and nothing else, doing no more research than picking up a copy of U.S. News & World Report. Since writing the first edition of this book, we’ve been in direct contact with hundreds more business school applicants. Many of them still fall short on at least one of the two goals that every applicant has: to show fit with an MBA program and to stand out versus the competition. The reason for these “misses” is usually not just the GMAT or some other application item that’s easy to spot. The problem usually lies deeper in a person’s application strategy, such as failing to show the admissions committee what makes that person unique or interesting, or failing to demonstrate sufficient enthusiasm for a given program. Unfortunately, many such applications are destined to fail before they’re ever even submitted. Though the competition is tougher than ever, we believe that no one should be doomed to churning out applications that have zero chance of success. So, we’re back with the third edition of *Your MBA Game Plan*. Although the core MBA Game Plan message hasn’t changed (you must always demonstrate fit with a school and stand out from the pack), we’ve built on the story and taken it even farther. We now profile more top-ranked business schools than ever before, including more programs outside of the United States, and have completely revised the other schools’ profiles to include updated strategies. We’ve added even more MBA admissions essays, we have taken a closer look at certain applicant profiles in response to the rapidly evolving applicant pool, and, we’ve worked the countless other lessons we’ve learned during the past eight years into every other part of this book. Our goal remains the same: to help you get into the business school of your dreams. We’ve been in your shoes, and hope to share with you what we’ve learned as we applied to business school in 2001 and in the years since then. (Wow, time flies!) We don’t want to see you make any of the most common mistakes that applicants make every year. If you can make it easy for admissions officers to see that you have a distinctive profile and would fit well with their schools’ cultures, then you’ll quickly get ahead of other candidates. And getting ahead is probably what you had in mind when you picked up this book in the first place. Best of luck to you!

Scott and Omari  
May 2011  
New Game, New Rules

To my relief, the cab slowed down and the driver waved me over. I had been on the verge of running for the last 30 minutes, trying to

reach my interview with Harvard Business School on time. Sliding into the back seat of the taxi, I heavily exhaled directions to the admissions office, rejuvenated with confidence knowing that I would not arrive to the interview late. Now all I had to do was differentiate myself from the other 9,000 applicants and prove to the admissions committee that I embody HBS's culture and mission. Suddenly, it hit me: This would be no small task. In many ways, the on-campus interview is a wake-up call. For many applicants, it is the first time that they interact directly with the competition and with their target schools. Stepping into the admissions office, my alarm went off as I began to discuss experiences, backgrounds, and objectives with other applicants who were waiting to interview. The conversations were enlightening, as gossip and advice on the application process were freely swapped. More so, however, these conversations were humbling. I spoke with a military pilot who had escorted the president around the country, a scientist in biotechnology who was working on a cancer-fighting antibody, and an Internet entrepreneur who had executed a multi-million-dollar initial public offering. What did I have to offer? I no longer believed my family's frequent promises that I would be admitted. They obviously didn't understand what I was up against. "Your interviewer is ready to see you now," the receptionist called out to me. Moments later, I was sitting across from an admissions officer. A 30-minute conversation ensued in which we discussed all aspects of my application, except for my GMAT score and GPA. Indeed, the interview was very similar to the several others in which I took part. Because most applicants to top business schools have the ability to succeed in the curricula, GPA and test scores are often ruled out as differentiating factors. So what remained to separate me from the thousands of other applicants? The admissions officer asked questions about my story. What were my career goals, and how would attending business school play a role in meeting those goals? How would my professional and personal experiences enhance the classroom dynamic? In what ways had I acted as a leader to my peers? Fortunately, I was ready. My responses were well crafted and were supported with specific details. These responses were all part of a strategic approach that I developed to target the schools to which I applied. The interview transformed into a platform on which I established my case. The admissions officer became my audience, measuring my storyline against other applicants' stories and against the school's sense of "fit." By the end of the interview, I felt satisfied. I had covered each of my points and made a convincing case for why I belonged at HBS. Exiting the interview, I didn't concern myself with finding a taxi. I wanted to savor my victory. Thanks to my preparation, I was one step closer to being admitted.

The Increasing Popularity of Business School Fueled by steadily rising post-MBA salaries and a burgeoning global economy that is sending ever more international business school students to American schools, the number of applications to top schools continues to climb. Despite a two-percent, year-over-year drop in applications to traditional two-year MBA programs reported by the Graduate Management Admission Council in 2010 (an almost inevitable decline after several years of strong growth during the last recession), the overall trend is undeniable. Admissions rates at top business schools continue to creep downward as more and more young professionals decide they want a top-tier MBA to bolster

their career prospects. Over the past decade, the rules of the business school application game have significantly changed. As a result of the overall increase in applications, the competition among applicants has intensified. All top-10 MBA programs (as ranked by U.S. News & World Report in 2010) have a mean GMAT score and GPA greater than 705 and 3.4, respectively, and these statistics continue to climb. Meanwhile, the number of seats at most schools is not climbing, and, in fact, some top schools have made fewer seats available to traditional full-time MBA applicants. The result is that schools are more closely examining all aspects of the MBA application beyond the basic statistics. Many applicants, however, have responded to this increased competition by merely focusing on improving their GMAT scores and other "hard" stats. U.S. News, Bloomberg Businessweek, and other magazines prominently feature a school's average GMAT score next to its name, so it's only natural that applicants focus on this obvious component of the application. But while the GMAT may be the first challenge in the application process that must be navigated, high scores alone certainly won't win the business school application game.

### MBA Application Strategy

Traditional strategic analysis examines the approach of a decision-maker given his environment and the tactics of other decision-makers who are in pursuit of similar objectives. As an applicant, you must succeed in an environment that demands differentiation against the competition and proper fit with the programs to which you apply. The ultimate questions that you as an applicant must answer are: How do I measure against the competition? How do I measure against my targeted business schools? In our admittedly subjective estimation, after years of experience, we estimate that the probability of gaining acceptance to top business school programs looks something like this: The rest of this book focuses on developing answers to those two questions and getting you to the upper-right cell. It will do so in a functional and comprehensive manner, highlighting all aspects of the application process. You will learn how to position yourself based on your experiences and your target schools, how to write effective essays, and how to execute your application strategy.

### Understanding the Competition

When Omari first started the business school application process, one of the first pieces of insight he was given dealt with the number of candidates applying with his professional profile: If you want to gain admittance to a top program, you must first find a way to differentiate yourself from the thousands of other consultants who are applying. This is good advice for any applicant, regardless of the profile. Therefore, it is helpful to get into the minds of admissions officers and of other business school candidates with the knowledge that these candidates will have strong applications that cross the officers' desks before and after your own application. At a high level, there are two aspects of your application that admissions officers will compare with other candidates' applications: your profile and your career goals.

### Your Profile

The first aspect of differentiation that you must understand as a business school candidate is that all applicants have an Achilles' heel. We all have a weakness in our profile that will show up in our applications; it's just a matter of whether or not it is appropriately addressed. Whether the issue is number of years of work experience, lack of community service activities, low GPA, poor writing ability, low GMAT score,

unconvincing interview skills, or overconfidence, all candidates have an aspect of their profiles that, unaddressed, could lead to the dreaded “ding,” as rejections are commonly called. Your profile consists of your academic background, professional experiences, and personal interests and activities. As much as possible, the components in your profile should be multifaceted and consistent with an overall theme: Multifaceted Admissions officers look for candidates who demonstrate multiple dimensions through various interests. A common question that is asked during business school interviews is: “Outside of your professional activities, what are your personal interests and endeavors?” Top business schools want to ensure that they do not merely admit workaholic drones, but rather candidates who lead interesting and inspiring lives. Consistent

A while back, we spoke with Carrie, an applicant who was declined admittance to the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. During her feedback session with an admissions officer, one of the messages that Carrie received was that she lacked community service experience. Actually, Carrie did have community service experience, but it wasn’t relevant experience. It didn’t fit with the overall message that she conveyed in her application. The community service activities in which Carrie took part appeared to be events in which she participated purely so that they could be posted on her resume. Admission committee members are savvy enough to detect when an applicant’s attempts to enhance her profile are contrived, so you therefore need to weave the components of your profile into your story in a logical and consistent manner. The second and third chapters of this book will assist you in differentiating your application story from the competition. Chapter 2 will outline the characteristics that admissions officers value, and show you how to demonstrate these characteristics in your own application. In highlighting those characteristics, you will ensure that your profile is multifaceted and consistent with a targeted story. This approach impresses top business schools, as they are searching for candidates who will add something unique to the classroom dynamic. Chapter 2 will also show you how to overcome certain weaknesses that your application may contain. Specific profiles will be covered in Chapter 3, which details each profile’s typical strengths and weaknesses, and provides guidance on how to overcome the stereotypes that admissions officers tend to associate with each profile. Your Career Goals

Where you are going is just as important as where you are coming from. Admissions officers often cite candidates’ inability to articulate their postgraduation goals—and how the business school’s curriculum will support those goals—as a contributing factor in a candidate’s rejection. As you communicate your career goals, you should convey an overall story that makes it easy for the admissions committee to see why an MBA makes sense for you. Typically, the career goal aspect of your story will either describe your motivation to make a career change or your intent to bolster your current career direction. Whichever career path you intend to pursue, the messages you communicate in the application should reflect innovation and an entrepreneurial spirit. That doesn’t mean that all applicants should strive to start their own businesses, but rather that business schools are looking for candidates who want to contribute a fresh perspective and new insight to their chosen professions. Use the application as a forum in

which to display ambition and ingenuity as you discuss future objectives. Additionally, you should discuss the ways in which the targeted school's specific curriculum will aid you in achieving those objectives. Chapter 4 will provide you with details on each component of the application process. Your story should be reflected in each of these components.

### Understanding Your Business School Targets

Most business schools look for similar qualities in their applicants. They want students who demonstrate academic aptitude, leadership, an ability to work well with peers and subordinates, integrity, and ambition, just to name a few. So, does this mean that the applications to your target schools should be the same? Of course it doesn't. Each school tends to emphasize certain traits over others, and looks for examples to support these traits. A quick look at the essay questions from a few business school applications tells you that each school asks about these qualities in different ways. Here's the irony: Each school claims to look for a unique type of candidate, yet it seems that every year there are some applicants who manage to get into all of the top programs. Do these candidates really have every trait that all of these schools are looking for? Probably not. More likely, they understand the emphasis that each school places on specific traits, and they know how to highlight those traits in their application. Successful applicants know that MIT Sloan values analytical ability, and they therefore stress their methodical approaches to business problems. They know that Fuqua really does pride itself on its teamwork-oriented culture, and they highlight the success they've had while working in teams. These may seem like obvious examples to an applicant who's done some basic school research, but this is an area in which many applicants stumble. They either don't give enough thought to highlighting the traits that each school looks for, or they "tack on" one trite example in a half-hearted attempt to meet the requirement. The result is almost always a rejection because the applicants failed to demonstrate proper fit with their target schools.

### What Is "Fit"?

In short, "fitting" with a school means demonstrating that you have the ability to succeed there, you are someone the school would be glad to have as part of its community, and you will serve as an ambassador for the school after you graduate. In order to convey proper fit with a school, you should demonstrate that: You understand what the school stands for and why it is important. When you say "Darden preaches leadership," you are able to give examples of what leadership means to you and explain why you want to further strengthen your own leadership abilities at Darden. You embody the traits that the school most wants to see in its students. You don't need to have climbed Mount Everest to have demonstrated accomplishment or aced the GMAT to demonstrate quantitative excellence. You do need to be able to illustrate how your everyday life is peppered with examples of the traits for which the school looks. You will become very involved in your business school, from contributing to class discussions to running student organizations to being an active alum 20 years from now. One great way to communicate this is by pointing to similar experiences with your undergraduate university. You are the kind of person with whom your classmates would want to work on a team project at 3 a.m. Exhibiting a penchant for working in teams and a sociable personality will establish the basis for this.

One other extremely important question that an admissions officer asks about every applicant is: "Would he actually

attend this school if he were accepted?" Admissions officers assume that you're applying to multiple schools, and they know that their school may not be your first choice. But you need to convey enough knowledge and enthusiasm about the school to convince admissions officers that you would strongly consider attending their school if you were accepted. The history of the business school admissions game is littered with stories of people with stellar credentials who were rejected by "safety" schools. If you don't sound sincere about wanting to attend a given school, you can expect that school to return the favor by not wanting you. Demonstrating "fit" in your application Your entire application should spell out how well you fit with your target business school. Practically speaking, though, the parts of the application that will do this the most are your essays, recommendations, and interview. Think of these as your opportunities to talk about how your background and future direction correspond with what the school has to offer, and to discuss them in a way that lets your personality come through. Yes, you will answer different questions for each school, but admissions officers inevitably want to get to know what makes you tick, and they do it through the questions that they ask. In essays, admissions officers most want to hear about actions that you have taken to solve a real problem or reach an actual goal, not what you would do in a hypothetical situation. They also want to hear what you learned from your experiences. Be as specific as possible in describing what you have accomplished and what you have learned in the process. The same goes for recommendations. Almost everyone finds someone to write a positive recommendation for them, but a truly great recommendation will support your positioning by providing specific examples of how you demonstrated leadership, succeeded as part of a team, and so on. We can't emphasize this enough: Be as specific as possible! Doing so will help make it easier for an admissions officer to picture you making a positive impact at your target school and beyond. Before you put together your applications, you should know exactly what you want them to communicate. Chapter 6 will help you build your game plan, which will bring out the messages that you want to convey to each of your target schools. Selecting Your Schools As important as it is to establish proper fit in your applications, you must first select the schools to which you will apply. The game is reversed, as you must decide which schools fit you rather than having the schools decide that you fit them. Selecting schools should be an introspective process. You should be warned, however, that people who don't even know your name will have an opinion on where you should apply. Also remember that school rankings are just one piece of information to consider. Certainly rankings can be helpful tools in getting familiar with the schools' perceived strengths and weaknesses. Still, it's important that you do your own research. After all, no magazine or newspaper knows what really matters most to you. Do not be enticed by prestige alone. Though it certainly may be a factor in making your selections, there are plenty of other criteria that should be considered. Some of the selection criteria that you may want to use in evaluating schools include: Curriculum emphases. Typical career paths of graduates. Teaching style. Student culture. Compensation upon graduation. Financial aid opportunities. International perspective and access. Geographical location. Facilities. Diversity. Cost of tuition and living. Class size. Use



of technology. Fortunately, there is an abundance of resources available to help you evaluate these criteria. Some of the steps you should undertake are: Visit business school Websites. Review curriculum information. Speak with current students and alumni. Speak with faculty. Attend business school forums. Visit the schools and sit in on classes. We will discuss some of these resources and criteria in more detail later. We will also assist you in your evaluation of programs. Chapter 5 takes a look at the business school selection process and provides an overview of 35 top global business schools, with perspectives on how to gain admittance to them. Finally, we've compiled a list of frequently asked questions (FAQs), which you will find at the end of most chapters. These are questions that we've heard a number of applicants ask. The FAQs have been placed in different chapters depending on their topics.

The Business School Decision

The decision to apply to business school is likely to be one of the most important decisions you'll make in your career. For full-time students, the investment will likely be in excess of \$150,000 before you even take opportunity costs (the salary you would have earned during those two years) into consideration. And with more than 70 percent of MBAs having to take out loans to pay for at least a portion of their education, it's clear that you shouldn't just wake up one morning and decide that you want to go to business school. Interestingly, that seems to be exactly the way some business school applicants arrived at their decision. Others (read: investment bankers and consultants) scheduled "apply to business school" in their Outlook calendars four years ago as if it's as routine as scheduling a haircut. Regardless of how you arrived at this decision, you should really spend some time thinking about what you want to get out of the business school experience.

The bottom line is that you absolutely have to be passionate about attending business school before making the decision to apply. Sure, the thought of going \$150,000 into debt is intimidating, but there are plenty of ways in which you can balance the costs of business school, including a large salary at the end of the rainbow. Perhaps the more daunting factor is the admissions process itself. Indeed, you must be passionate about earning an MBA, because the application process will deter anyone who isn't dedicated to getting in. Certainly, this book will help you with every step in that process, but we can't do much to instill the dedication that it takes to get in. That part is up to you.

Thankfully, business schools come in all sorts of shapes, sizes, and colors, so you should be able to select an MBA program that fits your needs. Here are some of your options:

**Full-time:** As the title would suggest, full-time programs are the most involved option. Most MBA programs in the United States run for two years (although some one-year programs do exist), and require students to leave their professional positions. Many programs outside of the United States offer one-year programs, which are beginning to appeal to more and more students, given the reduced costs. Students like the full-time option, because it gives them full exposure to the business school experience. Certainly the opportunity costs are higher than with most other options, but the experience is richer, because of the amount of time spent with classmates, faculty, and speakers. Generally, full-time programs are seen as a good option for people who are considering some type of career transition, be it a new industry, function, or position. One of the benefits of full-time

programs that allows this transition to occur is the summer internship. There is often heated debate over whether there is actually any financial benefit to attending a full-time program. Although there is no clear answer, our personal experiences have shown that in addition to making a career transition, there are great intangible benefits to being surrounded by intelligent, motivated people for two years. This book's focus, in terms of providing application strategy advice, will be on full-time programs. The application processes for part-time and distance-learning programs, however, are very similar. You can still benefit from the advice in this book should you decide not to apply to a full-time program.

**Part-time:** If you are satisfied with your current career path and can't fathom the thought of breaking away from the workforce for one or two years, a part-time program might be what you're looking for. Part-time students generally follow the same curriculum as their full-time counterparts, but take all of their classes during the evenings and on weekends. Most part-time students take three to five years to finish their degrees. Many part-timers report that the class load combined with their normal work load can be intense at times, but they are happy not to have to take on the extra debt load or forgo their regular income.

**Distance-learning:** These programs quickly rose in popularity as people became more comfortable with taking classes online. Typically, students will download course material and assignments from the business school Website and have access to faculty via the Internet. In some cases, students will occasionally meet in the classroom to discuss course material. Distance-learning programs are normally one to three years in length and feature curricula similar to that of full-time programs. The benefits are that you can continue your career in a location that isn't within close proximity of the program in which you're enrolled. More and more business schools recognize the value of this option, and more programs are offering online learning options every year. Be aware that a large trade-off you make in choosing a distance-learning program is that you will miss out on the opportunity to be surrounded by exceptional peers from all walks of life. If you are comfortable with this trade-off and are mostly interested in the hard skills that an MBA can deliver (especially if you want to move ahead in your current job, rather than find a new job), then a distance-learning option may be right for you. Just be aware that most online-only MBA programs don't carry anywhere near the cachet that their traditional counterparts do.

**Executive MBA:** Executive MBA (EMBA) programs are similar to part-time programs in that they normally appeal to professionals who are further along in their careers than typical full-time applicants, and allow them to keep working full-time while earning their degrees. EMBA programs also sometimes resemble distance-learning programs in that they can give students multiple, flexible options for study. The main difference is that EMBA students are typically even further along in their careers than are students in the other program types. Also, the vast majority of EMBA students are sponsored by their companies. EMBA programs generally follow similar curricula as full-time programs and can take anywhere from two to five years to complete.

**Other executive programs:** For those who are further along in their careers and have specific aspects of business they would like to learn more about, executive education programs might be the way to go. Executive education programs generally run for one or two

weeks and provide established executives with the opportunity to improve their competency in one of a variety of business topics from mergers and acquisitions to leading change in an organization to supply chain management. Their short length allows executives to rapidly get educated in an area without infringing upon their work schedule. These programs are also a nice way to get up to speed on a business topic without enduring lectures on topics with which you are already familiar. Executive programs are, however, notoriously expensive. You can expect one these programs to set you or your company back anywhere from \$3,000 to \$35,000. Additionally, you won't receive any type of degree for your participation. At best, you can hope to receive some type of certification. Still, you will enjoy a fairly simple application process. Most applications request information on your professional background only (no GMAT, no essays, no interview, no recommendations, and so on) and can be accessed directly from business schools' Websites. Overall, executive education programs are much more interested in your ability to pay than your qualifications. So, if you're reading this book in order to develop a strategy to get into an executive education program, you can stop right now.

**PhD:** If you are enamored at the thought of teaching business concepts, then you should consider going the PhD route. Business schools are always looking for fresh talent, knowing that faculty strength is a major differentiating factor in the eyes of applicants. PhD programs generally take four to five years to complete and, in many cases, require you to take some MBA coursework before specializing. Although you will be in school much longer than with a fulltime MBA program, you will receive considerably more financial assistance. You should know, however, that PhD programs can be extremely difficult to gain admittance to, even more so than their MBA counterparts. Many PhD programs at top schools only take a handful of students per specialty each year. Additionally, landing your dream faculty position can be much more challenging than landing your dream business job because faculty spots at top schools are always limited. Beyond thinking about what type of program you want to attend, you should also consider whether you want to apply for a dual degree program or a specialty program. Dual degree programs give you a chance to earn an MBA degree and another advanced degree in less time than it would take to complete both degrees separately. Unfortunately, there are rarely two-for-one deals on the price of pursuing a dual degree, but you may qualify for additional financial assistance. Some of the most popular degrees to combine with an MBA include: Law. Public policy. Education. International studies. Engineering. Medicine. Health administration. If you decide to pursue a dual degree, you should make sure that you understand how the extra degree will be beneficial. Be wary of pursuing a dual degree merely for the prestige of getting additional letters after your name. In fact, some companies might be slow to consider you during recruiting, because of the fear that they'd have to compensate you more for both degrees, or the expectation that you're more likely to jump ship and chase other opportunities within a couple of years of being hired. Also, know that a dual degree may actually provide you with less flexibility. If, for instance, you get a dual degree in business and medicine, then firms outside of healthcare will immediately ask why you're interested in them, given your background. With that said, if you

have a firm understanding of how the additional degree fits in with your career goals, are willing to pay the extra tuition, and don't mind spending the additional time, then a dual degree may be worth pursuing. As you get older, start a family, and so forth, it will only get harder to step away from the workforce to gain yet another advanced degree. So, you may as well do it now if you're certain that's what you want. Apart from dual degree programs, several schools offer specialization programs within their core business school curricula. These programs generally require you to take a few required MBA courses before following the specialization component of the curriculum. Examples of specialization programs include: Financial engineering. Systems engineering. Accounting. Healthcare. Manufacturing management. Specialization programs are nice from the standpoint that they signal your dedication to a particular field. Recruiters from those areas tend to like that level of dedication, so if you're comfortable aligning yourself with a particular industry or function, you should consider specializing. Naturally, the flip side is that you are narrowing your business focus rather than broadening it. Also, specialization programs can sometimes be more difficult to gain acceptance to than their general management counterparts. Nonetheless, participants in these programs who have a clear career direction consistently speak highly about their experiences. So there you have it: a whole world of opportunity from which you can select. It is of course a big decision to make. But once you make the decision to apply, we'll be with you the rest of the way.

**FAQs**

**How specific should I be in discussing my career goals?** Simply espousing generalities with regard to your career goals will not win you the gold. Although you don't have to state what exact job title you expect to hold in five years, it is important that you convey a career direction in your application. Establishing a direction shows that you know what you want to get out of business school and aren't simply trying to boost your salary. As a general rule, you should be as specific as you feel comfortable discussing. In other words, don't discuss a career path in your application that you can't speak intelligently about. Overall, your career goals should make sense in the context of your application story and should be compelling, answering the question of why you want an MBA to pursue that career path. You should also be able to discuss how your career goals will have an impact on an industry, individuals, or society in general.

**What if I'm not sure what my career goals are?** Use the application preparation process to gain a better understanding of your talents and ambitions. Talk to your friends and family about what they see you doing and match that with your background. Refine your ideas as you investigate business school curricula until your application story takes shape. Odds are that by the end of the business school application process you will have a much clearer picture of what your career goals are. You just don't want the admissions committee to view you as an aimless vagabond. This is particularly true if you come from a less business-oriented background, in which case having a concrete story for why you need an MBA is even more critical than for a typical applicant.

**If I apply to business school saying I want to pursue one career, but then pursue something else once I'm in, will that matter?** No one will care! Though MBA admissions officers do want to see a great deal of introspection and professional maturity in your application, they also know that you're still only a few to several years into a

career that will last for decades. Whether or not it feels like it, you're still a mere pup in the grand scheme of things. Part of the value of attending business school—especially a two-year, full-time program—is the ability to explore new ideas and possible career paths. If you start out thinking you want to go into healthcare marketing and end up being a management consultant, that's completely fine. We're mainly concerned with discouraging you from saying you want to pursue a path in something such as social entrepreneurship simply because you think that's what admissions officers want to hear. Speak the truth when you apply, but know that, if you're admitted, you've also earned the right to shop around and consider as many career options as you please.<sup>1</sup>

**New Game, New Rules**

To my relief, the cab slowed down and the driver waved me over. I had been on the verge of running for the last 30 minutes, trying to reach my interview with Harvard Business School on time. Sliding into the back seat of the taxi, I heavily exhaled directions to the admissions office, rejuvenated with confidence knowing that I would not arrive to the interview late. Now all I had to do was differentiate myself from the other 9,000 applicants and prove to the admissions committee that I embody HBS's culture and mission. Suddenly, it hit me: This would be no small task.

In many ways, the on-campus interview is a wake-up call. For many applicants, it is the first time that they interact directly with the competition and with their target schools. Stepping into the admissions office, my alarm went off as I began to discuss experiences, backgrounds, and objectives with other applicants who were waiting to interview. The conversations were enlightening, as gossip and advice on the application process were freely swapped. More so, however, these conversations were humbling. I spoke with a military pilot who had escorted the president around the country, a scientist in biotechnology who was working on a cancer-fighting antibody, and an Internet entrepreneur who had executed a multi-million-dollar initial public offering. What did I have to offer? I no longer believed my family's frequent promises that I would be admitted. They obviously didn't understand what I was up against. "Your interviewer is ready to see you now," the receptionist called out to me. Moments later, I was sitting across from an admissions officer. A 30-minute conversation ensued in which we discussed all aspects of my application, except for my GMAT score and GPA. Indeed, the interview was very similar to the several others in which I took part. Because most applicants to top business schools have the ability to succeed in the curricula, GPA and test scores are often ruled out as differentiating factors. So what remained to separate me from the thousands of other applicants? The admissions officer asked questions about my story. What were my career goals, and how would attending business school play a role in meeting those goals? How would my professional and personal experiences enhance the classroom dynamic? In what ways had I acted as a leader to my peers? Fortunately, I was ready. My responses were well crafted and were supported with specific details. These responses were all part of a strategic approach that I developed to target the schools to which I applied. The interview transformed into a platform on which I established my case. The admissions officer became my audience, measuring my storyline against other applicants' stories and against the school's sense of "fit." By the end of the interview, I felt satisfied. I had covered each of my points and made a convincing case for why I

belonged at HBS. Exiting the interview, I didn't concern myself with finding a taxi. I wanted to savor my victory. Thanks to my preparation, I was one step closer to being admitted.

The Increasing Popularity of Business School Fueled by steadily rising post-MBA salaries and a burgeoning global economy that is sending ever more international business school students to American schools, the number of applications to top schools continues to climb. Despite a two-percent, year-over-year drop in applications to traditional two-year MBA programs reported by the Graduate Management Admission Council in 2010 (an almost inevitable decline after several years of strong growth during the last recession), the overall trend is undeniable. Admissions rates at top business schools continue to creep downward as more and more young professionals decide they want a top-tier MBA to bolster their career prospects. Over the past decade, the rules of the business school application game have significantly changed. As a result of the overall increase in applications, the competition among applicants has intensified. All top-10 MBA programs (as ranked by U.S. News & World Report in 2010) have a mean GMAT score and GPA greater than 705 and 3.4, respectively, and these statistics continue to climb. Meanwhile, the number of seats at most schools is not climbing, and, in fact, some top schools have made fewer seats available to traditional full-time MBA applicants. The result is that schools are more closely examining all aspects of the MBA application beyond the basic statistics. Many applicants, however, have responded to this increased competition by merely focusing on improving their GMAT scores and other "hard" stats. U.S. News, Bloomberg Businessweek, and other magazines prominently feature a school's average GMAT score next to its name, so it's only natural that applicants focus on this obvious component of the application. But while the GMAT may be the first challenge in the application process that must be navigated, high scores alone certainly won't win the business school application game.

**MBA Application Strategy** Traditional strategic analysis examines the approach of a decision-maker given his environment and the tactics of other decision-makers who are in pursuit of similar objectives. As an applicant, you must succeed in an environment that demands differentiation against the competition and proper fit with the programs to which you apply. The ultimate questions that you as an applicant must answer are: How do I measure against the competition? How do I measure against my targeted business schools?

In our admittedly subjective estimation, after years of experience, we estimate that the probability of gaining acceptance to top business school programs looks something like this: The rest of this book focuses on developing answers to those two questions and getting you to the upper-right cell. It will do so in a functional and comprehensive manner, highlighting all aspects of the application process. You will learn how to position yourself based on your experiences and your target schools, how to write effective essays, and how to execute your application strategy.

**Understanding the Competition** When Omari first started the business school application process, one of the first pieces of insight he was given dealt with the number of candidates applying with his professional profile: If you want to gain admittance to a top program, you must first find a way to differentiate yourself from the thousands of other consultants who are applying. This is good advice for any

applicant, regardless of the profile. Therefore, it is helpful to get into the minds of admissions officers and of other business school candidates with the knowledge that these candidates will have strong applications that cross the officers' desks before and after your own application. At a high level, there are two aspects of your application that admissions officers will compare with other candidates' applications: your profile and your career goals.

### Your Profile

The first aspect of differentiation that you must understand as a business school candidate is that all applicants have an Achilles' heel. We all have a weakness in our profile that will show up in our applications; it's just a matter of whether or not it is appropriately addressed. Whether the issue is number of years of work experience, lack of community service activities, low GPA, poor writing ability, low GMAT score, unconvincing interview skills, or overconfidence, all candidates have an aspect of their profiles that, unaddressed, could lead to the dreaded "ding," as rejections are commonly called.

### Your profile consists of your academic background, professional experiences, and personal interests and activities. As much as possible, the components in your profile should be multifaceted and consistent with an overall theme:

### Multifaceted

Admissions officers look for candidates who demonstrate multiple dimensions through various interests. A common question that is asked during business school interviews is: "Outside of your professional activities, what are your personal interests and endeavors?" Top business schools want to ensure that they do not merely admit workaholic drones, but rather candidates who lead interesting and inspiring lives.

### Consistent

A while back, we spoke with Carrie, an applicant who was declined admittance to the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. During her feedback session with an admissions officer, one of the messages that Carrie received was that she lacked community service experience. Actually, Carrie did have community service experience, but it wasn't relevant experience. It didn't fit with the overall message that she conveyed in her application. The community service activities in which Carrie took part appeared to be events in which she participated purely so that they could be posted on her resume. Admission committee members are savvy enough to detect when an applicant's attempts to enhance her profile are contrived, so you therefore need to weave the components of your profile into your story in a logical and consistent manner.

### The second and third chapters of this book will assist you in differentiating your application story from the competition. Chapter 2 will outline the characteristics that admissions officers value, and show you how to demonstrate these characteristics in your own application. In highlighting those characteristics, you will ensure that your profile is multifaceted and consistent with a targeted story. This approach impresses top business schools, as they are searching for candidates who will add something unique to the classroom dynamic. Chapter 2 will also show you how to overcome certain weaknesses that your application may contain. Specific profiles will be covered in Chapter 3, which details each profile's typical strengths and weaknesses, and provides guidance on how to overcome the stereotypes that admissions officers tend to associate with each profile.

### Your Career Goals

Where you are going is just as important as where you are coming from. Admissions officers often cite candidates' inability to articulate their postgraduation goals—and how the

business school's curriculum will support those goals—as a contributing factor in a candidate's rejection. As you communicate your career goals, you should convey an overall story that makes it easy for the admissions committee to see why an MBA makes sense for you. Typically, the career goal aspect of your story will either describe your motivation to make a career change or your intent to bolster your current career direction. Whichever career path you intend to pursue, the messages you communicate in the application should reflect innovation and an entrepreneurial spirit. That doesn't mean that all applicants should strive to start their own businesses, but rather that business schools are looking for candidates who want to contribute a fresh perspective and new insight to their chosen professions. Use the application as a forum in which to display ambition and ingenuity as you discuss future objectives. Additionally, you should discuss the ways in which the targeted school's specific curriculum will aid you in achieving those objectives. Chapter 4 will provide you with details on each component of the application process. Your story should be reflected in each of these components.

### Understanding Your Business School Targets

Most business schools look for similar qualities in their applicants. They want students who demonstrate academic aptitude, leadership, an ability to work well with peers and subordinates, integrity, and ambition, just to name a few. So, does this mean that the applications to your target schools should be the same? Of course it doesn't. Each school tends to emphasize certain traits over others, and looks for examples to support these traits. A quick look at the essay questions from a few business school applications tells you that each school asks about these qualities in different ways. Here's the irony: Each school claims to look for a unique type of candidate, yet it seems that every year there are some applicants who manage to get into all of the top programs. Do these candidates really have every trait that all of these schools are looking for? Probably not. More likely, they understand the emphasis that each school places on specific traits, and they know how to highlight those traits in their application. Successful applicants know that MIT Sloan values analytical ability, and they therefore stress their methodical approaches to business problems. They know that Fuqua really does pride itself on its teamwork-oriented culture, and they highlight the success they've had while working in teams. These may seem like obvious examples to an applicant who's done some basic school research, but this is an area in which many applicants stumble. They either don't give enough thought to highlighting the traits that each school looks for, or they "tack on" one trite example in a half-hearted attempt to meet the requirement. The result is almost always a rejection because the applicants failed to demonstrate proper fit with their target schools.

### What Is "Fit"?

In short, "fitting" with a school means demonstrating that you have the ability to succeed there, you are someone the school would be glad to have as part of its community, and you will serve as an ambassador for the school after you graduate. In order to convey proper fit with a school, you should demonstrate that: You understand what the school stands for and why it is important. When you say "Darden preaches leadership," you are able to give examples of what leadership means to you and explain why you want to further strengthen your own leadership abilities at Darden. You embody the traits that the school most wants to see in its students. You don't need



to have climbed Mount Everest to have demonstrated accomplishment or aced the GMAT to demonstrate quantitative excellence. You do need to be able to illustrate how your everyday life is peppered with examples of the traits for which the school looks. You will become very involved in your business school, from contributing to class discussions to running student organizations to being an active alum 20 years from now. One great way to communicate this is by pointing to similar experiences with your undergraduate university. You are the kind of person with whom your classmates would want to work on a team project at 3 a.m. Exhibiting a penchant for working in teams and a sociable personality will establish the basis for this. One other extremely important question that an admissions officer asks about every applicant is: "Would he actually attend this school if he were accepted?" Admissions officers assume that you're applying to multiple schools, and they know that their school may not be your first choice. But you need to convey enough knowledge and enthusiasm about the school to convince admissions officers that you would strongly consider attending their school if you were accepted. The history of the business school admissions game is littered with stories of people with stellar credentials who were rejected by "safety" schools. If you don't sound sincere about wanting to attend a given school, you can expect that school to return the favor by not wanting you. Demonstrating "fit" in your application Your entire application should spell out how well you fit with your target business school. Practically speaking, though, the parts of the application that will do this the most are your essays, recommendations, and interview. Think of these as your opportunities to talk about how your background and future direction correspond with what the school has to offer, and to discuss them in a way that lets your personality come through. Yes, you will answer different questions for each school, but admissions officers inevitably want to get to know what makes you tick, and they do it through the questions that they ask. In essays, admissions officers most want to hear about actions that you have taken to solve a real problem or reach an actual goal, not what you would do in a hypothetical situation. They also want to hear what you learned from your experiences. Be as specific as possible in describing what you have accomplished and what you have learned in the process. The same goes for recommendations. Almost everyone finds someone to write a positive recommendation for them, but a truly great recommendation will support your positioning by providing specific examples of how you demonstrated leadership, succeeded as part of a team, and so on. We can't emphasize this enough: Be as specific as possible! Doing so will help make it easier for an admissions officer to picture you making a positive impact at your target school and beyond. Before you put together your applications, you should know exactly what you want them to communicate. Chapter 6 will help you build your game plan, which will bring out the messages that you want to convey to each of your target schools. Selecting Your Schools As important as it is to establish proper fit in your applications, you must first select the schools to which you will apply. The game is reversed, as you must decide which schools fit you rather than having the schools decide that you fit them. Selecting schools should be an introspective process. You should be warned, however, that people who don't even know your name will have an opinion on where you should apply.

Also remember that school rankings are just one piece of information to consider. Certainly rankings can be helpful tools in getting familiar with the schools' perceived strengths and weaknesses. Still, it's important that you do your own research. After all, no magazine or newspaper knows what really matters most to you. Do not be enticed by prestige alone. Though it certainly may be a factor in making your selections, there are plenty of other criteria that should be considered. Some of the selection criteria that you may want to use in evaluating schools include: Curriculum emphases. Typical career paths of graduates. Teaching style. Student culture. Compensation upon graduation. Financial aid opportunities. International perspective and access. Geographical location. Facilities. Diversity. Cost of tuition and living. Class size. Use of technology. Fortunately, there is an abundance of resources available to help you evaluate these criteria. Some of the steps you should undertake are: Visit business school Websites. Review curriculum information. Speak with current students and alumni. Speak with faculty. Attend business school forums. Visit the schools and sit in on classes. We will discuss some of these resources and criteria in more detail later. We will also assist you in your evaluation of programs. Chapter 5 takes a look at the business school selection process and provides an overview of 35 top global business schools, with perspectives on how to gain admittance to them. Finally, we've compiled a list of frequently asked questions (FAQs), which you will find at the end of most chapters. These are questions that we've heard a number of applicants ask. The FAQs have been placed in different chapters depending on their topics.

**The Business School Decision**

The decision to apply to business school is likely to be one of the most important decisions you'll make in your career. For full-time students, the investment will likely be in excess of \$150,000 before you even take opportunity costs (the salary you would have earned during those two years) into consideration. And with more than 70 percent of MBAs having to take out loans to pay for at least a portion of their education, it's clear that you shouldn't just wake up one morning and decide that you want to go to business school. Interestingly, that seems to be exactly the way some business school applicants arrived at their decision. Others (read: investment bankers and consultants) scheduled "apply to business school" in their Outlook calendars four years ago as if it's as routine as scheduling a haircut. Regardless of how you arrived at this decision, you should really spend some time thinking about what you want to get out of the business school experience. The bottom line is that you absolutely have to be passionate about attending business school before making the decision to apply. Sure, the thought of going \$150,000 into debt is intimidating, but there are plenty of ways in which you can balance the costs of business school, including a large salary at the end of the rainbow. Perhaps the more daunting factor is the admissions process itself. Indeed, you must be passionate about earning an MBA, because the application process will deter anyone who isn't dedicated to getting in. Certainly, this book will help you with every step in that process, but we can't do much to instill the dedication that it takes to get in. That part is up to you. Thankfully, business schools come in all sorts of shapes, sizes, and colors, so you should be able to select an MBA program that fits your needs. Here are some of your options: Full-time: As the title would suggest, full-time

programs are the most involved option. Most MBA programs in the United States run for two years (although some one-year programs do exist), and require students to leave their professional positions. Many programs outside of the United States offer one-year programs, which are beginning to appeal to more and more students, given the reduced costs. Students like the full-time option, because it gives them full exposure to the business school experience. Certainly the opportunity costs are higher than with most other options, but the experience is richer, because of the amount of time spent with classmates, faculty, and speakers. Generally, full-time programs are seen as a good option for people who are considering some type of career transition, be it a new industry, function, or position. One of the benefits of full-time programs that allows this transition to occur is the summer internship. There is often heated debate over whether there is actually any financial benefit to attending a full-time program. Although there is no clear answer, our personal experiences have shown that in addition to making a career transition, there are great intangible benefits to being surrounded by intelligent, motivated people for two years. This book's focus, in terms of providing application strategy advice, will be on full-time programs. The application processes for part-time and distance-learning programs, however, are very similar. You can still benefit from the advice in this book should you decide not to apply to a full-time program.

**Part-time:** If you are satisfied with your current career path and can't fathom the thought of breaking away from the workforce for one or two years, a part-time program might be what you're looking for. Part-time students generally follow the same curriculum as their full-time counterparts, but take all of their classes during the evenings and on weekends. Most part-time students take three to five years to finish their degrees. Many part-timers report that the class load combined with their normal work load can be intense at times, but they are happy not to have to take on the extra debt load or forgo their regular income.

**Distance-learning:** These programs quickly rose in popularity as people became more comfortable with taking classes online. Typically, students will download course material and assignments from the business school Website and have access to faculty via the Internet. In some cases, students will occasionally meet in the classroom to discuss course material. Distance-learning programs are normally one to three years in length and feature curricula similar to that of full-time programs. The benefits are that you can continue your career in a location that isn't within close proximity of the program in which you're enrolled. More and more business schools recognize the value of this option, and more programs are offering online learning options every year. Be aware that a large trade-off you make in choosing a distance-learning program is that you will miss out on the opportunity to be surrounded by exceptional peers from all walks of life. If you are comfortable with this trade-off and are mostly interested in the hard skills that an MBA can deliver (especially if you want to move ahead in your current job, rather than find a new job), then a distance-learning option may be right for you. Just be aware that most online-only MBA programs don't carry anywhere near the cachet that their traditional counterparts do.

**Executive MBA:** Executive MBA (EMBA) programs are similar to part-time programs in that they normally appeal to professionals who are further along in their careers

than typical full-time applicants, and allow them to keep working full-time while earning their degrees. EMBA programs also sometimes resemble distance-learning programs in that they can give students multiple, flexible options for study. The main difference is that EMBA students are typically even further along in their careers than are students in the other program types. Also, the vast majority of EMBA students are sponsored by their companies. EMBA programs generally follow similar curricula as full-time programs and can take anywhere from two to five years to complete. Other executive programs: For those who are further along in their careers and have specific aspects of business they would like to learn more about, executive education programs might be the way to go. Executive education programs generally run for one or two weeks and provide established executives with the opportunity to improve their competency in one of a variety of business topics from mergers and acquisitions to leading change in an organization to supply chain management. Their short length allows executives to rapidly get educated in an area without infringing upon their work schedule. These programs are also a nice way to get up to speed on a business topic without enduring lectures on topics with which you are already familiar. Executive programs are, however, notoriously expensive. You can expect one of these programs to set you or your company back anywhere from \$3,000 to \$35,000. Additionally, you won't receive any type of degree for your participation. At best, you can hope to receive some type of certification. Still, you will enjoy a fairly simple application process. Most applications request information on your professional background only (no GMAT, no essays, no interview, no recommendations, and so on) and can be accessed directly from business schools' Websites. Overall, executive education programs are much more interested in your ability to pay than your qualifications. So, if you're reading this book in order to develop a strategy to get into an executive education program, you can stop right now. PhD: If you are enamored at the thought of teaching business concepts, then you should consider going the PhD route. Business schools are always looking for fresh talent, knowing that faculty strength is a major differentiating factor in the eyes of applicants. PhD programs generally take four to five years to complete and, in many cases, require you to take some MBA coursework before specializing. Although you will be in school much longer than with a fulltime MBA program, you will receive considerably more financial assistance. You should know, however, that PhD programs can be extremely difficult to gain admittance to, even more so than their MBA counterparts. Many PhD programs at top schools only take a handful of students per specialty each year. Additionally, landing your dream faculty position can be much more challenging than landing your dream business job because faculty spots at top schools are always limited. Beyond thinking about what type of program you want to attend, you should also consider whether you want to apply for a dual degree program or a specialty program. Dual degree programs give you a chance to earn an MBA degree and another advanced degree in less time than it would take to complete both degrees separately. Unfortunately, there are rarely two-for-one deals on the price of pursuing a dual degree, but you may qualify for additional financial assistance. Some of the most popular degrees to combine with an MBA include: Law. Public policy. Education.

International studies. Engineering. Medicine. Health administration. If you decide to pursue a dual degree, you should make sure that you understand how the extra degree will be beneficial. Be wary of pursuing a dual degree merely for the prestige of getting additional letters after your name. In fact, some companies might be slow to consider you during recruiting, because of the fear that they'd have to compensate you more for both degrees, or the expectation that you're more likely to jump ship and chase other opportunities within a couple of years of being hired. Also, know that a dual degree may actually provide you with less flexibility. If, for instance, you get a dual degree in business and medicine, then firms outside of healthcare will immediately ask why you're interested in them, given your background. With that said, if you have a firm understanding of how the additional degree fits in with your career goals, are willing to pay the extra tuition, and don't mind spending the additional time, then a dual degree may be worth pursuing. As you get older, start a family, and so forth, it will only get harder to step away from the workforce to gain yet another advanced degree. So, you may as well do it now if you're certain that's what you want.

Apart from dual degree programs, several schools offer specialization programs within their core business school curricula. These programs generally require you to take a few required MBA courses before following the specialization component of the curriculum. Examples of specialization programs include: Financial engineering. Systems engineering. Accounting. Healthcare. Manufacturing management. Specialization programs are nice from the standpoint that they signal your dedication to a particular field. Recruiters from those areas tend to like that level of dedication, so if you're comfortable aligning yourself with a particular industry or function, you should consider specializing. Naturally, the flip side is that you are narrowing your business focus rather than broadening it. Also, specialization programs can sometimes be more difficult to gain acceptance to than their general management counterparts. Nonetheless, participants in these programs who have a clear career direction consistently speak highly about their experiences. So there you have it: a whole world of opportunity from which you can select. It is of course a big decision to make. But once you make the decision to apply, we'll be with you the rest of the way.

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**How specific should I be in discussing my career goals?** Simply espousing generalities with regard to your career goals will not win you the gold. Although you don't have to state what exact job title you expect to hold in five years, it is important that you convey a career direction in your application. Establishing a direction shows that you know what you want to get out of business school and aren't simply trying to boost your salary. As a general rule, you should be as specific as you feel comfortable discussing. In other words, don't discuss a career path in your application that you can't speak intelligently about. Overall, your career goals should make sense in the context of your application story and should be compelling, answering the question of why you want an MBA to pursue that career path. You should also be able to discuss how your career goals will have an impact on an industry, individuals, or society in general.

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## 2 The Four Dimensions of a Perfect Applicant

Becoming the perfect business school candidate is as much an exercise in understanding and cultivating your relative strengths as it is in identifying and addressing your relative weaknesses. We all have strengths. The main challenge is to reveal your strengths in your applications and convince admissions officers that those strengths aren't outweighed by your weaknesses. For every Superman there is a kryptonite. For every applicant there is a weakness. That's okay! This is the first reality that must be understood as you develop your position and become the "perfect applicant." Remember: A 780 on the GMAT does not blind admissions officers to generic career goals any more than a great stereo system makes up for a car that's missing an engine. To avoid this type of imbalance, you must express all four dimensions that every business school looks for:

### Leadership

Probably more than anything else, business schools want to be known as institutions that produce leaders in their fields. Admissions committees are therefore in search of applicants who display leadership ability in all facets of their lives. This doesn't mean that you need to have served as a captain in the Army or have started three new nonprofit organizations. Candidates who successfully demonstrate leadership in their applications exhibit how they have provided others with direction, shown initiative, and managed difficult situations in their professional, personal, and academic careers. And, above all, they need to show how they have made a positive impact on the organization and community around them. It is not enough to merely state that you are a leader; you must provide examples of demonstrated leadership. Ultimately, the admissions committee should identify you as a high potential leader because of supporting details rather than overt statements. A good rule of thumb is "Show, don't tell."

### Innovation

Innovation is a combination of traditional intellectual ability and creativity. Naturally, the former is reflected in the

“hard” statistics such as your GMAT score and grade point average, but admissions committee members also look for the latter. Applicants who are visionaries are generally successful in establishing the trait of innovation. Innovation, in this case, can be as simple as finding a new solution to an everyday business problem. Past behavior is a terrific predictor of one’s future behavior in similar settings, and admissions officers look for applicants they can envision doing bold, new things down the road. Stories that demonstrate this sort of professional creativity will help your cause here.

**Teamwork**The success that Kellogg has had with integrating teamwork throughout its curriculum has spread through time to the other top business schools. Kellogg’s success with a team-oriented curriculum has been supported by the way in which most companies now operate. Because companies utilize teams for virtually all of their functions, business schools are in search of applicants with strong team skills. A team-oriented attitude is now a baseline expectation of every applicant. This includes basic social skills and a willingness to share successes and take accountability for failures. Though top business schools are certainly known for being competitive environments, operating in teams has become an integral part of conducting business, and as such is a key aspect of the business school experience.

**Maturity**Work experience has become a vital part of candidates’ applications. On average, admitted applicants to the top business schools have almost five years of full-time work experience. Although some top programs have made a deliberate effort to admit more people right out of college during the past several years (most notably Harvard Business School, with its HBS 2+2 Program), this remains the exception and not the rule. More important than the length of one’s work experience, however, is the quality and depth of that experience. Top business schools are in search of candidates with multilayered experiences inside and outside of the workplace. An important aspect of the business school experience is that students teach one another based on their backgrounds. It is often said that everyone at business school, including faculty, is both a teacher and a student. Admissions committees therefore try to identify “mature” candidates who display professional maturity and integrity throughout their applications. As an applicant, your goal should be to weave each of these dimensions throughout all of the application components. In general, application components consist of: Data sheets. Essays. Recommendations. Resume. Transcript. Interview.

In Chapter 4, we will step through each of these components in detail and show ways in which successful applicants have expressed the four dimensions. To help you gauge how well your profile supports these dimensions, you should take an inventory of your activities and achievements. This will allow you to identify your strengths and weaknesses and address them accordingly.

**Activities and achievements** that typically support the four dimensions include the following:

**Community Service**Through time, community service has evolved from a nice-to-have to a must-have on the application. During feedback sessions with rejected applicants, admissions committee members frequently mention that they wish they had seen more in the way of community involvement. It should be stressed, however, that this is a quality (not quantity) activity. You shouldn’t merely write down every humanitarian act that you’ve ever performed. Nor should you try to join half a dozen community

service organizations six months before applying to desperately demonstrate that you have a heart. Rather, it is important to show that you have aspirations of helping society as a whole and not just your personal bank account. Your goal should be to demonstrate deep impact through a few activities, not broad impact across many. Community service is a great way to express all four of the dimensions that you will need to demonstrate in your application, but it can especially be powerful in communicating maturity and leadership abilities.

**GMAT Score** Although your GMAT score alone will never get you into a business school, it certainly can keep you out. As a general rule, if your score falls below a school's middle-80-percent range of scores, you will have to overcome long odds in order to be considered a contender. On the flip side, a GMAT score close to a school's mean indicates that you have the intellectual horsepower to excel in the business school classroom. Naturally, achieving a strong score on the GMAT gives you points in the innovation department. To avoid having to overcome a low score, you should review our section on the GMAT in Chapter 4. In that chapter we also answer the question of whether you should take the GMAT or the GRE, which many top MBA programs also now accept.

**Hobbies and Extracurricular Activities** Any hobby that can support one of the dimensions or give the admissions committee insight into your personality is worth mentioning. At the end of the day, business schools are looking to admit people, not numbers, and discussing hobbies is a great way to differentiate yourself from the competition. These activities can also display your strengths in areas such as teamwork and innovation. As such, it isn't really important what the hobby is, but rather what the hobby says about you as an applicant. Do you like fly fishing? Great. Now tell the admissions committee why. Your target business schools are more interested in the reason than you might realize.

**International and Cultural Exposure** As the trend of globalization continues and the world gets smaller, business schools want applicants who will have global impact. Use every part of the application as a platform to highlight your foreign language skills, multi-national experiences, and cultural awareness. Examples of this can be as grandiose as leading a business unit through a global merger across three continents, or as simple as working with a group of individuals with diverse professional and educational backgrounds. In general, including international or cultural experiences displays a willingness to operate outside of your comfort zone. In this way, it will help you to support the maturity and teamwork dimensions.

**Professional Experience** For most applicants, professional experience will be the primary driver of the application. It is what admissions officers care about most of all (what better way to judge how successful you will be 20 years from now?), and it will permeate your essays, recommendations, interviews, and resumes. Because it has such wideranging usage, it should be utilized to support all four dimensions.

**Undergraduate and Graduate Transcripts** Although your undergraduate and graduate transcripts can't be altered, you can emphasize different aspects of them to support your position. Perhaps you took myriad courses outside of your major during undergrad. You could use that multi-discipline approach to support your desire to attend a business school that focuses on general management. Naturally, a high grade point average (GPA) helps to support the innovation dimension and indicates your ability



to succeed in a rigorous academic environment. A low GPA can be overcome, to a point, with a terrific GMAT score and successful post-college coursework. Analyzing Your Strengths and Weaknesses Odds are, you have some notable strengths that will make you a solid student and worthy contributor in business school, but you also have some weaknesses that might keep you out of your ideal school if they go unaddressed. That puts you in a pool that includes probably 99 percent of all business school applicants. This section will show you how to systematically identify and capitalize on your strengths while rooting out and neutralizing your weaknesses. The Grid Surprisingly, many applicants don't spend any time analyzing or even just writing down their strengths and weaknesses. This might seem like a trivial task—especially because you know yourself better than anyone—but remember that your goal is to sell yourself to someone whose only contact with you is through your application and possibly a 30-minute interview. Therefore, you need to organize your thoughts and make sure that you know exactly what traits you will emphasize for the admissions committee. It helps to start by drawing out the four dimensions and activity/achievement categories in a grid, like the one here: Figure 2.1 Next, list your activities and achievements, according to the categories, that bring out one or more of the dimensions. This process shouldn't happen in one 10-minute session. Rather, it will likely take a few minutes here and there as other activities and achievements come to mind. Ideally you can give yourself days or even weeks to make this happen. Some things to think about when you are looking into your past are: In what extracurricular activities did you participate while in college? For what did you volunteer? To what positions were you elected? How have you gotten involved in your community since graduating from college? What have you enjoyed about these experiences? What have you learned that you didn't learn in school or on the job? What do you like to do in your spare time? What do you enjoy about each of these things? How have they helped you gain a new perspective or exercise your creative side? Where have you traveled? What languages do you know? What have you learned from your friends of different backgrounds? What have you done on the job that might exhibit one or more of the four desired dimensions? Did you lead a team, identify a problem and find a creative solution, deal with a problematic coworker, and achieve a goal that no one thought was possible? What about your undergraduate academic experience might stand out? Did you study abroad or develop your own independent study? Did you dedicate yourself to one academic field, or did you pursue multiple interests? What awards did you receive? Start by being fairly generous with yourself. Put everything that comes to mind in the grid. You can pare down the overlaps and the weaker examples later. Also, you may have participated in some activities that don't fit neatly into any of the previously mentioned categories. As long as they help bring out one of the four main dimensions that you want to demonstrate, include them. You can create a catch-all "other" category if needed. When you are done, your grid may look like an expanded version of this: Figure 2.2 Note that you will likely have more Xs in some categories than in others. That's perfectly fine. The idea is not to have a completely full grid, but rather to use the grid as a tool for visualizing what your strengths and weaknesses are. Hopefully, your activities and achievements will complement each other and

help fill in each column of the table to some degree, but don't worry if this doesn't happen when you first fill it out. Also note that some activities may only demonstrate one dimension while others may demonstrate three or four of them. That doesn't mean that the former is less valuable than the latter. Keep in mind that the most important thing is to adequately demonstrate all four desired dimensions. An activity that provides your only strong example of leadership may end up being the most important piece of your application story, rather than an example that shows that you demonstrated all four dimensions moderately well. After you are confident that you have covered everything in your background that is relevant to your application, start to trim the list if needed. If you have 10 examples that demonstrate teamwork, try to evaluate them through an admissions officer's eyes and rank them from most important to least important. The question you should ask yourself in order to rank them should be: "How effectively does this achievement or activity demonstrate what I am trying to show?" It's tempting to include glamorous examples over more common ones, but being one small part of a CEO's task force on cost-cutting may do less to show off your traits than having led the solution of a tough problem within your own department. Also look for activities and achievements that overlap. If you have done four things that all demonstrate leadership and maturity, you won't need to mention all four of them in your application. Just one or two will do.

### What to Do About Your Weaknesses

In the event that you look at one row or column of your grid and see a lot of white space, don't panic! Most applicants will encounter this challenge. Remember that the table isn't the end, but rather it is the means for identifying what you might need to work on while you build your application. Following are some areas where applicants typically have some holes in their grids, and some ideas for bolstering your position in each.

#### Community Service

Not everyone has done a lot of community service, and it can be tempting to want to volunteer for five nonprofit organizations in the months leading up to your application deadline. Admissions committees can see right through this, however, so don't waste your time in a last-ditch attempt to look "involved." If you simply do not have any community service activities to point to, look for other activities in your background that will demonstrate similar characteristics. Starting a volleyball club at the local gym won't solve world hunger, but it still shows that you like to get involved and can motivate others to do the same. If you find that your application still lacks the altruistic angle that a community service activity might demonstrate, then be sure to bring out your human side in other ways, such as more subtle examples of how you helped a family member or someone on the job solve a problem. The bottom line is that you want to show that you like to get involved in the community around you, and that you are more than a GMAT score and fancy resume. If you still have time before you begin the application process, be on the lookout for community service opportunities. Mentoring programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters are great ways to show your willingness to give back to the community. Just remember that the key is to make a strong impact in one or two areas, not to simply sign up for half a dozen activities. That single word—impact—should be your guiding light. Activities that give you the opportunity to say "That would not have happened if I hadn't been there" are the most powerful examples of all. Another way to think of community

service is as a powerful way to complement your work experience. If you haven't had many opportunities to lead a team at work, for example, then showing how you did so as part of a volunteer organization is a great way to demonstrate leadership abilities. MBA admissions officers know that most applicants are young and may still have somewhat limited work experience, so they're adept at scouring your entire background for evidence of high potential. This doesn't only apply to leadership examples; community involvement, though most often associated with leadership and a desire to make the world better, can give you opportunities to demonstrate all four of the key applicant dimensions.

### GMAT Score

The good news about the GMAT (or GRE, for those schools that accept it) is that it is one of the few achievements that you can work on and improve in a short amount of time (compared to community service or an undergraduate transcript from five years ago). The bad news is that some applicants can spend months studying for it and still fall short of their goal. If your GMAT score makes you look weak in the quantitative or verbal departments, be sure to bring out other examples in your application that will counterbalance these weaknesses. If your quantitative score is low, highlight any tough analytical courses that you took as an undergrad. Or show how you use your quantitative skills to unravel tough problems on the job, or even as part of a volunteer opportunity in which you participated. Remember that demonstrating an analytical skill set doesn't have to mean showing that you know calculus. There are practical, everyday activities that can help you demonstrate your ability to break down a problem or your comfort with using numbers to make decisions. The bottom line is that you just need to show that you won't be helpless two weeks into your first-year finance course. If your verbal score is low, then you will need to work extra hard to highlight your communication skills. You can do this through your essays and your interviews. Keep in mind that admissions officers will be suspicious of someone with poorly written Analytical Writing Assessment (AWA) essays on the GMAT, but terrific application essays; that kind of application is often covered with fingerprints from a professional editor or admissions consultant. Remember that getting some help is okay, but the application you submit must be your own work. You can also enlist support from your recommenders to address weaknesses in both the quantitative and/or verbal section. They may be able to provide examples that offset some of the concerns that your GMAT score raises. If your undergraduate transcript and your job don't help, consider enrolling in a statistics, finance, public speaking, or accounting course in a local community college. This shows a dedication to education and will impress the admissions committees. Many business schools are happy to suggest what kinds of courses they would consider as useful preparation for their programs.

### Hobbies and Extracurricular Activities

This is usually the part of the application that gives applicants the least amount of trouble, as most of us have enough interests to keep us busy outside of school or work. Look at how your hobbies relate to your other activities, and they hopefully will provide a well-rounded picture of you as a person. If you already have the four desired dimensions covered reasonably well by your other activities and achievements, then use your hobbies as a way to provide a little extra depth and color to your application. Even seemingly silly or frivolous hobbies and interests can help in this

way. If your hobbies truly don't add anything new, then de-emphasize them and let the other parts of your application stand on their own.

### International and Cultural Exposure

For many people, this is a clear-cut, have-or-don't-have issue. If you haven't worked, studied, or traveled abroad, don't despair. Business schools like to see experience in this area, but realize that not everyone has had a chance to see the world. If this is the case for you, be sure to emphasize the success that you have had in working with people of various backgrounds or even different points of view from your own. Even two people from the same school who work for the same company have a lot of differences between them. Show how you have overcome these differences to build success, and, even more importantly, demonstrate that you value these opportunities to grow and push yourself outside of your normal comfort zone. The more easily admissions officers can envision you successfully working on a study team with four other people from four different countries, the better your chances will be.

### Professional Experience

People who worry about their professional experience are usually concerned with either the quality or quantity of the work that they have done. If you are worried about the amount of work experience that you have, take comfort in the fact that many business schools are actually pursuing younger applicants. They will still be interested in you as long as you have demonstrated success on the job, increasing responsibility in your assignments, and a true understanding of what an MBA can do for you. If you are still an undergrad and are looking to go right into business school, your best chances of demonstrating leadership and maturity will be in your extracurricular activities and anything else where you took charge and made something happen outside of the classroom.

Ultimately, though no applicant wants to hear "Wait till next year," the quantity problem can be solved by simply waiting another year or two before you apply. Or, if you apply and are rejected, you can apply again after gaining a couple of years' worth of terrific new experiences.

On the flip side, particularly as some top schools take an interest in younger applicants, there is such a thing as too much work experience. There's no cut-off in terms of years of experience, and every school will take great pains to point out that a couple of students in its entering class are pushing 40 years of age, but anyone with more than seven or eight years of work experience will invite questions along the lines of "Why are you only applying now? What took you so long to discover that this is what you want to do next in your career?" No school will judge you based solely on your age, but if you strike admissions officers as someone who's applying now just because his or her career is stagnating, then your chances of success will be low. Or, the school may decide that a part-time or executive MBA is ultimately a better fit for you.

### Quality issues around work experience can be tough, but these can be overcome, at least in part, with your other application components. Do you feel as though your career is starting to plateau? Think about why this has happened and how an MBA will help you address the issue. Maybe your career progress has slowed because you lack important managerial skills that an MBA will give you. The important thing, in this case, is to demonstrate that your lack of upward mobility does not correspond to a lack of ambition or aptitude for success.

Does your work not seem interesting or exciting enough? Don't worry too much about this issue, as

business schools love people from a variety of backgrounds. Being a foreman at a corrugated box factory may seem dull to you, but if you can highlight what you have learned about business on the job—and what you still have to learn—then you can make a strong case for yourself. Some applicants have holes in their work records, as they took sabbaticals to travel, to care for a sick loved one, or to simply try new things. As long as you have a legitimate reason for such a hole and can convince the admissions committee that you are indeed ambitious and committed to studying business, they will appreciate the unique perspectives that these experiences will give you. It is always better to hit these holes head-on than to try to hide them and hope admissions officers don't notice them.

### Undergraduate and Graduate Transcripts

If your transcript shows weakness, don't worry. Not all "weak" transcripts are equally bad, and there are some things you can do to help yourself. A Stanford admissions officer once said about transcripts, "We're forgiving of slow starts, but not as forgiving of slow finishes." Most business schools have the same attitude. If you got off to a rough start your freshman year but showed steady improvement while in college, then you are probably in good shape. Admissions officers aren't itching to reject you because of a bad choice you made while you were still a teenager. They like to see that you got more serious about your work and were able to turn the academic tide. If you were consistently poor or did worse as time went on, however, your challenge will be to convince the admissions committee that you're serious about academics and have the brainpower to succeed in business school. The former can be accomplished in your essays, where you will discuss what it is that you expect to get out of an MBA curriculum. The latter can be made up for by the GMAT or, if that is also weak, by earning strong grades in part-time courses at a local school. Your transcript(s) may also be weak because you were simply too involved in extracurricular activities as an undergrad. Use this opportunity to turn a weakness into a strength by demonstrating your commitment and initiative at your undergraduate school, and making the case for why you will be equally involved in business school. You must balance that out, however, with a demonstrated understanding of the importance of academics in business school. In other words, you should try and convince the admissions counselors that you will get the school/ activities mix right this time around.

### Final Word on Strengths and Weaknesses

In general, a winning application strategy counteracts your perceived weaknesses with examples that show your strengths in those same (or similar) areas. The more that each part of your application can naturally complement and support the other pieces, the better off you will be. Some applicants will use the extra essay—which many schools provide as an option in their applications—to directly address a weakness such as a low GMAT score or undergraduate GPA. This is fine, but think of it as a last resort. One risk of devoting an entire essay to a weakness is that it highlights the very issue that you're trying to neutralize. There are times when the extra essay does help, however, and we will discuss these types of situations more in Chapter 4.

### A Conversation With Soojin Kwon Koh

Soojin Kwon Koh is the Director of Admissions and Financial Aid at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business. Consistently ranked as one of the top-10 business schools in the United States, Ross is often

acknowledged for its innovative curriculum and for turning out some of the most sought after business school graduates in the world. We checked in with Soojin to get her perspectives on the application process and advice on what applicants can do to improve their chances of gaining acceptance to the top business schools. What's your take on the GMAT? Why is it important? In general the application review process is all about adding dimension to what is an inherently two-dimensional evaluation. The GMAT is one of the primary factors we use to predict an applicant's propensity to perform well in the academic program. I don't think that it's necessarily a good predictor of how well an applicant will do in the career of her choosing, but in addition to the GPA, it does help to quantify intellectual capacity. It also allows many applicants to make up for less-than-stellar GPAs. Lastly, as a standardized measure, it puts applicants on similar footing, whereas GPAs come with a certain amount of bias depending on the undergraduate curriculum. For applicants who have a relatively low GMAT, what do they have to do to at least be considered? Strong work experience and undergraduate GPA help. Strong essays really make a difference. We also take a close look at the applicant's career goals and reasons for wanting to pursue an MBA. Does the applicant have clear reasons for wanting to get an MBA? Does he have a clear thought process? Has he demonstrated passion for pursuing an MBA at Ross? These three attributes can help put an applicant into the running. It does make the process a bit easier though when the applicant at least scores within the range of traditionally accepted applicants. What does it mean to evaluate an applicant for fit? Every school probably evaluates fit a little differently. We're looking to confirm that who the applicant is and aspires to be fits well with the Ross mission. In addition to having the appropriate level of intellectual capability, the applicant must exhibit attributes that are consistent with our culture, which is team-oriented and collaborative. If you're a person who prefers to work and excel on your own or generally just don't perform well in teams, then it's a major red flag for us. We also look for passion. That is a real desire to go out and make a difference. It's most impressive when an applicant communicates that she has the skills and motivation to pursue her dreams and she truly understands how Ross fits into that picture. So, it's important that the applicant truly understand what a school is all about and evaluate what role she might play in supporting that school's mission. Would you encourage applicants to reach out to and spend time with current students so that they can get a better sense of a school's culture? Absolutely. Students are the best reflection of what it's like to go to school here. Getting students' perspectives on the school's culture can definitely give applicants a good idea of what day-to-day life is like. How do you evaluate recommendations? Aren't all recommendations glowing? In recommendations we're looking to see whether the applicant truly is who she claims to be. We're looking for consistency. One thing we stress is for recommenders to provide specific examples. It's not enough for recommenders to simply say that an applicant performs at a high level. We want to know exactly what the applicant has done to merit such high praise. Anecdotes, tangible results, and specifics go a long way. It also helps to see how the applicant really goes above and beyond. It shows that the applicant is passionate about her work and is inclined to contribute a

great deal in the future. You would be surprised how many poor recommendations we receive. Some recommendations have maybe five lines and answer each question with one sentence. Obviously this type of recommendation does not send a positive signal with respect to the applicant's candidacy. Some recommendations might look positive at initial glance, but a closer read reveals veiled criticisms. It's interesting to me that that the applicant would not have picked up on the nature of the relationship before requesting a recommendation. That, in and of itself, is a signal. How then would you recommend that applicants manage their recommenders? We recommend that the applicant sit down with his recommender, explain that he is thinking about going to business school, explain why, and then discuss his intended career track and why. Moreover, the applicant can spend some time talking to the recommender about their working relationship and what he's accomplished through time. There is a fine line, however, as applicants have to be careful not to start coaching their recommenders and providing them with too many specifics. Because we require two recommendations, if both cite the same exact specifics then we question whether the recommenders have been coached on exactly what to say about the applicant. What is one of the top mistakes that applicants tend to make? One of the major mistakes is not clearly laying out what the applicant wants to do from a career standpoint and then laying out where the business school fits into the picture. A lot of applicants just apply to business school without taking the appropriate time to reflect on their career goals and on where we fit into the plan. For many, it just feels like the next natural step. Successful applicants tend to be much more reflective and consider the pursuit of an MBA as significant turning point in their lives. We want applicants to treat the application process with that level of significance. So we ask, "Why is an MBA from Ross necessary for this applicant?" We check to see whether the applicant has really researched us or whether she is simply applying to all of the top-ten schools and saying the same thing to all of them. If that's the case then we tend to discount the probability that you will really take advantage of all the different opportunities that we offer here. These opportunities would be wasted on someone who is looking to merely check the MBA off her list, so we tend to avoid box-checkers. We want applicants who are really going to come and embrace everything that is available. So, what level of specificity is adequate when discussing career goals? I would say as specific as is honest. We recognize that most students won't go on to do exactly what they discuss in their essays. What we're looking at is the applicant's thought process. We want to get into the applicant's head and heart to understand their motivations and what drives them. If the career goals are well thought out and make sense in the context of what we offer as a school, then the applicant is on the right track. We definitely don't want people to offer up career goals that simply sound good or are trendy. Rather, we want to see that they've spent some time researching their options, have made an initial choice and can defend it as a viable career objective. Certainly the more specifics the applicant can give, the more interesting an essay or discussion will likely result. How would you recommend that applicants that come from traditional "feeder" industries (for example, consulting and investment banking) differentiate themselves? In addition to academic and professional track record, we look at extracurricular

activities. Extracurriculars such as community service, international experiences, entrepreneurial ventures, or activities related to sustainable development can be great indicators that the applicant would be a good match and we have evidence that the applicant would get involved with activities here on campus. Additionally, it provides us with some comfort that the applicant will be a good Ross alum even after they've graduated.

Are there major mistakes that you see among international applicants? Oftentimes, we receive a number of applications that are virtually identical in terms of academic and professional experiences to international applicants. While it differs a bit from region to region, it's critical that the international applicant understand that the application process requires so much more than simply a high GMAT score or an impressive resume. At a certain point, you know the applicant is smart, but so are the next 200 applicants from their country, so you have to go beyond that to differentiate yourself. We're trying to achieve diversity here; not just in gender, ethnicity, geographical region and professional background, but also diversity in thinking. The last one is important, because we expect that each student will bring a slightly different perspective to the table. If an applicant sounds like hundreds of others, there isn't much of a reason to bring him in, even if his scores are off the chart. We know that diversity of thought can have a powerful impact on the ability to learn, so we are very careful to evaluate that and it's critical that applicants consider how they're different and what they will bring, as unique individuals, to the table.

What does it take for an undergraduate applicant to be successful? In all of our applicants, we look for people who can make significant contributions to classroom discussions as well as to team-based assignments. As such, for an undergraduate applicant to obtain admission to Ross, he really needs to have outperformed his peers not only academically, but also in extracurriculars and hopefully also in business. The applicant may have started his own business or played a starring role in significant internships. No matter what it is, the applicant must be capable of significant contributions such that his classmates truly benefit from his presence on campus.

What makes for a great essay? Great essays are the ones where you can see an applicant behind the words. After reading 500 words, if you feel as though you've really gotten to know the applicant a little bit better, then it's a successful essay. Whether there is heart, humor, or an experience that is different, a good essay is memorable and interesting. It doesn't need to be poetic or overly eloquent, but we do want to know that there's a human with interests and passions behind it.

How important is the interview? It's another dimension that we use to characterize the applicant. The interview is a great opportunity to assess the enthusiasm of the applicant. It's relatively easy to assess characteristics such as energy level, body language, eye contact, and knowledge about the school. So, it definitely helps give us a sense of fit. It helps us to understand whether this is the kind of person who will work well on a team and think on her feet. But, it's not typically the aspect of the application that makes or breaks a person. We have non-admitted applicants call all the time requesting to re-interview, but it's rare that the interview is the only problem.

Any trends that you've seen among applicants that concern you? Yes, it appears that there some applicants who are using essay consultants who actually write essays on behalf of applicants. And it's plainly



obvious in many cases. With some international applicants, in particular, when you compare the GMAT writing samples to the essays, it's clear that they've crossed the line in terms of having someone else do the writing for them. I've seen essays on par with something that could be found in *The New Yorker* and it's such a red flag. I mean, I don't even think our staff could write as eloquently as some of these essays. We don't expect that essays read like Hemingway's work, but they should be authentic. It's almost refreshing to read essays from an international applicant that are flawed here or there, rather than some of the fake submissions that cross our path. We want to hear from applicants themselves and hear their voices. Any other parting thoughts? I'd love to get people to write so that we can really get to know them. When you're reading thousands of applications, it's refreshing to get the ones that come to life in your hands. You think, wow it would be great to have this person here, because I can see that there is something about them that shows they would make a real contribution here and make great contributions after they leave.

**FAQs**  
How important is the strength of your undergraduate/graduate school's brand to the admissions committee? Overall, what you did in college and what you've done since then are more important than what school you went to. Still, business schools do take your college's brand name into consideration, especially when considering your grades. Some schools are known to pay more attention to this than others. However, this should not be a major consideration when you apply. For every Princeton and Yale grad prowling the halls of top business schools, there is also a student from a lesser-known school. All schools love to brag about the number of undergraduate institutions that are represented by their classes (the numbers generally range from 80 to 200). You definitely shouldn't spend all of your time trying to sell your school if it is not a well-known one. You should, however, be able to explain why you decided to attend the schools listed on your transcripts and discuss their merits. Beyond that, however, keep the focus on you. At the same time, if you did go to a college with a great reputation, don't rest on your laurels and expect to gain admission based on reputation alone. It's an asset, but one that will quickly fall by the wayside if your other application components are mediocre.

What if I have been laid off from my job? First of all, don't panic! Getting laid off does not squash your chances of getting into a top business school. There are several things that you need to do. Most importantly, you need to convince the admissions committee that you're not simply applying to business school because you're out of work and have no better option. If admissions officers sense that this is the case, then you will have squashed your chances. You can combat this perception by highlighting your career goals and how business school fits into the picture. Also, while you absolutely should not dwell on the fact that you were laid off, acknowledge that it happened and be prepared to explain why (hopefully it's something out of your control), and move on. Admissions officers understand that even great employees sometimes lose their jobs. Also, you will need to work extra hard to weave professional success stories throughout your application, to make it clear that you are a "winner" who just happened to get caught up in bad circumstances. Recommendations are especially important here, particularly if they come from your ex-boss who regrettably had to let you go. Showing that you

were a positive contributor and that you left on good terms will help a great deal. Finally, show that you've been productive in your time off. A Tuck admissions officer once commented that she couldn't believe how some laid-off applicants were content to do nothing for a year. Even things outside of your career such as pro-bono work or volunteering can show that you're not someone who's content to just sit back and take it when life deals you a bad hand.<sup>2</sup>

### The Four Dimensions of a Perfect Applicant

Becoming the perfect business school candidate is as much an exercise in understanding and cultivating your relative strengths as it is in identifying and addressing your relative weaknesses. We all have strengths. The main challenge is to reveal your strengths in your applications and convince admissions officers that those strengths aren't outweighed by your weaknesses. For every Superman there is a kryptonite. For every applicant there is a weakness. That's okay! This is the first reality that must be understood as you develop your position and become the "perfect applicant." Remember: A 780 on the GMAT does not blind admissions officers to generic career goals any more than a great stereo system makes up for a car that's missing an engine. To avoid this type of imbalance, you must express all four dimensions that every business school looks for:

#### Leadership

Probably more than anything else, business schools want to be known as institutions that produce leaders in their fields. Admissions committees are therefore in search of applicants who display leadership ability in all facets of their lives. This doesn't mean that you need to have served as a captain in the Army or have started three new nonprofit organizations. Candidates who successfully demonstrate leadership in their applications exhibit how they have provided others with direction, shown initiative, and managed difficult situations in their professional, personal, and academic careers. And, above all, they need to show how they have made a positive impact on the organization and community around them. It is not enough to merely state that you are a leader; you must provide examples of demonstrated leadership. Ultimately, the admissions committee should identify you as a high potential leader because of supporting details rather than overt statements. A good rule of thumb is "Show, don't tell."

#### Innovation

Innovation is a combination of traditional intellectual ability and creativity. Naturally, the former is reflected in the "hard" statistics such as your GMAT score and grade point average, but admissions committee members also look for the latter. Applicants who are visionaries are generally successful in establishing the trait of innovation. Innovation, in this case, can be as simple as finding a new solution to an everyday business problem. Past behavior is a terrific predictor of one's future behavior in similar settings, and admissions officers look for applicants they can envision doing bold, new things down the road. Stories that demonstrate this sort of professional creativity will help your cause here.

#### Teamwork

The success that Kellogg has had with integrating teamwork throughout its curriculum has spread through time to the other top business schools. Kellogg's success with a team-oriented curriculum has been supported by the way in which most companies now operate. Because companies utilize teams for virtually all of their functions, business schools are in search of applicants with strong team skills. A team-oriented attitude is now a baseline expectation of every applicant. This includes basic social skills and a willingness to share

successes and take accountability for failures. Though top business schools are certainly known for being competitive environments, operating in teams has become an integral part of conducting business, and as such is a key aspect of the business school experience. Maturity Work experience has become a vital part of candidates' applications. On average, admitted applicants to the top business schools have almost five years of full-time work experience. Although some top programs have made a deliberate effort to admit more people right out of college during the past several years (most notably Harvard Business School, with its HBS 2+2 Program), this remains the exception and not the rule. More important than the length of one's work experience, however, is the quality and depth of that experience. Top business schools are in search of candidates with multilayered experiences inside and outside of the workplace. An important aspect of the business school experience is that students teach one another based on their backgrounds. It is often said that everyone at business school, including faculty, is both a teacher and a student. Admissions committees therefore try to identify "mature" candidates who display professional maturity and integrity throughout their applications. As an applicant, your goal should be to weave each of these dimensions throughout all of the application components. In general, application components consist of: Data sheets. Essays. Recommendations. Resume. Transcript. Interview. In Chapter 4, we will step through each of these components in detail and show ways in which successful applicants have expressed the four dimensions. To help you gauge how well your profile supports these dimensions, you should take an inventory of your activities and achievements. This will allow you to identify your strengths and weaknesses and address them accordingly. Activities and achievements that typically support the four dimensions include the following: Community Service Through time, community service has evolved from a nice-to-have to a must-have on the application. During feedback sessions with rejected applicants, admissions committee members frequently mention that they wish they had seen more in the way of community involvement. It should be stressed, however, that this is a quality (not quantity) activity. You shouldn't merely write down every humanitarian act that you've ever performed. Nor should you try to join half a dozen community service organizations six months before applying to desperately demonstrate that you have a heart. Rather, it is important to show that you have aspirations of helping society as a whole and not just your personal bank account. Your goal should be to demonstrate deep impact through a few activities, not broad impact across many. Community service is a great way to express all four of the dimensions that you will need to demonstrate in your application, but it can especially be powerful in communicating maturity and leadership abilities. GMAT Score Although your GMAT score alone will never get you into a business school, it certainly can keep you out. As a general rule, if your score falls below a school's middle-80-percent range of scores, you will have to overcome long odds in order to be considered a contender. On the flip side, a GMAT score close to a school's mean indicates that you have the intellectual horsepower to excel in the business school classroom. Naturally, achieving a strong score on the GMAT gives you points in the innovation department. To avoid having to overcome a low score, you should review our

section on the GMAT in Chapter 4. In that chapter we also answer the question of whether you should take the GMAT or the GRE, which many top MBA programs also now accept.

**Hobbies and Extracurricular Activities** Any hobby that can support one of the dimensions or give the admissions committee insight into your personality is worth mentioning. At the end of the day, business schools are looking to admit people, not numbers, and discussing hobbies is a great way to differentiate yourself from the competition. These activities can also display your strengths in areas such as teamwork and innovation. As such, it isn't really important what the hobby is, but rather what the hobby says about you as an applicant. Do you like fly fishing? Great. Now tell the admissions committee why. Your target business schools are more interested in the reason than you might realize.

**International and Cultural Exposure** As the trend of globalization continues and the world gets smaller, business schools want applicants who will have global impact. Use every part of the application as a platform to highlight your foreign language skills, multi-national experiences, and cultural awareness. Examples of this can be as grandiose as leading a business unit through a global merger across three continents, or as simple as working with a group of individuals with diverse professional and educational backgrounds. In general, including international or cultural experiences displays a willingness to operate outside of your comfort zone. In this way, it will help you to support the maturity and teamwork dimensions.

**Professional Experience** For most applicants, professional experience will be the primary driver of the application. It is what admissions officers care about most of all (what better way to judge how successful you will be 20 years from now?), and it will permeate your essays, recommendations, interviews, and resumes. Because it has such wideranging usage, it should be utilized to support all four dimensions.

**Undergraduate and Graduate Transcripts** Although your undergraduate and graduate transcripts can't be altered, you can emphasize different aspects of them to support your position. Perhaps you took myriad courses outside of your major during undergrad. You could use that multi-discipline approach to support your desire to attend a business school that focuses on general management. Naturally, a high grade point average (GPA) helps to support the innovation dimension and indicates your ability to succeed in a rigorous academic environment. A low GPA can be overcome, to a point, with a terrific GMAT score and successful post-college coursework.

**Analyzing Your Strengths and Weaknesses** Odds are, you have some notable strengths that will make you a solid student and worthy contributor in business school, but you also have some weaknesses that might keep you out of your ideal school if they go unaddressed. That puts you in a pool that includes probably 99 percent of all business school applicants. This section will show you how to systematically identify and capitalize on your strengths while rooting out and neutralizing your weaknesses.

**The Grid** Surprisingly, many applicants don't spend any time analyzing or even just writing down their strengths and weaknesses. This might seem like a trivial task—especially because you know yourself better than anyone—but remember that your goal is to sell yourself to someone whose only contact with you is through your application and possibly a 30-minute interview. Therefore, you need to organize your thoughts and make sure that you know exactly what traits you will

emphasize for the admissions committee. It helps to start by drawing out the four dimensions and activity/achievement categories in a grid, like the one here: Figure 2.1 Next, list your activities and achievements, according to the categories, that bring out one or more of the dimensions. This process shouldn't happen in one 10-minute session. Rather, it will likely take a few minutes here and there as other activities and achievements come to mind. Ideally you can give yourself days or even weeks to make this happen. Some things to think about when you are looking into your past are: In what extracurricular activities did you participate while in college? For what did you volunteer? To what positions were you elected? How have you gotten involved in your community since graduating from college? What have you enjoyed about these experiences? What have you learned that you didn't learn in school or on the job? What do you like to do in your spare time? What do you enjoy about each of these things? How have they helped you gain a new perspective or exercise your creative side? Where have you traveled? What languages do you know? What have you learned from your friends of different backgrounds? What have you done on the job that might exhibit one or more of the four desired dimensions? Did you lead a team, identify a problem and find a creative solution, deal with a problematic coworker, and achieve a goal that no one thought was possible? What about your undergraduate academic experience might stand out? Did you study abroad or develop your own independent study? Did you dedicate yourself to one academic field, or did you pursue multiple interests? What awards did you receive? Start by being fairly generous with yourself. Put everything that comes to mind in the grid. You can pare down the overlaps and the weaker examples later. Also, you may have participated in some activities that don't fit neatly into any of the previously mentioned categories. As long as they help bring out one of the four main dimensions that you want to demonstrate, include them. You can create a catch-all "other" category if needed. When you are done, your grid may look like an expanded version of this: Figure 2.2 Note that you will likely have more Xs in some categories than in others. That's perfectly fine. The idea is not to have a completely full grid, but rather to use the grid as a tool for visualizing what your strengths and weaknesses are. Hopefully, your activities and achievements will complement each other and help fill in each column of the table to some degree, but don't worry if this doesn't happen when you first fill it out. Also note that some activities may only demonstrate one dimension while others may demonstrate three or four of them. That doesn't mean that the former is less valuable than the latter. Keep in mind that the most important thing is to adequately demonstrate all four desired dimensions. An activity that provides your only strong example of leadership may end up being the most important piece of your application story, rather than an example that shows that you demonstrated all four dimensions moderately well. After you are confident that you have covered everything in your background that is relevant to your application, start to trim the list if needed. If you have 10 examples that demonstrate teamwork, try to evaluate them through an admissions officer's eyes and rank them from most important to least important. The question you should ask yourself in order to rank them should be: "How effectively does this achievement or activity demonstrate what I am trying to show?" It's tempting to include glamorous examples

over more common ones, but being one small part of a CEO's task force on cost-cutting may do less to show off your traits than having led the solution of a tough problem within your own department. Also look for activities and achievements that overlap. If you have done four things that all demonstrate leadership and maturity, you won't need to mention all four of them in your application. Just one or two will do.

### What to Do About Your Weaknesses

In the event that you look at one row or column of your grid and see a lot of white space, don't panic! Most applicants will encounter this challenge. Remember that the table isn't the end, but rather it is the means for identifying what you might need to work on while you build your application. Following are some areas where applicants typically have some holes in their grids, and some ideas for bolstering your position in each.

### Community Service

Not everyone has done a lot of community service, and it can be tempting to want to volunteer for five nonprofit organizations in the months leading up to your application deadline. Admissions committees can see right through this, however, so don't waste your time in a last-ditch attempt to look "involved." If you simply do not have any community service activities to point to, look for other activities in your background that will demonstrate similar characteristics. Starting a volleyball club at the local gym won't solve world hunger, but it still shows that you like to get involved and can motivate others to do the same. If you find that your application still lacks the altruistic angle that a community service activity might demonstrate, then be sure to bring out your human side in other ways, such as more subtle examples of how you helped a family member or someone on the job solve a problem. The bottom line is that you want to show that you like to get involved in the community around you, and that you are more than a GMAT score and fancy resume. If you still have time before you begin the application process, be on the lookout for community service opportunities. Mentoring programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters are great ways to show your willingness to give back to the community. Just remember that the key is to make a strong impact in one or two areas, not to simply sign up for half a dozen activities. That single word—impact—should be your guiding light. Activities that give you the opportunity to say "That would not have happened if I hadn't been there" are the most powerful examples of all.

### Another way to think of community service is as a powerful way to complement your work experience. If you haven't had many opportunities to lead a team at work, for example, then showing how you did so as part of a volunteer organization is a great way to demonstrate leadership abilities. MBA admissions officers know that most applicants are young and may still have somewhat limited work experience, so they're adept at scouring your entire background for evidence of high potential. This doesn't only apply to leadership examples; community involvement, though most often associated with leadership and a desire to make the world better, can give you opportunities to demonstrate all four of the key applicant dimensions.

### GMAT Score

The good news about the GMAT (or GRE, for those schools that accept it) is that it is one of the few achievements that you can work on and improve in a short amount of time (compared to community service or an undergraduate transcript from five years ago). The bad news is that some applicants can spend months studying for it and still fall short of their goal. If your GMAT score makes you look weak in

the quantitative or verbal departments, be sure to bring out other examples in your application that will counterbalance these weaknesses. If your quantitative score is low, highlight any tough analytical courses that you took as an undergrad. Or show how you use your quantitative skills to unravel tough problems on the job, or even as part of a volunteer opportunity in which you participated. Remember that demonstrating an analytical skill set doesn't have to mean showing that you know calculus. There are practical, everyday activities that can help you demonstrate your ability to break down a problem or your comfort with using numbers to make decisions. The bottom line is that you just need to show that you won't be helpless two weeks into your first-year finance course. If your verbal score is low, then you will need to work extra hard to highlight your communication skills. You can do this through your essays and your interviews. Keep in mind that admissions officers will be suspicious of someone with poorly written Analytical Writing Assessment (AWA) essays on the GMAT, but terrific application essays; that kind of application is often covered with fingerprints from a professional editor or admissions consultant. Remember that getting some help is okay, but the application you submit must be your own work. You can also enlist support from your recommenders to address weaknesses in both the quantitative and/or verbal section. They may be able to provide examples that offset some of the concerns that your GMAT score raises. If your undergraduate transcript and your job don't help, consider enrolling in a statistics, finance, public speaking, or accounting course in a local community college. This shows a dedication to education and will impress the admissions committees. Many business schools are happy to suggest what kinds of courses they would consider as useful preparation for their programs.

#### Hobbies and Extracurricular Activities

This is usually the part of the application that gives applicants the least amount of trouble, as most of us have enough interests to keep us busy outside of school or work. Look at how your hobbies relate to your other activities, and they hopefully will provide a well-rounded picture of you as a person. If you already have the four desired dimensions covered reasonably well by your other activities and achievements, then use your hobbies as a way to provide a little extra depth and color to your application. Even seemingly silly or frivolous hobbies and interests can help in this way. If your hobbies truly don't add anything new, then de-emphasize them and let the other parts of your application stand on their own.

#### International and Cultural Exposure

For many people, this is a clear-cut, have-or-don't-have issue. If you haven't worked, studied, or traveled abroad, don't despair. Business schools like to see experience in this area, but realize that not everyone has had a chance to see the world. If this is the case for you, be sure to emphasize the success that you have had in working with people of various backgrounds or even different points of view from your own. Even two people from the same school who work for the same company have a lot of differences between them. Show how you have overcome these differences to build success, and, even more importantly, demonstrate that you value these opportunities to grow and push yourself outside of your normal comfort zone. The more easily admissions officers can envision you successfully working on a study team with four other people from four different countries, the better your chances will be.

#### Professional

Experience People who worry about their professional experience are usually concerned with either the quality or quantity of the work that they have done. If you are worried about the amount of work experience that you have, take comfort in the fact that many business schools are actually pursuing younger applicants. They will still be interested in you as long as you have demonstrated success on the job, increasing responsibility in your assignments, and a true understanding of what an MBA can do for you. If you are still an undergrad and are looking to go right into business school, your best chances of demonstrating leadership and maturity will be in your extracurricular activities and anything else where you took charge and made something happen outside of the classroom. Ultimately, though no applicant wants to hear “Wait till next year,” the quantity problem can be solved by simply waiting another year or two before you apply. Or, if you apply and are rejected, you can apply again after gaining a couple of years’ worth of terrific new experiences. On the flip side, particularly as some top schools take an interest in younger applicants, there is such a thing as too much work experience. There’s no cut-off in terms of years of experience, and every school will take great pains to point out that a couple of students in its entering class are pushing 40 years of age, but anyone with more than seven or eight years of work experience will invite questions along the lines of “Why are you only applying now? What took you so long to discover that this is what you want to do next in your career?” No school will judge you based solely on your age, but if you strike admissions officers as someone who’s applying now just because his or her career is stagnating, then your chances of success will be low. Or, the school may decide that a part-time or executive MBA is ultimately a better fit for you. Quality issues around work experience can be tough, but these can be overcome, at least in part, with your other application components. Do you feel as though your career is starting to plateau? Think about why this has happened and how an MBA will help you address the issue. Maybe your career progress has slowed because you lack important managerial skills that an MBA will give you. The important thing, in this case, is to demonstrate that your lack of upward mobility does not correspond to a lack of ambition or aptitude for success. Does your work not seem interesting or exciting enough? Don’t worry too much about this issue, as business schools love people from a variety of backgrounds. Being a foreman at a corrugated box factory may seem dull to you, but if you can highlight what you have learned about business on the job—and what you still have to learn—then you can make a strong case for yourself. Some applicants have holes in their work records, as they took sabbaticals to travel, to care for a sick loved one, or to simply try new things. As long as you have a legitimate reason for such a hole and can convince the admissions committee that you are indeed ambitious and committed to studying business, they will appreciate the unique perspectives that these experiences will give you. It is always better to hit these holes head-on than to try to hide them and hope admissions officers don’t notice them. Undergraduate and Graduate Transcripts If your transcript shows weakness, don’t worry. Not all “weak” transcripts are equally bad, and there are some things you can do to help yourself. A Stanford admissions officer once said about transcripts, “We’re forgiving of slow starts, but not as forgiving of slow finishes.” Most business



schools have the same attitude. If you got off to a rough start your freshman year but showed steady improvement while in college, then you are probably in good shape. Admissions officers aren't itching to reject you because of a bad choice you made while you were still a teenager. They like to see that you got more serious about your work and were able to turn the academic tide. If you were consistently poor or did worse as time went on, however, your challenge will be to convince the admissions committee that you're serious about academics and have the brainpower to succeed in business school. The former can be accomplished in your essays, where you will discuss what it is that you expect to get out of an MBA curriculum. The latter can be made up for by the GMAT or, if that is also weak, by earning strong grades in part-time courses at a local school. Your transcript(s) may also be weak because you were simply too involved in extracurricular activities as an undergrad. Use this opportunity to turn a weakness into a strength by demonstrating your commitment and initiative at your undergraduate school, and making the case for why you will be equally involved in business school. You must balance that out, however, with a demonstrated understanding of the importance of academics in business school. In other words, you should try and convince the admissions counselors that you will get the school/ activities mix right this time around.

#### Final Word on Strengths and Weaknesses

In general, a winning application strategy counteracts your perceived weaknesses with examples that show your strengths in those same (or similar) areas. The more that each part of your application can naturally complement and support the other pieces, the better off you will be. Some applicants will use the extra essay—which many schools provide as an option in their applications—to directly address a weakness such as a low GMAT score or undergraduate GPA. This is fine, but think of it as a last resort. One risk of devoting an entire essay to a weakness is that it highlights the very issue that you're trying to neutralize. There are times when the extra essay does help, however, and we will discuss these types of situations more in Chapter 4.

#### A Conversation With Soojin Kwon Koh

Soojin Kwon Koh is the Director of Admissions and Financial Aid at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business. Consistently ranked as one of the top-10 business schools in the United States, Ross is often acknowledged for its innovative curriculum and for turning out some of the most sought after business school graduates in the world. We checked in with Soojin to get her perspectives on the application process and advice on what applicants can do to improve their chances of gaining acceptance to the top business schools.

#### What's your take on the GMAT? Why is it important?

In general the application review process is all about adding dimension to what is an inherently two-dimensional evaluation. The GMAT is one of the primary factors we use to predict an applicant's propensity to perform well in the academic program. I don't think that it's necessarily a good predictor of how well an applicant will do in the career of her choosing, but in addition to the GPA, it does help to quantify intellectual capacity. It also allows many applicants to make up for less-than-stellar GPAs. Lastly, as a standardized measure, it puts applicants on similar footing, whereas GPAs come with a certain amount of bias depending on the undergraduate curriculum. For applicants who have a relatively low GMAT, what do they have to

do to at least be considered? Strong work experience and undergraduate GPA help. Strong essays really make a difference. We also take a close look at the applicant's career goals and reasons for wanting to pursue an MBA. Does the applicant have clear reasons for wanting to get an MBA? Does he have a clear thought process? Has he demonstrated passion for pursuing an MBA at Ross? These three attributes can help put an applicant into the running. It does make the process a bit easier though when the applicant at least scores within the range of traditionally accepted applicants. What does it mean to evaluate an applicant for fit? Every school probably evaluates fit a little differently. We're looking to confirm that who the applicant is and aspires to be fits well with the Ross mission. In addition to having the appropriate level of intellectual capability, the applicant must exhibit attributes that are consistent with our culture, which is team-oriented and collaborative. If you're a person who prefers to work and excel on your own or generally just don't perform well in teams, then it's a major red flag for us. We also look for passion. That is a real desire to go out and make a difference. It's most impressive when an applicant communicates that she has the skills and motivation to pursue her dreams and she truly understands how Ross fits into that picture. So, it's important that the applicant truly understand what a school is all about and evaluate what role she might play in supporting that school's mission. Would you encourage applicants to reach out to and spend time with current students so that they can get a better sense of a school's culture? Absolutely. Students are the best reflection of what it's like to go to school here. Getting students' perspectives on the school's culture can definitely give applicants a good idea of what day-to-day life is like. How do you evaluate recommendations? Aren't all recommendations glowing? In recommendations we're looking to see whether the applicant truly is who she claims to be. We're looking for consistency. One thing we stress is for recommenders to provide specific examples. It's not enough for recommenders to simply say that an applicant performs at a high level. We want to know exactly what the applicant has done to merit such high praise. Anecdotes, tangible results, and specifics go a long way. It also helps to see how the applicant really goes above and beyond. It shows that the applicant is passionate about her work and is inclined to contribute a great deal in the future. You would be surprised how many poor recommendations we receive. Some recommendations have maybe five lines and answer each question with one sentence. Obviously this type of recommendation does not send a positive signal with respect to the applicant's candidacy. Some recommendations might look positive at initial glance, but a closer read reveals veiled criticisms. It's interesting to me that that the applicant would not have picked up on the nature of the relationship before requesting a recommendation. That, in and of itself, is a signal. How then would you recommend that applicants manage their recommenders? We recommend that the applicant sit down with his recommender, explain that he is thinking about going to business school, explain why, and then discuss his intended career track and why. Moreover, the applicant can spend some time talking to the recommender about their working relationship and what he's accomplished through time. There is a fine line, however, as applicants have to be careful not to start coaching their recommenders and providing them with

too many specifics. Because we require two recommendations, if both cite the same exact specifics then we question whether the recommenders have been coached on exactly what to say about the applicant. What is one of the top mistakes that applicants tend to make? One of the major mistakes is not clearly laying out what the applicant wants to do from a career standpoint and then laying out where the business school fits into the picture. A lot of applicants just apply to business school without taking the appropriate time to reflect on their career goals and on where we fit into the plan. For many, it just feels like the next natural step. Successful applicants tend to be much more reflective and consider the pursuit of an MBA as significant turning point in their lives. We want applicants to treat the application process with that level of significance. So we ask, "Why is an MBA from Ross necessary for this applicant?" We check to see whether the applicant has really researched us or whether she is simply applying to all of the top-ten schools and saying the same thing to all of them. If that's the case then we tend to discount the probability that you will really take advantage of all the different opportunities that we offer here. These opportunities would be wasted on someone who is looking to merely check the MBA off her list, so we tend to avoid box-checkers. We want applicants who are really going to come and embrace everything that is available. So, what level of specificity is adequate when discussing career goals? I would say as specific as is honest. We recognize that most students won't go on to do exactly what they discuss in their essays. What we're looking at is the applicant's thought process. We want to get into the applicant's head and heart to understand their motivations and what drives them. If the career goals are well thought out and make sense in the context of what we offer as a school, then the applicant is on the right track. We definitely don't want people to offer up career goals that simply sound good or are trendy. Rather, we want to see that they've spent some time researching their options, have made an initial choice and can defend it as a viable career objective. Certainly the more specifics the applicant can give, the more interesting an essay or discussion will likely result. How would you recommend that applicants that come from traditional "feeder" industries (for example, consulting and investment banking) differentiate themselves? In addition to academic and professional track record, we look at extracurricular activities. Extracurriculars such as community service, international experiences, entrepreneurial ventures, or activities related to sustainable development can be great indicators that the applicant would be a good match and we have evidence that the applicant would get involved with activities here on campus. Additionally, it provides us with some comfort that the applicant will be a good Ross alum even after they've graduated. Are there major mistakes that you see among international applicants? Oftentimes, we receive a number of applications that are virtually identical in terms of academic and professional experiences to international applicants. While it differs a bit from region to region, it's critical that the international applicant understand that the application process requires so much more than simply a high GMAT score or an impressive resume. At a certain point, you know the applicant is smart, but so are the next 200 applicants from their country, so you have to go beyond that to differentiate yourself. We're trying to achieve diversity here; not just in gender, ethnicity, geographical region and professional

background, but also diversity in thinking. The last one is important, because we expect that each student will bring a slightly different perspective to the table. If an applicant sounds like hundreds of others, there isn't much of a reason to bring him in, even if his scores are off the chart. We know that diversity of thought can have a powerful impact on the ability to learn, so we are very careful to evaluate that and it's critical that applicants consider how they're different and what they will bring, as unique individuals, to the table.

What does it take for an undergraduate applicant to be successful? In all of our applicants, we look for people who can make significant contributions to classroom discussions as well as to team-based assignments. As such, for an undergraduate applicant to obtain admission to Ross, he really needs to have outperformed his peers not only academically, but also in extracurriculars and hopefully also in business. The applicant may have started his own business or played a starring role in significant internships. No matter what it is, the applicant must be capable of significant contributions such that his classmates truly benefit from his presence on campus.

What makes for a great essay? Great essays are the ones where you can see an applicant behind the words. After reading 500 words, if you feel as though you've really gotten to know the applicant a little bit better, then it's a successful essay. Whether there is heart, humor, or an experience that is different, a good essay is memorable and interesting. It doesn't need to be poetic or overly eloquent, but we do want to know that there's a human with interests and passions behind it.

How important is the interview? It's another dimension that we use to characterize the applicant. The interview is a great opportunity to assess the enthusiasm of the applicant. It's relatively easy to assess characteristics such as energy level, body language, eye contact, and knowledge about the school. So, it definitely helps give us a sense of fit. It helps us to understand whether this is the kind of person who will work well on a team and think on her feet. But, it's not typically the aspect of the application that makes or breaks a person. We have non-admitted applicants call all the time requesting to re-interview, but it's rare that the interview is the only problem.

Any trends that you've seen among applicants that concern you? Yes, it appears that there some applicants who are using essay consultants who actually write essays on behalf of applicants. And it's plainly obvious in many cases. With some international applicants, in particular, when you compare the GMAT writing samples to the essays, it's clear that they've crossed the line in terms of having someone else do the writing for them. I've seen essays on par with something that could be found in *The New Yorker* and it's such a red flag. I mean, I don't even think our staff could write as eloquently as some of these essays. We don't expect that essays read like Hemingway's work, but they should be authentic. It's almost refreshing to read essays from an international applicant that are flawed here or there, rather than some of the fake submissions that cross our path. We want to hear from applicants themselves and hear their voices.

Any other parting thoughts? I'd love to get people to write so that we can really get to know them. When you're reading thousands of applications, it's refreshing to get the ones that come to life in your hands. You think, wow it would be great to have this person here, because I can see that there is something about them that shows they would make a real contribution here and make great

contributions after they leave.

### FAQs

How important is the strength of your undergraduate/graduate school's brand to the admissions committee? Overall, what you did in college and what you've done since then are more important than what school you went to. Still, business schools do take your college's brand name into consideration, especially when considering your grades. Some schools are known to pay more attention to this than others. However, this should not be a major consideration when you apply. For every Princeton and Yale grad prowling the halls of top business schools, there is also a student from a lesser-known school. All schools love to brag about the number of undergraduate institutions that are represented by their classes (the numbers generally range from 80 to 200). You definitely shouldn't spend all of your time trying to sell your school if it is not a well-known one. You should, however, be able to explain why you decided to attend the schools listed on your transcripts and discuss their merits. Beyond that, however, keep the focus on you. At the same time, if you did go to a college with a great reputation, don't rest on your laurels and expect to gain admission based on reputation alone. It's an asset, but one that will quickly fall by the wayside if your other application components are mediocre.

### What if I have been laid off from my job?

First of all, don't panic! Getting laid off does not squash your chances of getting into a top business school. There are several things that you need to do. Most importantly, you need to convince the admissions committee that you're not simply applying to business school because you're out of work and have no better option. If admissions officers sense that this is the case, then you will have squashed your chances. You can combat this perception by highlighting your career goals and how business school fits into the picture. Also, while you absolutely should not dwell on the fact that you were laid off, acknowledge that it happened and be prepared to explain why (hopefully it's something out of your control), and move on. Admissions officers understand that even great employees sometimes lose their jobs. Also, you will need to work extra hard to weave professional success stories throughout your application, to make it clear that you are a "winner" who just happened to get caught up in bad circumstances. Recommendations are especially important here, particularly if they come from your ex-boss who regrettably had to let you go. Showing that you were a positive contributor and that you left on good terms will help a great deal. Finally, show that you've been productive in your time off. A Tuck admissions officer once commented that she couldn't believe how some laid-off applicants were content to do nothing for a year. Even things outside of your career such as pro-bono work or volunteering can show that you're not someone who's content to just sit back and take it when life deals you a bad hand.

### 3 Applicant Profiles

What you communicate in your application will be largely dictated by who you are and where you want to go in your career. However, just as important in the eyes of business school admissions officers is where you have been. If you are an investment banker, for example, they will assume that you have more in common with other banking applicants than with military or nonprofit applicants. This means that, beyond what you tell admissions committees about yourself, they may assume that you have many of the traits (both positive and negative) that a typical banker has. It is your responsibility to be aware of these commonly held stereotypes and

to take advantage of the good ones while overcoming the bad ones. Although business schools rarely say so explicitly, it makes sense that your stiffest competition will come from those who are most like you. Schools don't necessarily operate off of hard quotas when admitting applicants with various professional backgrounds, but they can only take so many consultants—or so many accountants, scientists, international applicants, and so on—before their classes start to become homogenous. So, you will be compared to other applicants with backgrounds similar to yours, and your job will be to stand apart from these other applicants. This is a core part of any winning application game plan. This chapter will help you achieve this goal. We will examine 11 of the most common applicant profiles, highlight some perceived strengths and weaknesses for each, and discuss ways that an applicant with a given profile can set himself apart from others with the same background. Naturally, much of the advice that applies to one applicant profile may apply to another. Also, there's a good chance that you don't fit explicitly into one of these profiles. For example, many people who studied engineering in college go into management consulting or investment banking. Those applicants may need to think through the pros and cons of more than one profile. Still, getting a sense of how admissions counselors think about various profiles will help you in creating your differentiated position. We recommend using this chapter in conjunction with your strengths/weaknesses analysis from Chapter 2 to develop your application strategy. Above all else, your application needs to reflect who you are. Beyond that, use the material presented here to separate yourself from the pack. A special note for applicants from other countries, particularly those from Asia: During the past decade, the number of people in Asia (especially India and China) applying to top U.S. business schools has surged dramatically. This speaks volumes with respect to the growth in this part of the world and the important role that it will surely play in the coming decades. But, if you are one of these applicants, this means that the job of standing out from the pack has become much more difficult than it was just five years ago. We have expanded the "International" profile in this third edition of the book to address this important trend and to help applicants who fit this description. If you come from this part of the world, pay special attention to that particular section. Finally, one of the hottest topics among MBA admissions experts in recent years has been business schools' growing affection for younger applicants. Though many admissions officers will vehemently deny that they're trying to "get younger" or that there's such a thing as an applicant who's "too old," the writing is on the wall at some top business schools. In this third edition of this book, we take a close look at the the root cause of this trend, and we discuss how you can use this to your advantage if you are still in college or you have only been working for one or two years.

1. Consulting In many ways, consultants are made for business school. (Here we use the term consultant to refer not only to management consultants, but also those in other fields where their primary jobs involve project-based work for clients.) As a consultant, you most likely have a strong academic background, have had multiple experiences with myriad companies, and have finely tuned analytical and interpersonal skills. Additionally, you have direct access to a cadre of business school graduates through your firm, who serve as great advisors on the MBA

admissions process and the life of a business school student. Unfortunately, you will go up against thousands of other consultants who also are working hard to get into a top-ranked MBA program. As a result, it can be extremely difficult to differentiate yourself as a consultant. Consulting firms often have standardized analyst programs that “feed” business schools with applicants after they’ve had two or three years of experience. Through time, many business schools have become somewhat wary of these programs, because of their tendency to produce applicants who are simply looking to “get their ticket punched.” They therefore look closely for clues that you really understand what business school is about and that you have good reasons for wanting to be there. You can avoid the perception that you’re just trying to get your ticket punched by being explicit about how you intend to utilize an MBA to reach your career goals. By the way, returning to consulting is certainly a valid career goal. But if you do go down that path, you need to be sure to discuss how you see yourself having an impact on the organization. Do you see an opportunity to increase your clients’ revenues by implementing customer relationship management programs? Then discuss how you want to capitalize on this opportunity by studying the intersection of marketing and technology. Want to bring a more global viewpoint to your organization? Then show how international study opportunities at your target school will give you that viewpoint. The bottom line is that you have to provide tangible reasons for wanting to attend business school. In many ways, this is even more important for applicants who want to return to consulting than it is for those who plan on switching careers. Earning an MBA may very well be a logical next step for you, but your reasons for wanting one will need to go deeper than “All of the partners in my firm have an MBA.” One way to ensure that your message comes through clearly is by avoiding consultant jargon into your essays and interviews (and by encouraging your recommendation writers to do the same in the letters they write on your behalf). Many consultants have a tendency to write essays that are high-level and ambiguous. Admissions counselors comment that consultants often fail to adequately explain their specific actions on projects and the results of those actions. To the extent that you can quantify both, you will stand out from the pack. Take a close look at Chapter 4 for additional guidance on how to write and interview effectively. The average number of years of work experience at top business schools is approximately five, even as some top schools make a push to pursue younger applicants. Consultants, however, tend to apply to schools after only two to four years of experience. If you fall into this group, then you should expect to be questioned about it and should find ways to emphasize your maturity. One way to do that is by discussing activities in which you are involved outside of consulting. Because of the long hours associated with their profession, many applicants from consulting are unable to talk about anything that is unrelated to work. To the extent that you are able to weave activities outside of the consulting world into your story, you will create opportunities for yourself to show off your leadership abilities and maturity. Though you may be tempted to say “I can’t do any extracurricular activities because I’m so busy at work,” keep in mind that there are thousands of other consultants who do somehow manage to find the time to make a positive impact in their communities.<sup>2</sup>

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describes you, then you are what business schools and their students like to call a “poet.” Whether you were previously a teacher, psychologist, musician, writer, chef, artist, or anything else that falls into this category, you bring something to the applicant pool that few others do. The trick will be to appear different enough to be interesting, but not so different that admissions officers will suspect that you can’t hack it or fit in with your more business-minded peers. First of all, don’t let anyone tell you that you have no business applying. The fact that you want an MBA makes you qualified to apply. Whether or not you get in is up to the admissions officers who review your application, but the moves they’ve made in recent years—most notably, accepting the GRE General Test and introducing programs to try to sway more college seniors to consider business school—make it clear that they are very interested in working more creative types into their classes. When you describe your past experiences, don’t simply write or talk about what you did. Go a level deeper and talk about why you have done these things. For instance, a sculptor got into a top business school by describing the satisfaction he got from turning his ideas into something of substance. He then effectively tied it back to business, describing how he wanted to acquire the tools to do the same thing for business ideas. You don’t need to be this explicit in tying your background to business (especially if it will end up sounding forced), but try to think in this way as you develop your application game plan. Admissions officers will value you for the unique perspective you can bring to the classroom, but it’s up to you to show that you can connect the dots and apply your non-business experiences to business problems. Most schools look for leadership skills more than anything else, and odds are that you’ve had a chance to display these skills at some point in your life. The more recent, the better, but don’t be afraid to bring up examples of how you uniquely made a difference in a situation when you were younger. Don’t worry if the story has nothing to do with business; leadership examples are universal, and your application will be much stronger for it. Your letters of recommendation can be especially helpful here, especially if you can get people with business backgrounds to vouch for your leadership skills and business potential. Of course, business schools also look for a minimum level of quantitative skills, and this is one place where you won’t get the benefit of the doubt. You absolutely must produce a GMAT (or GRE) score within range of your target schools’ averages. Your best bet is to practice early and practice often, and give yourself enough time to take the exam more than once if needed. And plan on taking some pre-MBA courses in accounting and statistics before you apply. Doing so will demonstrate a sincere interest in earning an MBA, and answer questions in admissions officers’ minds about you possibly applying to school as a dilettante who has nothing better to do. Taking these courses early will allow you to sell them in your application.

3. Engineering and Science Engineers (here we will broadly use engineers to refer to anyone coming from a science, mathematics, or engineering background) typically have strong quantitative skills, and that is one reason why you will find a good number of engineers at any top business school. In fact, at least a third of most top business schools’ students come from engineering backgrounds. Being an engineer, however, you will find that you need to sell your interpersonal skills, and prove that you understand the “big picture” when it comes to



business. Few engineers ever fail to make the cut in business school admissions because of their quantitative abilities. Even if you don't have an amazing GMAT score, you should be able to point to your undergraduate degree and recent work experience as evidence of these skills. Even better, you will hopefully be able to demonstrate strong problem-solving skills by virtue of the work you've done. Even if your past experiences seem ho-hum to you, an admissions officer will be interested to hear how you solved an important problem, and why you went about it in the way that you did. A good example can be as mundane as improving the flow rate through a valve by 2 percent, or contributing to a small enhancement in the efficacy of a new drug. Being explicit about the significance of the problem—and which of your skills helped you arrive at the solution—will go a long way toward selling these abilities. Many business-minded engineers also enjoy the advantage of having a good overall story for why they want to earn an MBA. Whereas a consultant or an investment banker may have to spend a lot of time proving that she isn't just getting her ticket punched for a higher salary, you can craft a strong story about how you've mastered one discipline, and now you want to move on to achieve a broader view of how a business is run. Admissions officers will appreciate any evidence that you can provide that shows you understand the importance of the functions in a company outside of its research and development department. The stereotype that you will most likely have to overcome is in regard to your interpersonal skills. An admissions committee will look critically for evidence that you can reach goals that require you to work with others. Any teamwork examples that you can provide will help you a great deal here, particularly stories that demonstrate your ability to understand others' motivations and to deal with them constructively. These examples of empathy will go a long way toward showing your ability to grow into the role of a leader. You can also set yourself apart through extracurricular activities demonstrating your interests outside of the workplace. They can show your desire to actively seek out opportunities to make the world around you better, rather than simply waiting for an engineering problem to be handed to you. Examples of community service, volunteering at your church, or simply pursuing a creative or athletic passion outside of the office will help you distinguish yourself from the other engineers in the crowd.

#### 4. Entrepreneurship

Few applicants can say that they've built their own business, giving entrepreneurs a leg up in the business school admissions process. If you are an entrepreneur, the key will be to drive home the strengths that admissions officers typically associate with people like you, while addressing the questions of why you want a degree now and how well you will fit into the business school culture. Here we use the term entrepreneur broadly. As such, our advice can apply to people who have set out to build organizations in a variety of fields, from technology to hospitality to nonprofit. By definition, entrepreneurs are people who like to strike out on their own and make things happen. It doesn't take much imagination to see how you can spin a story rich in leadership, creativity, and ambition, no matter what your venture was. Whether you built a whole organization or simply created a new business opportunity within an existing company, you should have a lot of material to draw upon. When you discuss these experiences, be sure to not only talk about your accomplishments, but also about how you

achieved them. Saying that you led your fledgling team to launch its first prototype on time is impressive, but it's more interesting to hear about how it happened. Stories about how you found the right people with whom to build your team, how you motivated them, how you managed personality conflicts among team members, and how you helped them overcome obstacles will all paint a great portrait of you as a leader. The most obvious challenge you will face is that you already set out to build a business, and only now are you applying to business school. Admissions officers will undoubtedly ask, "If you thought you could make it on your own two years ago, how come you now feel like you need to sit in a classroom and learn again?" Your reasons will obviously depend on your own situation, but a stronger answer will emphasize your desire to learn and move toward new goals; a weaker one will focus on your desire to get away from the start-up scene.<sup>3</sup>

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uniquely made a difference in a situation when you were younger. Don't worry if the story has nothing to do with business; leadership examples are universal, and your application will be much stronger for it. Your letters of recommendation can be especially helpful here, especially if you can get people with business backgrounds to vouch for your leadership skills and business potential. Of course, business schools also look for a minimum level of quantitative skills, and this is one place where you won't get the benefit of the doubt. You absolutely must produce a GMAT (or GRE) score within range of your target schools' averages. Your best bet is to practice early and practice often, and give yourself enough time to take the exam more than once if needed. And plan on taking some pre-MBA courses in accounting and statistics before you apply. Doing so will demonstrate a sincere interest in earning an MBA, and answer questions in admissions officers' minds about you possibly applying to school as a dilettante who has nothing better to do. Taking these courses early will allow you to sell them in your application.

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## What people say about this book

GMAT Club (Expert), "Helpful and Practical. The book is based on the 2 main points - to get into an MBA Program of your choice you have to demonstrate that you have a unique profile (differentiation) and that you fit the school. With potentially a 50-70% chance to get into the program of choice if you have these 2 attributes.~~~ PROS: ~~~~ Fairly concise and can be read/covered pretty quickly (the fact that the book is well written helps)- I like very much the suggestions for the 4 key dimensions of an applicant (Leadership, innovation, teamwork, and maturity). The book then creates a table with these as column headings and numerous parts of the application as the rows (such as transcript, work experience, resume, LOR, essays, GMAT, extracurricular activities) and allows you to tick off each element that contributes to any of the 4- Chart of GMAT 80% distribution scores for the top 20 programs and a few other stats/charts- Applicant profiles - the book splits up the application tips/strategy based on the applicant profiles, such as Consulting, Creative Engineers Entrepreneurship Government International (goes in depth to categorize further), IB & Finance Marketing, Military Non profit Recent grad- Typical backgrounds of students at the MBA programs and also their career backgrounds. (Consulting is 25%)- Interview tips (good but not very exhaustive prep)- Information about each of the top 30 programs with details on application strategy (what the school focuses on, what they are looking for, who is a good fit, and also some additional unofficial insights that Vertas saw from the years of work with applications to each of the schools)- Real sample Essay Analysis (34 total essays)- Several in-depth profile examples- Sample Resumes (5)~~~ WEAKNESSES ~~~~ Though laid out fine, I am having a hard time finding information I have read previously. The markers on some of the essays and sections could be identified better or have some standard icons/symbols and Table of contents should be really expanded to include subsections. Right now it is not useful.- Would be great to see things not to do/disaster stories/examples of poor fit (there are several essays at the back that are not stellar and are illustrations of exactly that) but would love to see more as well as common weaknesses and approaches to address/eliminate- Add strategies for re-applicants- Would benefit the most applicants who have 9 months for the entire process~~~ BOTTOM LINE: ~~~~This has become of my new favorite MBA Application BooksLet me know if any questions - I reply to comments.Best Regards,BB, Founder of GMAT ClubGMAT 750"

Matthew J. Barnard, "Best I have Seen. I can't recommend this book highly enough: It was incredibly helpful from the beginning to end of the MBA search process. It really does help you craft a strategy, construct resumes and essays, and prepare for interviews.The best part is the small section on the individual schools: these provide a great introduction during your search and are a great starting point when beginning applications.I'm off to my first choice MBA program in a few months and I think this book is a big part of the reason why."

Matthew, "Good book for those that have >6mnths before they apply. Only reached chapter 3 and already this book has helped me figure out a better plan for working on things to improve my application (not just what, but how). This book also includes valuable information for those who are just starting the process and still cannot pinpoint schools to apply to. Def a good read for those just starting out IMO."

Monika Matthews, "Helpful. It's hard to get mba books because you know you'll only need them for a little while, and then each program is so different it's difficult to judge what you really need. This book was great in that it offered info from particular schools to which I was applying. If I had to choose only one book, it would be this one."

Loren Kronemeyer, "I would recommend this book in developing a strategy to get into b-school. This was useful in prepping for applying to b-school, in that it gave good insight into what admissions officers look for as well as how do develop a strategy that would put you ahead of the competition."

Andrei Popescu, "OK. It is a good book, but not my personal favorite. For more insightful advice I warmly endorse Avi Gordon's book."

Jeremy Hintz, "Great resource. The authors do a great job of considering a variety of angles and scenarios for the application process. Definitely the cheapest step I'll take while applying to business school, and well worth the investment."

Pat, "Four Stars. Great essay examples--great buy!"

Jason, "Great MBA Application Resource!. I found this extremely helpful in understanding the overview of process of applying to MBA programs throughout North America. Excellent! I recommend this to anyone serious about MBA education."

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## **Book Information**

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