

A photograph of three hands holding black graduation caps with gold tassels against a solid blue background. The hands are positioned in the upper right corner, with one hand at the top, one in the middle, and one at the bottom, each holding a cap. The caps are slightly tilted and overlapping.

The MBA Insider 2020 Business School Guide



Introduction

If you're like most incoming MBA students, you've spent a lot of time researching programs to find the right school for you. After mulling over decisions and evaluating your career aspirations amidst a global pandemic, you've enrolled at a top MBA program and are eagerly awaiting to start your business school experience.

But while your GMATs, essays and admissions interviews are behind you, there is so much more ahead. By now, you've been told how transformative and impactful the MBA experience can be, but how do you know what to do, where to start, or how to take advantage of all the opportunities that business school offers?

These are questions I thought about right before I started my MBA at UNC Kenan-Flagler, and they are questions that I've studied in talking with hundreds of MBA students and alum on my blog MBASchooled, and for my book, **MBA Insider: How to Make the Most of Your MBA Experience**.

As you get ready to start your year and embark on the beginning of your first semester, I'm excited to share with you our MBA Insider Business School 2020 Guide.

In this guide, we will cover:

1 What's Unique About the MBA Experience?

2 Common Challenges MBA Students Face

3 What Is the Virtual MBA Experience Like?

- Academics
- Careers and Recruiting
- Student Clubs and Activities
- Social and Personal

4 Advice from MBA Students

With this guide, you'll have an idea of what to expect, a greater awareness of potential challenges and how to navigate them, and lessons and tips from current and former MBA students to help you make the most of your MBA Experience, so you can set and achieve your own MBA goals more quickly.



1

What Is Unique About the Business School Experience?

There are lots of opportunities

Business school is like an all you can eat buffet. There are so many choices and options for experiences and opportunities to pursue. For many MBA students, this is a huge selling point of the experience, as it gives people a chance to drive transformative learning and growth. Mariel Sena says (Ross, '21), “there are so many clubs you can join, classes you can take, and roles and companies you can recruit for. While it’s great to explore new things, the key is learning how to take advantage of the experiences that align most with your goals and priorities.”

”

clubs you can join,
classes you can take,
roles and companies
you can recruit for,
and great to explore
new things

There are lots of new people

“Building a network” is often one of the reasons why people choose to go to business school, and the beauty of this is that it is absolutely true. Getting to experience something transformative like business school with hundreds of other people is a unique aspect of the MBA experience.

At UNC Kenan-Flagler, Kirsten Smith (UNC Kenan-Flagler, '20) was surrounded by 280 classmates each and every day. This is a great opportunity, but it can also be overwhelming to spend 12–14 hours a day with strangers in a brand-new environment. Whether it's in class, at a recruiting event with lots of people, or in a small five- or six-person study team, you are always surrounded by people. This can be both exciting and exhausting. According to Smith, “As someone who straddles the line between an introvert and an extrovert, this was both fulfilling and draining, depending on

the day. I loved learning from my peers and hearing about their experiences, but I also needed alone time to refocus and recharge.”

However, becoming best friends with your classmates doesn't magically happen. To take advantage of this, go out of your way to meet and get to know your classmates. This is especially true in a virtual environment, where you may not have the same luxuries of meeting in person as frequently as you used to. “Building relationships with your classmates doesn't happen magically, it happens when you choose to make the effort consistently and repeatedly,” said Ben Thayer (UNC Kenan-Flagler, '16).

I loved learning
from my peers and
hearing about their
experiences



Building relationships with
your classmates doesn't
happen magically



There are endless opportunities for feedback

They say that feedback is a gift. If you haven't heard that expression, expect some presents in business school!

During business school, you'll be getting lots of feedback. There is value in feedback, especially when it comes from others, such as peers, instructors and administrators. This feedback can help us see our blind spots, uncover strengths we didn't know we had, or help us improve in specific areas. Feedback can often come from ourselves, whether it's through self-reflection exercises, assessments like VIA Strengths or Strengths Finder, or 360 assessments. As a classmate of mine once said, "I don't know if there is a personal assessment I didn't take when I was in business school!" While feedback is great, it does take some getting used to, both learning how to accept it graciously, especially when it stings or hurts, as well as how to manage it and act on it. "Getting as well as giving feedback are two things that you will do frequently in business school," said Ben Thayer (UNC Kenan-Flagler, '16). If you can learn how to do both of those things, you will not only learn frequently, but you will also win the respect and graces of your classmates.

”Getting as well as giving feedback are two things that you will do frequently in business school

You will do a lot of context switching

In your first semester, there are so many important priorities that are thrown at you all at once. Whether it's in the classroom and taking a full course load, focusing on exploring careers and preparing for internship recruiting, finding clubs and activities, or working on a study team, you are constantly moving from event to event. That said, not all of these are similar to each other, which can be a challenge. In some cases, you are in a group of 60 people in a class. In other cases, you are by yourself. Sometimes, you're thinking silently. At other times, you're expected to be social. The constant context switching back and forth can be perplexing. "In a given day, you'll go from working on a team project with five other people, to a 1:1 conversation with your peer mentor (a second year), who is giving you feedback on your latest version of your resume, to an event with 50-60 of your classmates at a company presentation, to finally being back at your home doing a 20-30 page reading for a class the next day," said Ben Thayer, (UNC Kenan-Flagler, '16). "It can be a whirlwind trying to make the transitions from those disparate sets of activities."





In business school, you have events in the evenings and team projects on weekends. Time management and prioritization are absolutely critical to your success

No days off!

In business school, there is something going on every day, perhaps even multiple things each day. While in the working world, there is usually some separation (weekends), in business school there are many times when you'll have plenty of activities on the weekends. Whether it's a group project or assignment, it makes setting aside time for yourself, or tending to other important activities in your life, difficult to manage. "In my pre-MBA job, I had busy hours during the day, but my schedule each week always had some element of down time, mostly on the weekends and evenings. In business school, you have events in the evenings and team projects on weekends. Time management and prioritization are absolutely critical to your success," said a 2nd year Haas MBA student.

You have agency and control

While there are certainly requirements that you have to hit, outside of that you are in charge of your destiny. The MBA experience gives you a chance to have autonomy about how to develop and grow. While there are certainly academic requirements and certain mandatory experiences, much of the MBA experience is left up to the student to determine how they want to spend their time. You get to call the shots and you choose to spend time on things that you want to do. Your job is to figure out how to best spend that time.



Want more MBA Guidance?

Check out the MBA Insider Podcast today and hear from MBA students, alum, and leaders about career advice and navigating business school

Listen Today



Apple Podcasts



Spotify

www.mbaschooled.com/podcast

2

What Are Common Challenges That MBA Students Face?

Prioritizing when everything is a priority

“Business school is one giant prioritization exercise,” said Najee Johnson (UNC Kenan-Flagler, ‘15). There are so many priorities on your plate, all of which could be considered important, and it can be hard to have to make tough decisions. For example, do you spend more time on that assignment, or head to the company presentation? Do you head to the club activity, or focus on finishing some of your career management deliverables? Furthermore, while having priorities helps, you also need to put them to the test each and every day. There are only 24 hours in a day, and there is only so much that can be done. So having priorities, and aligning your decision making to them, is a difficult struggle many

MBA students face. “At times, it seems like there are never enough hours in the day for the list of things you want to get done. You have to prioritize what’s most important, but also, you want to feel confident that when you spend the time on something you’ve prioritized, that you’re doing more than enough,” said Steph Simpson. (Ross, ‘21).

The first year can feel overwhelming with everything going on. There’s a lot of moving parts, and your calendar quickly becomes your best friend.

DAMON REYNOLDS, UT MCOMBS, ‘20



MBA Insider Tip: Take the time to write down your priorities, and each week, check your calendar, planner, etc., to see if you are aligning to those priorities.

Choices, and lots of them

The beauty of having an experience with lots of opportunities is that there are lots of opportunities! This also is a challenge. This comes in many aspects of the MBA experience, whether it's trying to choose elective classes, trying to decide on what you want to recruit for, or what clubs to be a part of. One of the hardest things that I had to manage was choosing from all the intellectually stimulating activities in the program. I love academic environments because I am a naturally curious person, and I enjoy learning and exploring whatever I find curious. While this has served me well in many ways, I struggled initially because I let my curiosity run wild, and I either got exhausted or felt like I wasn't giving enough attention to other priorities. This meant I had to figure out how to say no to things.

There are so many clubs you can join, classes you can take, roles and companies you can recruit for. While it's great to explore new things, listen to your gut and remember the reasons why you decided to go to business school. Use that as a North Star when deciding where to allocate your time and what to prioritize.

MARIEL SENA, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN (ROSS, '21)



MBA Insider Tip: Identify your non-negotiables. These are things you will always say yes to.



FOMO (Fear of missing out)

FOMO is not only a real-world thing but also a business school phenomenon. The upside of being surrounded by like-minded people focused on the same thing is that there will be opportunities to do just about anything. Whether it's an impromptu weekend trip with your classmates, attending a recruiting event that everyone else is going to, or signing up for a class that everyone else wants to take, you can easily feel like if you don't say yes, you'll be missing out on a huge reward of the MBA experience. But, at the same time, how can you say yes to everything? When Jeff and Katie Ellington entered Wharton, they had recently gotten married and moved across the country. In addition to adjusting to the



rigors of the MBA program, they also knew they wanted to make time for each other. “We had to really prioritize the things that were important to us, which meant that we were very clear on what we wanted to say yes to,” said Katie. “While it wasn’t always easy, we both felt that our choices reflected our priorities of each other, our family, and our interests,” added Jeff.

“As cliché as it sounds, when school started, I was busier than ever, and it was really difficult to stay focused on what I really wanted out of my MBA experience. Sometimes the FOMO can be extreme! It’s important to keep checking in with yourself to make sure you’re prioritizing the things that are actually important to you and that you aren’t going to burn out.”

JAANHVI VAIDYA, UCLA ANDERSON, ‘21



MBA Insider Tip: Identify and call out times when you have to say “no” to something. If you aren’t finding yourself saying no to opportunities or experiences, consider what you need to take off your plate in the future.

Imposter syndrome

The beauty of having a lot of dynamic classmates is that you have plenty of people to learn from during your time in business school. However, it can be easy to feel overwhelmed or to get the “imposter syndrome” because you feel like you don’t measure up. Additionally, some schools have highly competitive environments. In many cases, you are competing against your fellow classmates for the same leadership opportunities, internships, or full-time jobs—and this is true even in less competitive schools. This situation can breed all sorts of insecurities as well as imposter syndrome, especially early on. For example, I struggled with imposter syndrome and with feeling like a fraud as I was making my transition to business school. I was one of the younger students in my class with less experience than most, which made me nervous about whether I could contribute equally. I figured out I had one of the lowest GMAT scores in my entire class, which again made me feel like I wouldn’t be able to contribute and that I got lucky just to get in.

All these thoughts were swirling around my head as I stepped onto Chapel Hill’s campus. Over time, I came to realize that I was not the only one who didn’t totally feel like they belonged there. Many of my classmates had the same feeling for a multitude of different reasons. It took an adjustment of my mindset and my attitude, but over time those fears subsided, and I began to embrace the opportunity to learn things in areas that I wasn’t strong in. I learned to contribute to discussions, projects, and opportunities



where I had experience or talents that I could share. In reality, these are the communities in which you will learn and grow the most, and they will offer the best career opportunities, too. Learning to be comfortable in that environment is a valuable life skill. You will have moments when you feel insecure or overmatched. Over time, you'll come to learn from them to become stronger.

How quickly recruiting starts

Business school gives you an opportunity to hit pause and identify where you want to go next. In the recruiting and marketing process for MBA applicants, many schools play up the notion that this is a great time to explore your interests and passions, which is partially true. In business school, you do have plenty of opportunities to find out where you want to take your career, that said, one of the most common challenges that students face is managing how quickly recruiting for internships starts.

Right away, you are put on a path to explore and hone in on the path you wish to pursue. This can be overwhelming for a lot of reasons. First, many people are still adjusting to the business school environment. Furthermore, many people are set on taking some time to



MBA Insider Tip: If you feel imposter syndrome creeping up, take a deep breath, and ask yourself, “What is making me feel this way, and what is the most helpful thing I can do to respond to this feeling.”

explore the program, but then they begin to panic because they look up and see employer events, case competitions and other activities, and they feel like they are falling behind. Third, some people just need some time to properly vet a big decision like a career change. Finally, some people are just overwhelmed with having to engage with recruitment activities while managing a full course load, activities etc.



MBA Insider Tip: Explore, but be focused while exploring. Select one or two hypothetical career choices, and explore those in order to make a decision. And if possible, try to determine your desired path (and backup) by the October(ish)

Looking for more MBA guidance and best practices?

Check out our online courses to learn how to maximize your MBA Experience

Courses.MBASchooled.com 



3

What Should I Expect Across the Key Pillars of Business School?



Academics



Social and Personal Relationships



Student Clubs and Activities



Careers and Recruiting



Academics

Perhaps the most recognized change to business school education in the era of COVID-19 is the move to some form of online learning across every program. At this point, most schools have a form of online learning, whether it's through a formal online MBA program or Executive Education, so a blueprint was already in place when COVID hit. While there were some glitches, many students felt that schools moved and responded quickly toward making the change. None of these conditions were ideal, and nobody wanted the quick transition online. That said, schools worked as hard as they could and went to extra lengths to try to make the experience as beneficial as possible for students.

Furthermore, many students reported that while the experience was a challenge, faculty were willing to accept feedback and looked for ways to improve. "Many professors were very proactive in asking for feedback about how to improve and make it better," said Stephanie Simpson. Additionally, as the quarter went on, improvements were made as students and professors learned what worked, what did not work, and what could be improved."

During last spring when COVID-19 hit, with a limited amount of time, most MBA programs were focused on transitioning an in-person learning experience to a fully online program. But now, with a quarter and a summer of iterating, testing and learning under their belts, many schools have been able to make substantive updates and revisions for the fall term. For example, UC-Berkeley is piloting an enhanced digital learning experience that was

built in it's Executive Education program for some of it's full-time classes this fall. Stanford GSB has created a task force to address issues related to online programs in the era of COVID.

Among some potential things that could come your way:

- "Pre-Reads" or digital videos that can be watched or reviewed in advance of an online lecture
- Use of discussion boards or forums for increased collaboration and dialogue
- Breakout rooms for smaller group discussion
- Smaller "virtual office hour"-type sessions
- "Mixed" classroom learning where some material is delivered in person and some is delivered online
- In-person classes that are also livestreamed or broadcasted for those who want to watch at home

Zoom fatigue is real

Zoom has been a godsend for a virtual MBA experience because so much of what can be done is now done on Zoom. The challenge is that it is very easy to get tired of it. There's been some research on the fatigue we get from video calls, and, truth be told, many of us also get fatigued in on-campus learning experiences as well. Many students and professors struggle with fatigue, especially with classes that tend to be longer. To fight fatigue, many students suggest you take breaks, get up, move around, stretch and break up constantly staring at a screen.



There are opportunities for greater participation

As a result of functionality like polls, chats, and breakout rooms, there are even great opportunities during a lecture or class for engagement and participation. Furthermore, not everyone is comfortable raising their hand in class, and not to mention, in those environments only one person can really speak at a time. But with this new functionality, many are finding that they either feel more comfortable engaging from their computer screen, or that there is more participation. According to Dean Datar at Harvard Business School (HBS), “Students who may have been a bit more shy or reticent somehow were participating more.”

It helps to have a hand

In a classroom, a professor can usually be OK in facilitating the dialogue and managing the logistics of a class. In a virtual environment, it's not always the same. While all these new features and functionalities of virtual technology are helpful, sometimes it's hard for one person to manage, especially if they're trying to manage the discussion while trying to do all these other things. At HBS they created a new role to facilitate dialogue and engagement on Zoom while the professor manages the discussion in the class.

It's hard to cover the same amount of content

Many schools didn't have a lot of time to transition to the virtual world, but many recognized early on that trying to cover the exact same amount of content that you would in a traditional classroom just wasn't possible.



Students who may have been a bit more shy or reticent somehow were participating more.

Without being in-person and with the nuances of technology, it's just too difficult to manage everything. Now, professors have to be more mindful about the outcomes they are trying to drive out of a specific class or topic, and how to scope them correctly. Without doing this, they risk losing the class or falling behind. In fact, HBS has given guidance to their professors to cover 75% of what is normally covered in a classroom setting.

New ways of engagement

To promote greater engagement and to reach diverse learning styles, many professors have used other modes of engagement and collaboration to enrich the classroom experience. Students appreciate the various mechanisms of engagement, whether it was pre- or in-class polls, pre-recorded videos to watch before lectures, or small group discussions and collaboration opportunities using the breakout room feature within the class. At Stanford GSB, Katherine Casey, associate professor of political economy at Stanford GSB, greeted students and then asked them to break into small groups just to give them a chance to chat with one another. The small groups allowed students to re-create the excitement of returning to class after spring break.





Look for group learning opportunities

One of the aspects of the learning experience that is very valuable is the ability to learn from your peers. While some of this will undoubtedly happen online, the chances to learn from the community and your peers isn't as commonplace. Make time to proactively find your peers and learn from them!

Assess your learning progress

Take stock of how you are learning and absorbing information from classes, and reassess what kind of help you think you need to ensure you are learning the material. There are resources available to you, so make sure you are using them as best as you can.

Make sure to have a good virtual learning setup

Taking classes on Zoom, group meetings on Zoom, and sitting in front of a computer all day can be exhausting. Make sure to create a good virtual setup with enough space and resources so you feel comfortable and engaged.



Social and Personal Relationships

Part of the inherent value in an in-person MBA experience is the chance to build relationships with your classmates. This certainly takes a hit when you can't be with them each day. However, students still want to engage and to respond to their peers and professors in a number of creative ways.

As an extrovert and social person, Brad Vonick (McCombs, '20) knew online learning was going to be a challenge, especially for what relationships mean to the MBA experience. He said, "One of the best parts of the McCombs MBA experience is the ability to be in a community of great peers. It was difficult to take in at first the fact that this would be a challenge as a result of COVID-19." Despite the challenge, Vonick still found safe and creative ways to connect with his peers and classmates. Whether it was finding time to play golf, or take one-on-one walks with friends, Vonick focused his efforts on spending time with a few people in small settings. "I enjoy being social, but I don't need to be around big crowds. This gave me the chance to really talk with and engage some of my classmates," Vonick said.

Furthermore, like many other MBA programs, McCombs students put on various virtual and Zoom events, such as book clubs, happy hours, other types of community events. Given the sudden shift and shock many of these events helped provide a sense of community, even if it wasn't the same. That said, after awhile, many MBA students admitted that while the intentions of these

virtual events were good, many people got tired of them. "We did our best engaging virtually, but once Zoom fatigue set in, even virtual hangouts didn't have the same charm they initially did," said one UCLA Anderson student.

Challenges are just opportunities in disguise, and sometimes constraints breed innovation and creativity. Many other MBA students have responded in interesting and creative ways.

- **Darden hosted their Darden Cup virtually.** Among the activities, Students, partners, and faculty downloaded a fitness app and tracked their workouts. Additionally, each week, the Darden Student Association sends out a weekly email highlighting the virtual events going on throughout the week, such as a virtual jeopardy contest, and a series called "Professor and a Playlist."
- Fuqua turned their **Fuqua Friday's into a virtual Fuqua Friday's event.** Since then, they've hosted cooking competitions, virtual book clubs and virtual trivia, among other events. They took it one step further by creating virtual programming well into the summer to help them stay connected and engaged.
- At **Kellogg**, Marilyn Jian Yi Caton (Kellogg, '21) created "#diy_kellogg, a Kellogg Slack channel that serves as a virtual networking facilitator. In the channel, people share ideas for team building activities and ways to engage and connect.



Find ways to connect offline and/or find ways to develop more meaningful connections

During March and April, Mariel Sena (Ross, '21) found it difficult to maintain and grow relationships virtually, so she had to look for other ways. "It's super tough to develop sincere, authentic relationships virtually; however, if you are able and willing to create and invest in designing intentional opportunities to build connection and belonging, it's much more likely," she said. Jaanhvi Vaidya (Anderson, '21) felt something similar during her experience at Anderson. The second years have undoubtedly been working hard to figure out how to hold the best virtual events possible, so even if it feels 'lame' or 'awkward' or you're feeling Zoom fatigue, I recommend showing up to events held by clubs/organizations that are of interest to you. Also, don't be afraid to take initiative and plan things yourselves."

Push yourself to connect with people you don't always see

Vaidya also recommended that in addition to making time to see people, make sure to connect with your classmates and peers, even if they are outside of your core group. "Even after the first few weeks when you're feeling comfortable with a group of friends or your section, strive to meet and talk to someone you don't know very well at least once a week," said Vaidya. "A huge part of business school is networking, so you're doing yourself a disservice if you don't push yourself to get to know as many people as possible," she said. Brad Vonick (McCombs, '20) also agrees. "If you're American, learn from your international classmates. If you're a marketer, become close with an investment banker. Some of my best friends from McCombs are very different from me, and those relationships are then ones that

have changed my perspective the most. And here's the best part: that's not compromised by a virtual environment," Vonick said.

It's important to unwind

There is so much to do in business school and there are never enough hours in the day, but make sure that you make time for yourself so you can be at your best. Damon Reynolds, (McCombs, '20) learned this during his time at McCombs. As someone who identifies as an introvert, Reynolds appreciated having some time alone by himself to unwind, especially after a busy or stressful day. Whether it was watching a movie, reading a book, or listening to music, Reynolds tried to prioritize time to take care of himself so he could achieve all he wanted to achieve during the day. "This down time was extremely important to me, and I included it on my calendar," Reynolds said.

Take advantage of the community

These are difficult times, and while many of us are fortunate to have our health, we are all struggling in different ways. Normally, business school and MBA students have their ups and downs, but even more so as a result of COVID-19 and the challenges that come with it. While this is difficult, there is something to be said about being in a community like an MBA program during this period. "During the spring, there were definitely some challenging moments, oftentimes with nothing related to business school, but rather just the state of the world. Being in a community like McCombs with so many smart, hard-working, kind and thoughtful people is exactly the place you want to be in times of challenge," Vonick said. When you are having a tough day, a challenging moment, or just need a hand, don't be afraid to ask for help, and lean on others," Vonick encouraged.



Student Clubs and Activities



Two weeks before what was the 29th Stern Women in Business Conference, Anna Ward, Tiffaine Stephens (NYU Stern, '20) and their Executive team found out that they would not be able to host their conference in person and that there would be no more in-person events at NYU Stern for the rest of the semester. With the clock winding down, Ward, Stephens and their team had a decision to make: can we and should we host this conference? The answer was yes, but they needed to figure out how.

“From that point on, it was an around the clock sprint to make it happen,” Ward said. Over the next two weeks they figured out how to make their in-person experience virtual by reimagining the conference, prepping speakers, testing technology and showing excitement and eagerness to all who were involved. “It was an incredible test in leading through a crisis, but I’m so grateful for the opportunity,” Ward said. In the end, the conference went off without a hitch and got stellar feedback. “During this time, I was taking a class on leadership, and it was a chance to literally put into practice what I was learning in the classroom,” Ward said. The conference got great feedback and was a resounding success. “I’m grateful we could host the conference, and even more grateful that we all worked together to find a way to show up for the SWIB community and women in the business community,” Ward said.

MBA programs rely on student clubs, organizations and activities to enrich the community and build relationships. With the move to virtual, many of the events

and activities that often bring students together were put on hold or cancelled. Despite this, during times when students couldn’t physically be together, student clubs, organizations and MBA student associations were a silver lining for many as they rolled up their sleeves, collaborated together, and found unique ways to engage and support students. Here are a few examples:

- At Kellogg, they were able to turn their entire admitted students weekend into a virtual admitted students weekend in just a couple of days. As a result, they were able to host their event over the course of a week while accommodating admitted students across numerous time zones. The event went as far as to host a “Kellogg Kribs” edition to give students a look at what it’s like to live in Evanston.
- At Fuqua, they hosted virtual “Fuqua Fridays,” accompanied by toasts from esteemed community members, at-home cooking competitions, book clubs, weekly trivia, exercise classes, movie nights, dance parties.
- At London Business School, the Private Equity and Venture Capital Club found ways to host virtual events with guest speaker VCs, CEOs and politicians.

Supporting your classmates

As the President of the Carolina Women in Business, Becca Jordan Wright (UNC Kenan-Flagler, '21) took over the organization right as she and her classmates found out they



would be remote for the rest of the quarter. As a leader, Wright knew she had a duty to serve her members and fellow students, but instead of jumping in, it meant listening first. “As type A, go-getters, many of us have a bias for action. But my team had to step back and listen to our student club members, to identify what programming was most needed at the time. In many cases, it wasn’t the event we had planned,” Wright said. For example, virtual yoga and trivia nights took the place of happy hours and in-person dinners. Using this empathetic and sensing approach, Wright and her executive board spoke with students to understand what their concerns and challenges were and the best ways to help. Once we had an understanding of the most pressing needs, we evaluated the schedule of events, figured out what to change, and worked quickly to make it happen,” Wright said. Part of this meant working with the MBA Student Association to handle the financial logistics and budget reallocation, since a pandemic was uncharted territory, but Wright and other student leaders worked together to make it happen.

During times of challenge, business school is an excellent place to be, because of the supportive and caring community. Since everyone is in it together, there is a sense of camaraderie and support for one another as everyone deals with the challenges at hand. There were several incredible examples of this across various MBA programs in the world. At Berkeley Haas, The Mindfulness Club organized several meet-up classes for yoga, mediation, and reflection activities. These activities are not just great for building camaraderie and collaboration, but also for relaxing and unwinding from the challenges and rigor of the MBA experience.

Engaging the next class

In addition to supporting their fellow classmates and current MBA students, many organizations found themselves spending a lot of time with prospective and admitted students. For starters, the traditional Admitted Students Weekends were cancelled, which was a huge blow for both schools and admitted students, as those are often a critical role in facilitating interaction. Some schools were able to pivot their admitted student weekends relatively quickly. Others found ways to drive additional outreach through Zoom Webinars and 1:1 digital engagements with incoming students.

Finding meaning and purpose

Student Clubs and Organizations by their very nature are chance for like minded people who share a common interest to work together on something that’s engaging and meaningful to them. During these difficult times, these organizations serve as a mechanism to bring people together, to provide people direction and purpose, and to give students a chance to use their skills, talents and abilities to make an impact. “It may not be perfect nor as engaging as it might be in person, but with so many people challenged and struggling, the potential impact these organizations can have on current students, admitted students, or people in the greater community can be meaningful and worthwhile.” I couldn’t be more proud of the leaders who have stepped up to serve and to help others in this time of challenge,” Wright said. “Whether it’s finding ways to help our fellow classmates find career opportunities, check on the well-being of each other, or engage the local community, this crisis has given all of us the chance to use our skills to help others, and many have responded,” Wright went on to add.



Careers and Recruiting



Joey Parker (Haas, '21) was in the hunt for summer internships when he found out that his MBA experience was going virtual due to COVID-19. "I was in the interview process in the later stages with a handful of companies," Parker said. Within days, many of the companies he was interviewing with either went silent, or paused or cancelled hiring. In the end, Parker nailed his final round interview and got an offer almost immediately following his interview which he quickly accepted. "I was excited and feel incredibly grateful that that offer came through," Parker said.

COVID-19 hit both first and second year MBA students at a particularly challenging time. For first years, March and April are months for self-directed and off-campus internship searches which tend to heat up around these times. Others, like Parker, were already in the middle of internship searches.

Finally, some MBA students who had internships had to face the reality that their summer experiences were going to be disrupted in some way, shape or form. Some students found out that their internships would be shortened, done remotely, or at least partially remotely. Others found out that their internship would be replaced with a shortened virtual experience, but they could expect full-time offers contingent on their graduation (a number of management consulting firms offered this).

Austin Carroll (Fuqua, '21) was on her way back from a class trip to Morocco when she

found out about the impact. A few days later, Carroll found out that her summer internship offer was going to be rescinded, and in the beginning of April, she would have to start looking for a new internship. "It was a difficult pill to swallow, and I gave myself time to process and reflect, but after doing so, I knew that I needed to get back into action," said Carroll. Carroll bravely put out a post on LinkedIn that she had lost her internship and she was on the hunt for a new summer opportunity. "The response was incredibly supportive, it was a scary thing to do, but I was so grateful for the support," Carroll went on to add. Eventually, Carroll landed an internship opportunity as a result of networking on LinkedIn in an industry that was different from what she initially recruited for.

For incoming MBA students, one of the benefits they have right now is that while the job and labor market continues to work itself out, students have a chance to focus on identifying their goals and building up skills and experiences using the resources and opportunities they have in business school to achieve those career goals. This is a valuable asset and experience to have right now, especially as many professionals are struggling with opportunities for growth in the workplace while managing and navigating their own COVID-19 challenges. That said, as it has been stated already, recruiting and careers starts very early in the year and requires planning and diligence, regardless of the circumstances in the world.



“I think it’s even more important to be proactive and a self-starter when it comes to the career and recruiting process,” said Brad Vonick, (McCombs, ‘20.) “Student clubs and organizations will be great resources, and you should absolutely use them, but if you are not going to physically see people every day for a specific event or reason, it’s important to be proactive about identifying what needs to get done,” Vonick said.

During April, May and June of this year, Vonick navigated his MBA experience at McCombs while focusing on finding a full-time job in the Tech sector before landing a full-time role toward the end of June. Vonick hustled and put significant effort into finding and landing his full-time opportunity. Vonick offered two pieces of advice. First, spend the time up front defining how important recruiting is to you.

“Priorities in business school are important, but recruiting can consume all of you if you let it, so make sure to have an honest conversation with yourself about how important it is,” Vonick said. Second, Vonick encouraged MBA students to spend the time now and use the resources they have to explore and nail down career goals for the first year. “You don’t have all the time in the world to explore, but you don’t want to rush it either. Be focused, but use the time you need,” said Vonick.

Networking - more important than ever

Networking has always been a critical aspect to the career and recruiting search, but due to the limitations of in-person campus events, it becomes even more of a priority for students.

While we won’t go into depth on this, if this is something you are not comfortable with or haven’t had much exposure to, make sure to make it a priority to ask your classmates and Career Center for help and guidance.

Uncertainty for Specific Industries

It’s important to acknowledge that while the economy and businesses are still figuring things out, there are some students who may have to re-evaluate some of their short-term career aspirations, especially those with an interest in entering industries that are impacted by COVID-19, such as retail, hospitality and entertainment. The good news is that there are graduating MBA students who faced similar circumstances, and they were able to navigate this process.

Sarah Mobin (McDonough, ‘20) interned for a global hospitality company in the summer of 2019, and she intended to start searching for full-time roles in March and April of 2020 for the just-in-time recruiting cycle. But then COVID-19 steadily came to light in the United States. Due to the impact on the hospitality industry, Mobin quickly realized she was going to need to make other plans. “I had to take a step back and reorganize my priorities and reaffirm my non-negotiables,” Mobin said. Once she did, she was able to use the same recruiting skills that she honed during her internship search to also land a full-time opportunity.

For Mobin, this meant two things. First, while she still wanted to pursue Brand Management, she realized that expanding industries would naturally open her up to more opportunities



and would give her the ability to utilize her transferable skills.. Second, while she initially wanted to be in New York, she also realized that being on the East Coast was still a good alternative. This opened up more doors, and eventually she landed an interview with a leading CPG company. A key change that Mobin implemented: She updated her resume to include more CPG-related activities, specifically highlighting a consulting project she did back in February for an international Food and CPG company. For the role she eventually ended up accepting, it turns out the hiring manager previously worked for the company that she had consulted for, and saw it on her resume, which piqued his interest. “I have heard a dozen times from my Career Center to prepare different versions of my resume, and this turned out to be excellent advice. I always personalized the first few bullets to the specific role, industry, and/or function I was applying to in order to grab the attention of a hiring manager or recruiter. Be intentional about how you present yourself,” Mobin said.

Utilize Your Career Development Resources

Given the challenges in the labor market, not only is it a great time to be in school, but it's a great time to be surrounded by a Career Development Center. You have incredible access to career resources and guidance. While you should always be using all of the career resources at your disposal, having access to experts and resources to navigate your career search is a huge boost to working toward your career track or path.

Networking and Building Relationships

Networking and building relationships were always important to a career search. Whether it is using informational interviews to understand the industry or role, or to find ways to engage with employers to learn about firms, building relationships was always a critical piece of landing an internship. In a virtual world with no on-campus events, networking becomes even more important. Using the resources that you have (e.g., LinkedIn, Alumni Databases) as well as your own network and your colleagues' networks to identify people and opportunities has never been more important. On the positive side, it appears that generally speaking, people are understanding and empathetic to what students are going through, and they are willing to help and engage.

Opportunities to Engage with Employers

As of the writing of this article, many MBA employers are focusing on a mostly virtual engagement recruiting strategy for the fall. Depending on restrictions and local health guidelines, this may evolve over time. But even if recruiters do become more available, it may take time for these opportunities to return. Many firms are looking for virtual ways to drive engagement and relationship-building with campuses as they still have hiring needs that need to be met.

Finding creative ways to build skills and experiences

Whether you are searching for an internship or full-time job, relevant skills and experiences have always been important. In these times, consider finding other ways to go about finding these skills or experiences for your



desired role or industry, so that when it does come time to search, you have even more qualifications. There are numerous ways to think about and do this. This could mean:

- Partnering with a professor to conduct a research project on a function or industry that you want to work in;
- Taking on a project during the school year with a company that you interned at;
- Finding an internship or project with a local non-profit or community organization;
- Building leadership skills through clubs or student organizations; and
- Building a new side project.

It's important to note that most of these opportunities were always available to MBA students. That said, these become even more important when we acknowledge that some traditional opportunities students would have been able to do are not available.

Making The Most out of The MBA Experience

After realizing that his full-time offer start date was going to be pushed back by a year, Chris Joondepth (UNC Kenan-Flagler, '20) started wondering how he was going to spend the next year before work started. "I knew that I wanted to maximize this time because I would never have a chance like this again," Joondepth said. Realizing that he was going to be working at a large corporation for a while, Joondepth went the opposite direction, and decided to work with a small business. Recognizing there was a need for face

masks to fight COVID-19, Joodeph started his own online ecommerce store on Etsy and eBay, manufacturing and selling masks. "This experience taught me so much about operations, customer service, supply chain, marketing, and everything else in between," Joondepth said. "I've gotten hands-on experience and I'm not sure I would have been able to learn this any other way."

Focus on what you can control

The best advice in navigating this era of COVID-19 is to focus on what you can control, and make the best of the experience. Furthermore, while there are many questions about how full-time studying will work, one thing is clear: the second year is an opportunity to build skills and experiences that will make you more confident and prepared for your chosen career path that you'll take with you after graduation. Austin Carroll (Fuqua, '21) is a strong believer in this. While receiving an internship offer, she didn't stop there. During some of her interviews for internships she got the feedback that she could strengthen her tech skills and experiences. She took that feedback to heart. In addition to taking some courses on various tech skills, Carroll built a mobile app and worked on her podcast as well. She also started writing a book she hopes to publish. "The experience taught me that I never want to be in a position where I am waiting around on something else. I wanted to use my curiosity and the resources I had to take advantage of opportunities," Carroll said.



4

Advice From MBA Students and Alum on How to Make the Most of Your MBA Experience

Before you start your MBA, check out these tips on how to make the most of your MBA experience, from current and former MBA students who have been in your shoes.

Chart your own course

“Intentionally following my passions and interests helped me quell the imposter syndrome I had. The situations where I thrived the most were when I pursued activities, opportunities, and electives that aligned to my interests. It always just felt right.” - Jasmine Ako (Yale SOM, ‘19)

Listen to Jasmine’s story [here](#)

Find your north star

“The summer before moving to Austin I chatted with a McCombs alum who is now a friend and mentor. She recommended writing down your top three or four goals for business school, in order. For some, #1 might be building an amazing network. For others, it’s getting the most experiential learning opportunities possible. For others, it’s just getting the best job in the XYZ industry. It will be different for everyone. What she then told me was to use this as my north star – to make every business school decision based on if it will help me achieve these goals. If the answer is yes, I should feel no regret or guilt. For example, if there’s a big social event but you’ve prioritized getting the dream job and

you have that interview in two days, don't regret staying in. If your top goal is to build an amazing network, don't regret going to every happy hour. While I'm not going to tell you I did this perfectly and without any regrets, I would strongly encourage every incoming MBA to do this exercise." - Brad Vonick (McCombs, '20)
Read more on Brad's journey [here](#)

Lean into your strengths

"Everyone has his or her own unique strengths and experiences as well as their weaknesses, and putting these strengths to work can add real value. Remember this, especially when you are working in a team-based environment. This is also something to remember when you are feeling insecure, or dealing with imposter syndrome. We all have things we can learn, but we also all have things we can contribute." - Ben Thayer (UNC Kenan-Flagler, '16)
Listen to Ben's journey [here](#)

Ask for help

"At times I felt out of place, especially during the early stages due to the transition I was making. The good news is that there are literally hundreds of students who have done this before. The second-years were so helpful in providing guidance, assistance, and feedback to small and big questions I had. You don't need to do this alone." - Ben Thayer (UNC Kenan-Flagler, '16)

Take advantage of academia

"One of the benefits of being in an academic setting is the access to the professors and learning - it's hard to get access to these elsewhere. I loved taking advantage of all the amazing speakers, workshops, and just

learning. (Pro Tip: Go to Office Hours!) This is hard to replicate in the real world, and you don't know how valuable it is until it's gone, so make sure to take advantage of it in business school" - Katie Ellington (Wharton, '17)

Be patient (but proactive!)

"It might take some time to really feel like you 'fit in' but you're not alone in that! Be patient (but persistent) and go out of your way, but know it does take time to build relationships with your peers" - Jaanvhi Vaidya (Anderson, '21)

Reach out to your classmates to get to know them

Take initiative to grab coffee (safely, of course!) with a classmate that you admire or whom you felt a connection with from a one-off encounter even if it might feel random. Some of my closest friends from business school started out as a coffee chat! - Jasmine Ako (Yale, SOM '19)

Practice networking

"It sounds weird to say "practice networking," but that's my advice. Start having informational interviews with professionals across industries and companies you're interested in before arriving at school—especially if you're interested in declaring a platform to direct your coursework and/or you're pivoting. It's often easiest to establish connections by working through your alumni network first, but feel empowered to venture outside of your alumni network. This pre-program exposure will help you become a master at networking. It will also help you direct your focus while you're in your



program, and it can even help you get a jump on recruiting. Don't forget to follow up with everyone you meet— always send a message thanking them for their time.” - Kendra Kelly (Olin, '21)

For the rest of Kendra's story, check out [this article](#)

Get into your routine

“For me, it was vital to keep a disciplined calendar and routine, especially in a virtual MBA environment. I scheduled my workouts, mealtimes, reading and homework time, etc. Without having clear expectations of myself and what I needed to accomplish in a day, I would very easily put things on the back burner and just stay glued to the news.”

Julianne Katz (Rice, '21)

For more of Julianne's story, [check out this article](#)

Look for small gatherings

“I'm very inclusive but prefer a 2 or 3 person meal/activity over a group of 10. You build much stronger relationships and learn so much more about others beyond their business school lives. And even if the entire meal or conversation is about the MBA (I'm guilty of that too), it's just so much more personal. In this strange world we live in, that's still something current students can do. Rather than go to a 10-person picnic in the park, go on a walk or hike or grab takeout just with one or two classmates.”

- Brad Vonick (McCombs, '20)

Focus your “100% efforts”

“It's important to do your best, but you also need to prioritize where you give 100%. Early on, I cared way too much about grades and

tried to do everything at 100%. I overcame this by learning how to say no and setting up boundaries. I also started creating priority lists and giving myself time limits on specific tasks. Basically it was a lesson in letting go of perfection and being strategic about my time.” - Maddie Rottman, USC, '21

For the rest of Maddie's story, check out [this article](#)

Share Your Story

“Many business schools give students an opportunity to share their stories with their sections or the entire school. I'd encourage first-years to put themselves out there and share their stories, whatever they may be, publicly. I had the opportunity to share [my story](#) (called MyTakes at HBS) with the entire HBS community and although it was one of the most terrifying moments ever, it was also one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I had to dig deep and reflect about my life—something I never gave myself the time and space to do. Publicly sharing my life story was tough but it unleashed in me the comfort with doing that openly with people. Haz ruido (make noise) with your story!” -

Amy Hernandez Turcios, HBS 2020

Listen to Amy's story [here](#)

Do Your Part to Support Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

“Get involved in a diversity, equity, and inclusion-related initiative or student group on-campus. This is your opportunity to grow as a well-rounded citizen of the business world; do right by your colleagues and take steps to be a better ally.” - Joey Parker, UC Berkeley (Haas) '21

Listen to Joey's story [here](#)

5

Conclusion: Take the Time in School to Create Your Future

There is a lot of uncertainty right now, and this uncertainty will continue for the next 12-18 months, as the world adapts to new ways of working as a result of COVID-19. Certainly, business school and the job market are facing the impacts. Our responses to COVID-19 will continue to evolve.

That said, what we do know is that there are some long-term trends in society and the world of work that make an MBA an important resource to driving career growth for your future. For example:

- In 2019, IBM conducted research that estimated that 120M employees will need to reskill by 2022.
 - 58% of companies are redesigning or planning to redesign their career development models. (Deloitte Human Capital Trends, 2017)
 - The half life of a skill is now 4.5 years. (Deloitte Human Capital Trends, 2017)
 - 58% of employees believe they will have new careers in five years. (Deloitte Human Capital Trends, 2017)
- While COVID-19 is accelerating some of these trends or disrupting some workplaces, the reality is that many of these shifts are already happening as we get closer to what we've been calling the "future of work." As technology continues to disrupt the

workplace, students must build a habit of lifelong learning if they want to succeed in their chosen careers. At various points, they may need to evolve their careers or transition into new ones. This means that the best employees need to consistently identify new market opportunities and consistently acquire new skills and experiences to take advantage of those opportunities.

At times, this may mean simply learning new skills to stay ahead in your chosen job, but at others, it may mean evolving your career or transitioning into an entirely new one. The good news is that an MBA education provides students with the time, training, and resources to gain the skills and experiences needed to thrive in the future of work. The skills will go with them for the remainder of their careers.

As Jenny Blake, the author of *Pivot* suggests, “Think of your career like a smartphone, not a ladder: your education and your upbringing is your out-of-the-box model, and it’s up to you to download the apps that will help you feel fulfilled and build an energizing body of work. Just as with your phone, it’s important to recharge, clear clutter, and upgrade your entire Operating System when you outgrow the original.”

Regardless of whether you are attending your MBA program in person or virtually, it is your chance to download the apps to accelerate to the next stage in your career. The question then becomes, Which apps will you download?

Key takeaways

- The virtual experience is not the in-person experience, but there are plenty of opportunities to learn and grow.
- In times of challenge and uncertainty, being in a community of talented, intelligent, and hard working peers is a great place to be.
- It’s very difficult to replicate an in-person learning experience, but schools have been doing online learning for awhile, and professors are evolving their learning and teaching methods to improve the online experience.
- Learning virtually requires you to be proactive and disciplined to stay engaged. Make sure you put thought into how you structure your day. take advantage of the learning resources that are provided to you.
- Student clubs and organizations are great ways to build community and camaraderie, even virtually. They are also a great chance to build your own skills and leadership capabilities.
- Social virtual events via Zoom can be fun, and they are great ways to stay connected outside of the classroom. That said, they can also get tiring. Don’t forget the simple pleasures of just checking in on a classmate, texting someone to say hello, or just finding a way to catch up in an informal setting with your friends and peers.
- If you are struggling or challenged, you probably aren’t alone. Reach out to your classmates, peers, or administrators for help or support.



Key Questions to Answer

- What resources do I need in order to succeed in a virtual learning environment?
- What is a routine that I can put into place to help me make the most of each day?
- What skills or talents do I have that I could use to help my fellow classmates or MBA community members?
- For my given career field, who are people I can connect with now, to learn more about their profession or industry?
- For my given field, what are some skills or experiences that I would need for this career? What are some mini-projects I could take on right now in school to help me build those skills?
- Social virtual events via Zoom can be fun, and they are great ways to stay connected outside of the classroom. That said, they can also get tiring. Don't forget the simple pleasures of just checking in on a classmate, texting someone to say hello, or just finding a way to catch up in an informal setting with your friends and peers.
- If you are struggling or challenged, you probably aren't alone. Reach out to your classmates, peers, or administrators for help or support.

Acknowledgments

A big thank you to the following individuals who contributed to this report

- | | | | |
|---|---|----|---|
| 1 | Jasmine Ako (Yale SOM, '19) | 9 | Brad Vonick (UT-McCombs, '20) |
| 2 | Jeff Ellington (Wharton, '17) | 10 | Damon Reynolds (UT-McCombs, '20) |
| 3 | Katie Ellington (Wharton, '17) | 11 | Mariel Sena (Ross, '21) |
| 4 | Amy Hernandez Turcios (HBS, '20) | 12 | Stephanie Simpson (Ross, '21) |
| 5 | Becca Jordan Wright
(UNC Kenan-Flagler, '21) | 13 | Kirsten Smith
(UNC Kenan-Flagler, '20) |
| 6 | Julianne Katz (Rice, '21) | 14 | Ben Thayer (UNC Kenan-Flagler, '16) |
| 7 | Kendra Kelly (Olin, '21) | 15 | Jaavhi Vaidya (UCLA Anderson, '21) |
| 8 | Joey Parker (Haas, '21) | 16 | Anna Ward (NYU Stern, '20) |



About the Author

Al Dea is a career and leadership coach, author, and speaker. He is also the Founder of [MBASchooled](#) and [CareerSchooled](#), two online blogs that help people build successful careers. He is also the author of *MBA Insider: How to Make the Most of Your MBA Experience*. Through insights, interviews, and stories from industry professionals, Al provides readers with the insights and knowledge they need to start, transition, or grow their careers.

Al is an expert in career development, graduate education, and career transitions, and his thinking and insights have been published in outlets such as *Business Insider*, *The World Economic Forum*, and *Time Magazine*. Al previously worked as a management consultant at Deloitte Consulting LLP, where he advised Fortune 500 companies on developing and executing digital transformation. Al received his bachelor's degree in Business and Theology from Boston College, and his Master's in Business Administration from the University of North Carolina, Chapel-Hill.



Want more career guidance?

Check out our courses and pave
your way to career success

Courses.MBASchooled.com 

Get in touch

 www.mbaschooled.com

 [@alex_dea](https://twitter.com/alex_dea)

 www.linkedin.com/in/aldea1/