

BUSINESS SCHOOL PLAN

Take the long view to make your MBA application shine

Browsing brochures from America's business schools, you might think the world of barracks and BDUs couldn't be more distant from that of boardrooms and business suits.

Think again: The step from active duty to enrollment in an MBA program isn't nearly as imposing as it looks from the pages of those glossy fliers.

"I definitely think that [veterans] see the 15 or 25 percent admissions rate and don't think they can hack it," says Michael Cygan, a former captain with the 1st Armored Division and a 2009 graduate of Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. But "our experiences are unique enough that schools do want the veterans."

A military career isn't a golden ticket to admission in preferred programs, however. Military applicants must approach the admissions process with the same eye to detail and planning they learned in the service.

Know thyself

The successful business-school applicant starts with a hearty dose of self-reflection. Applicants should clarify career goals, personal values and learning styles as they sift through potential alma maters.

The two processes are linked: Is Wharton's emphasis on finance or Kellogg's reputation for management a better fit? Will Harvard's case method or Stanford's emphasis on teamwork provide the best learning environment? How does military experience affect these decisions?

With an undergraduate degree in engineering and Army leadership experience, Cygan wanted a program that emphasized operations. Knowing that narrowed schools considerably,



Veterans made up about 5 percent of the class of 2012 at Harvard Business School, up from about 3 percent the last four years.

and helped him stress his qualifications to the right programs.

"It's almost paramount when you're applying to schools that they know exactly why you want to be in that school and why you're a good fit for them," he says.

Although it's tempting to choose a school based on its ranking, applicants who skimp on personal reflection will regret it when the selection becomes competitive. Three "why" questions — why business school, why now, why this institution — are guaranteed to be a part of every admissions interview, says Esther Choy, a consultant whose Leadership Story Lab (www.leadershipstorylab.com) specializes in preparing applicants for the

admissions process.

"If you've done your homework as far as your own career development, those three 'why' questions would be naturally flowing out of your mouth without having to script your talking points," she says.

Leadership lessons

Top-tier business schools take the work of molding future leaders as seriously as teaching finance. And that emphasis on leadership gives veterans a leg up.

"Our mission is to educate leaders who make a difference in the world," explains Deirdre Leopold, managing director of admissions and financial aid at Harvard School of Business. "That means we need to start with leadership talent. ... I think the way that the military is structured, it's very easy for military candidates to demonstrate that."

Competitive applicants address a school's leader-building mission directly in their application essays and interviews. The best examples of leadership don't hinge on job

descriptions and numbers of subordinates, but on cases when an applicant identified a problem and took initiative to correct it. Don't fixate on the chain of command, but on actions.

Virtually every military career should be brimming with stories that will wow interviewers; count on all veterans to come to the admissions process with impressive leadership skills on their résumé. But MBA programs want a diverse class and only take the best from each sector that applies to the school.

Successful military applicants use their leadership roles as a springboard to highlight additional activities — special projects on post, volunteer work or other community-outreach efforts. Applicants who don't have many outside activities should focus on the problem-solving and communication skills

used in leadership roles.

"There's got to be something in the application that stands out so you're not just a garden-variety military applicant," said Cygan, who stressed his rapid promotion through the ranks in his own application.

Steer recommendations

Recommendations from commanding officers or other colleagues have a major influence on an application, but many recommenders don't know what they should include. Wise applicants clue their recommender into the process, providing him with long- and short-term goals, and explaining the decision to go to business school.

"The more information you can provide to them, the easier it is for your recommenders to write your letter and the more substantive it will be," Choy says.

Ideally, an applicant's letters of recommendation will mesh perfectly with the ambitions presented in his admissions essays.

The more clearly an applicant has defined

APPLICATION TIMELINE

Applicants who hope to attend business school in fall 2011 need to begin meeting milestones now for a successful application.

September-October

- Prepare for and take GMAT. Allow time for at least one retest.
- Finalize shortlist of programs in which you are interested.

November

- Select references to write letters of recommendation.

- Begin work on application essays.

December-January

- Submit applications by each program's deadline.
- Submit Free Application for Federal Student Aid for eligibility for financial aid.

February


- Visit campuses of schools to which you've been accepted.
- Prepare for admissions interviews.

March-April

- Attend admissions interviews.
- Make final selection.

these goals, and the more aware he is of how they fit with a college's methods, the better his chances are, regardless of the institution.

"The person who is just thinking ... about getting in and hasn't thought about beyond — I think they'll always be a weak applicant," said Seda Mansour, associate director

of admissions at Stanford's Graduate School of Business. "The more self-aware an applicant is, I think the better choice they're going to make. ... They're going to be a better fit. It will resonate with the right program." 

— Matt Schild

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