Beyond the Core

Most schools now offer students opportunities to focus their MBA studies on a specific industry.

By Cindy Krischer Goodman

With demand for MBA programs remaining flat, Florida universities are ramping up efforts to lure new students by offering specialized programs and teaching out to local employers for input.

Students now are able to choose from among more than 50 specialized MBA programs at Florida's universities, with concentrations in areas such as entrepreneurship, sports management, health care, international business and supply chain management.

"We're responding to the needs of the modern student and the business world," says Don Capener, dean of Jacksonville University's Davis College of Business. Capener says his school's new MBA with a concentration in consumer goods and services will launch in fall.

While MBA programs typically offer courses in "core" disciplines such as accounting, finance and marketing, specialized programs let students focus their elective courses on a specific industry or function. In some cases, an entire MBA program is focused on managerial skills for a specific industry.

Nationally, some of the more sought-after specializations include MBAs in supply chain management, entrepreneurship, informational technology, international business and real estate management. Zara Ahmad, who will graduate in May with an MBA in health care management from Florida International University, knew she wanted deeper industry-specific knowledge to advance in the health care field. "If you are unsure of your plan, the broader MBA might be more beneficial, but if you have been working a few years and know the direction you are going, specialization can get you where you want to go," Ahmad says.

J. Piastron Jones, dean of Nova Southeastern University's H. Wayne Huizenga School of Business and Entrepreneurship in Davie, expects Florida's business schools will continue to create new MBA specializations, particularly as they compete with hundreds of institutions offering MBA degrees, sometimes entirely online. "We want to find a way to distinguish ourselves in the marketplace. That's what is driving this," Jones says.
Florida International University

Concentration: Health Care Management

Medical school can teach you how to treat your patients but not necessarily how to run a physician practice or manage a hospital. Mercy Bradley believes an MBA degree gives health care professionals the understanding and equips them to make well-informed business decisions.

As director of FIU’s MBA in health care management, Bradley looks for midlevel health care managers, physicians or clinic workers who want to know more about business, strategy and leadership.

“Our core business curriculum is the same as the general MBA program, but our case studies relate to health care or hospital systems,” Bradley explains.

A recent case study asked students to analyze the implementation of a disease management program for diabetes and recommend the most effective strategy. Along with management skills, students also delve into health care policy, financing and reimbursement, and budgeting. In a series of courses and challenges, they are required to work together to find answers and solve problems encountered in working environments.

“The majority of our students are working in hospital or health network systems and want to go to the next level in their careers,” Bradley says. “They realize they need an advanced degree to do that.” Some, too, are in other fields and want to transition into health care.

Zara Ahmad, director of HR at the Palace and Rehabilitation Center in Kendall, says her company’s top executives have already promoted her since she enrolled in a specialized MBA program.

“My coursework covers challenges I am dealing with in my workplace such as insurance reimbursement and new health care laws,” she says. As her facility moves from paper to electronic systems, Ahmad found value in her course on implementing information systems designed specifically for health care.

FIU’s health care MBA is an 18-month program in which students move through together, taking two courses per term for a total of four a semester. The school also offers an online option.

“Health care institutions feel their leaders need to be well versed in many areas to understand the big picture to make improvements,” Bradley says.

As part of the MBA program, FIU students are enrolled in a Write2Learn program that provides them with an opportunity to improve their writing skills in preparation for a career in health care management. “From the moment they begin our program, students are being prepared to think and write clearly about complex health care issues,” Bradley says.

FIU has graduated 263 students with MBAs in health care since 2010 and has 149 students enrolled in the program.