

MBA Admission **FOR SMARTIES**

**The No-Nonsense Guide to
Acceptance at Top Business Schools**

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The No-Nonsense Guide to
Acceptance at Top Business Schools

By Linda Abraham and Judy Gruen

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310-815-9553

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Book cover and content designed by Sarah Abraham - www.sarahadesign.com

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ISBN 1466294981

Library of Congress Control number 2011916022

First Edition

Printed in the United States

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my parents and my husband, who have
inspired, encouraged, and sustained.

– Linda Abraham

To Jeff, my husband and best friend, my love forever.

– Judy Gruen

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Preface



If you are considering adding the prestigious initials “MBA” to your credentials, you are probably like many of the thousands of clients my graduate school admissions company, Accepted.com, has worked with over the years: intelligent, goal-oriented, ambitious and eager to make your mark in the world of business. Whether you dream of bringing new products to the marketplace, becoming a successful investment banker or one day having the title of CEO of a business or not-for-profit organization, you know that a robust business education can make the difference between realizing those dreams – or not.

It’s no wonder that in good economic times or bad, the MBA remains one of the most sought-after graduate degrees. Foundational coursework in business combined with access to internships, specialty programs and powerful alumni networks usually makes the investment in an MBA pay off handsomely. Research commissioned by *Bloomberg Businessweek* in 2011 and conducted by PayScale estimated the difference in median cash compensation (salary and bonuses) between the “haves” and “have-nots” of MBAs to be more than \$1 million over the course of twenty years. And you won’t be surprised to learn that the most prestigious of the full-time MBA programs, including Harvard, Wharton and Stanford, yielded a long-term salary differential much greater, about \$3.6 million over a twenty-year period. That’s a lot of cash.

But here’s what you may not know: Gaining acceptance to the right MBA programs for you requires considerable thought, research and effort – significantly more than you may realize. Notice that I said *the right MBA programs for you* and not the most illustrious name in the pantheon of top-ranked programs. MBA applicants like to aim as high as possible when applying to schools, but even in tougher economic times it’s always a buyer’s market, and the MBA programs are the buyers. This is one reason, though certainly not the only reason, why *the process of choosing an MBA program must go beyond a superficial picking of the top ten or even top twenty schools*.

In more than sixteen years as a graduate school admissions consultant, I have seen a needless yet predictable pattern in too many clients. These men and women were well qualified for many excellent programs yet set themselves

up for rejection by failing to evaluate how closely they fit with their target schools, which were often out of their league. Dazzled by a school's star status, these applicants didn't or wouldn't explore whether they were competitive for their "reach" schools or even whether the schools met their educational needs. I am not suggesting that you shouldn't aim high, but you're much more likely to hit your target if you subscribe to the "Ready, Aim, Fire!" approach rather than the "Fire, Aim!" approach.

Fortunately, most of our clients understand that to be successful in their quest for an MBA, they must ask themselves two fundamental questions:

- ☑ Do my career goals and personal preferences match the school's curricular, extracurricular, and recruiting strengths?
- ☑ Do my academic and professional qualifications compare favorably to the school's recent class profiles?

When you take the time and effort to match your career goals to the school strengths, you reveal "fit," an element all admissions committee members look for. When you understand how your profile compares to those recently accepted, you are in a position to evaluate your competitiveness for a particular program. The schools that help you achieve your goals are the ones you should want to attend, and the schools where you are competitive are those more likely to accept you. Determining overlap between those two categories will help open the MBA admissions doors at the right schools for you.

An effective application is not about spin

It's also become popular among some grad school consultants to claim that MBA candidates need to create "spin" in their applications and advise candidates to "brand" themselves. I disagree. Branding is important for consumer products, like Pepsi, Patagonia, and Puma, and it's essential for ranchers who need to identify their cattle. Spin is also necessary after publicity disasters or to put the best face on poor corporate earnings. Ultimately, however, no matter how competitive a program is, the MBA applications process involves complex and multifaceted human beings on the admissions committee who are carefully (albeit sometimes quickly) evaluating other complex and multifaceted human beings as potential matches for their programs.

Understood this way, focusing on spin is a bad idea not only because it is simplistic and artificial. It's a bad idea because in focusing on the sizzle rather than the steak, you might easily present yourself in a way that is inauthentic or incomplete. Either scenario is a loser for you. For example, let's say you portray yourself as someone you *think* the school wants you to be (but are not) and are accepted. In that case, you may realize only too late that the school is a bad fit for the real you. This emphasis on marketing over authentic presentation will likely cause you to miss opportunities to reveal yourself to the admissions committee in a meaningful way. This, sadly, can dash your prospects for acceptance. So leave the spin for the wash cycle and branding for soft drinks and athletic shoes. Your job as an MBA applicant is to show yourself to full advantage – authentically and genuinely.

What this book will help you accomplish

When the admissions committee sees that you aren't a fit, you're toast. So it's not enough to aim high; you have to aim *smart*. That's why I'm glad you have picked up this book. *MBA Admissions for Smarties* will be your friendly guide to *both* aspects of a successful application: the *strategy* involved in researching appropriate schools and the effective *presentation* of your candidacy. The greatest boost to your odds for acceptance requires *beginning with the end goal in mind*. In Part 1 of this book, I will show you how to map out a winning strategy that will help you:

- ☑ Define and assess your career goals.
- ☑ Determine which MBA programs should remain on your target list.
- ☑ Assess your qualifications, both quantitatively and qualitatively.
- ☑ Evaluate fit with the program, which leapfrogs you ahead of much of the competition.
- ☑ Decide how many schools to apply to and when to apply.

In Part 2, we will move from the strategy to presentation. In these chapters I will show you how to present your qualifications clearly, compellingly and authentically. Specifically, you will learn how to:

- ☑ Develop core ideas for your essays and build each one with meaningful, distinctive content.
- ☑ Avoid the most common pitfalls of weak or forgettable essays.
- ☑ Respond to particular essay questions.
- ☑ Edit for quality, cohesiveness and authenticity.
- ☑ Write and revise your resume for maximum impact and minimum fat.
- ☑ Gather letters of recommendation that pack a punch.
- ☑ Prepare for school interviews.

Tailor your applications for special circumstances (i.e., waitlisted, reapplicant, overrepresented applicant pool, underrepresented minority, career changers, military, older or younger applicants).

At Accepted.com, we work with our clients to help them think through their strategy and make their strongest case for admission. In *MBA Admissions for Smarties*, I am sharing the winning strategies that have proven themselves over time and helped earn admission for thousands of clients to top programs in the United States and internationally. This book offers practical advice on how to present yourself to the schools to maximum advantage, with minimal headaches and second-guessing.

A few notes on the text: While this book was written by both of us, we have chosen to write it using the singular “I” instead of “we” for a friendlier, personal feel. Additionally, all names of clients have been changed.

Behind the scenes, you not only benefit from two experienced admissions consultants, but also from several other Accepted.com editors whose contributions have added so much to this book. Jennifer Bloom, Natalie Grinblatt Epstein, Cindy Tokumitsu, and former Accepted.com editor Dr. Sachin

Waikar all allowed us to excerpt their blog posts and offered their expertise. Nancy Evans went far beyond the call of duty in bringing her many years of experience in textbook development editing to this project. Her recommendations on both style and content have added tremendous value, and Dr. Rebecca Blustein offered expert proofreading in the final stages.

Aside from our own talented staff, Maxx Duffy, founder of Maxx Associates; Dr. Christie St. John, Senior Associate Director of Admission at the Tuck School of Business; Leila Pirnia, Founder of MBA Podcaster; and Christine Sneva, Director, Admissions and Financial Aid at the Johnson Graduate School of Management read the manuscript in draft form and offered valuable feedback.

And now, let's get started!

Linda Abraham and Judy Gruen

Objective MBA: Let Your Goals Guide You

“If you don’t know where you are going, you might wind up someplace else.” -- Yogi Berra

I had spent the day at a leading strategy consulting firm giving a seminar on MBA admissions. My presentation was well-received, and I had a good time. I was simultaneously exhausted and energized.

Thinking back on the day, I realized that in each of the four presentations I delivered, whether talking about applicant qualifications, choosing schools, the admissions perspective, or planning for the future, I ended up talking about the importance of goals. And in the afternoon when meeting individually with future applicants, I was struck by the fact that *none* of them had clear goals for their MBA, not even the ones who were definitely committed to applying in the coming fall and were working hard on GMAT prep.

Here’s a perfect example. A young man named Alex¹ approached me, keen to discuss his MBA application strategy and target schools. Alex was also eager to tell me about his GMAT (720), his work experience as an engineer at a start-up and, more recently, his experience at an established software company, where he devised a creative solution that saved the firm nearly \$75,000 in streamlined efficiencies during the last year. Alex had a respectable community service track record as a Big Brother and tutor. He was a strong candidate on paper, and his six target schools were all ranked in the top twenty. So far, so good. But when I began to ask him some basic questions that I would ask any MBA applicant, I saw that Alex fell into the all-too-familiar trap of focusing on the idea of earning an MBA without focusing on why he wanted it.

¹ All client names have been changed.

For example, when I asked him, “What is your short-term, post-MBA goal?” he said, “I’m interested in technology entrepreneurship, consulting, or possibly marketing.”

“That isn’t a goal, Alex. That’s a list,” I told him. “If you write all of those in a goals essay, or state that in an interview, it will be a loud signal to the admissions committee that you haven’t a clue what you want to do. In the best case, you will seem as if you lack focus. At worst, your application will be quickly dismissed. You can’t offer a kaleidoscope of goals, or you’re going to get dinged.”

A goal is something you want to do, not just study

I don’t mean to be too hard on Alex. In his mid-twenties, with a lot of talent, energy and an eagerness to explore the untapped potential of his budding career, he understandably wanted to remain open to various possibilities and was just being honest about it. Like many other clients I have worked with, Alex was at first surprised when I told him his goals were too fuzzy. I told him what I have told countless other prospective MBA students: Goals must be credible, clear, and sincere. They must specify not only industry, but function. In fact, well-defined goals are as much a requirement in successful MBA admissions as GMAT, GPA, and work experience. *They are front and center in the minds of admissions readers. Put them front and center in your mind as you prepare to apply.*

Alex was a little bit thrown by this at first. He asked me, “Don’t the schools know that even if you have one goal in mind when you apply to MBA programs, your goals might change?”

“Sure they do,” I told him. “Nobody knows what the future will bring, Alex, but your choice of an MBA program has to show that you have thoughtfully charted a course that leads from where you have been to where you want to go. A goal has to include the industry you’d like to work in as well as the role or function you want to play in that industry. What do you want to accomplish in this field? What impact do you hope to make? The schools also want to know what motivates you to choose this goal in the first place.”

Alex nodded thoughtfully, so I continued.

“There’s more. Schools will also want to know that you’re a good fit for their program in other respects. You need to honestly assess not only your academic and professional achievements, but also your personality, learning style and preferences for location while in school. Not everybody is cut out for the cold northeast. Not everybody thrives as much in an urban setting as they do in a quieter locale.”

“That makes sense. I just hadn’t thought about all these things before,” Alex admitted.

Alex could have made a mental note not to call me for any further consulting and walked away. Instead, he hired me to work with him and ultimately was accepted at one of his top choice schools.

How Alex defined his goals for his MBA and beyond

Based on my suggestion, Alex began to think more deeply about certain aspects of his personality and experience, some of which he had not at first connected with the work of choosing and applying to business schools. For example, I recommended that he first *look inward* and ask himself the following: *What do I enjoy and where do I excel? What lessons and values can I bring from my nonprofessional life to my professional life?*

Then I recommended he *look outward* and consider what professional paths would take advantage of his strengths and offer the potential to give him more of what he found satisfying.

In addition to these considerations, Alex thought about other personal preferences that could affect his choice of target schools. As part of this process, we brainstormed together about his goals, an exercise that Alex found a little intimidating at first but ultimately liberating. Taking time for deeper self-reflection led Alex to refine those goals in a more targeted fashion, ultimately focusing on technology entrepreneurship. This made the most sense for him not only given his professional experience, but also because he was genuinely more enthusiastic about this option than the other options he had considered in marketing or consulting.

Research – With his newly refined goals and understanding about his own needs, Alex did further research about various programs and their “person-

alities” to consider where he was really a better fit. This resulted in crossing two schools off his list and replacing them with two others that he hadn’t even considered before but whose strengths, recruitment record, location and learning style were excellent matches for him. While the two new programs were outside the top ten, both were excellent programs. His choices also showed me that Alex was willing to look beyond the sometimes blinding star status of the highest-ranked programs to find ones that would still provide an outstanding education and an even better fit – or scholarship money.

Writing with focus – Alex’s exercise in refining his goals and values clarification immediately enabled him to write with more confidence and passion about his career path and why he was well-suited for the schools where he ultimately applied. In taking this more deliberate method of choosing schools, he learned something that may sound deceptively simple but is too often forgotten: A goal is something you want to *do*, not just study.

What is your situation?

Some applicants may be very clear about either the industry in which they want to work or the function or job title they’d like to have, but not always both. For example, you may be certain that you want to grow into a marketing executive role but are much less clear about what product or service you’d like to help market. There’s an enormous difference in what you will need to know if you choose healthcare marketing versus technology marketing, or entertainment marketing versus automotive marketing, or real estate marketing versus social enterprise marketing. These all fall under the large umbrella of marketing. However, the differences among those industries and the knowledge and skills needed to work within them could lead you to choose among different MBA programs.

Taking the example further, does your career goal in marketing include business development, market research, brand management or channel management? Focusing more sharply on the nuances of your chosen industry or chosen job function can and should affect your school selection.

This doesn’t mean your career trajectory has to be completely linear. For example, let’s say you are a software consultant who has worked on software marketing projects or a software designer who has worked in product development. Now you now want to go into brand management in the software

industry. This goal still makes sense. It is focused and clear. This sort of clarity is a vital asset to you in the application process.

Draw a direct line from where you have been to where you want to go.

As you chart your post-MBA goals, write down the answers to the following questions. This exercise will help you in your own process of clarifying your goals and helping you pinpoint the most suitable schools for you.

- What aspects of your work **experience** have given you the most satisfaction?
- Where do you envision your greatest **potential** to grow professionally?
- What is your driving **motivation** to pursue this goal?
- What **character traits** do you possess that will be an asset in a given role or industry?
- When did you first discover an **opportunity** or need in your desired industry or function?
- What is your long-term **vision** for your career at this point, and how will your short-term goal logically lead to the realization of your long-term career vision?

Your goals will certainly evolve over time, and when you apply to MBA programs you may be genuinely torn between two equally compelling short-term goals. But by the time you sit down to write your goals essay, *you need to draw a direct line from where you have been in your career and where you want to go.*

Later on in the application process you are likely to be asked to discuss both short-term and long-term career goals, so it's useful to think about the distinction between those now. To help you visualize what that path will look like, ask yourself the following questions:

- ☑ What would your ideal position be at each of these stages?
- ☑ What specific goals or milestones would you like to achieve at each stage?
- ☑ What impact would you hope to have on the people you work with and in your chosen field?
- ☑ What type of company or companies would you work for along the way?

Do your research so that your goals are achievable. If you are not already well-versed in what is happening in your target industry, research hiring trends, services, organization, market status, products and competitive concerns in your field and in the kind of companies you would like to work for, then seek informational interviews with people in the positions you aspire to as well as with recruiters in your target field. These efforts will also help you write intelligently about your chosen field and show that you understand its current needs, challenges and opportunities. And they will help you see where you can make your mark.

What if you're a career changer?

If you are a career changer, then how do you chart your course? The truth is that well over half of all MBA students are career changers, and some schools estimate the figure is closer to 80 or 90 percent if “career changer” is defined as a change in either industry or function. So you will have a lot of company in the applicant pool. Although a majority of MBA applicants are changing careers, you still must present the case that you are sufficiently informed about your new field and role to make it seem a credible, authentic choice for you. Again, research is critical, including interviewing people who already work in the field. Think about what skills you already possess that will be an asset in your new field. Let’s say you come from a not-for-profit background and want to go into business consulting. Your skills may already include excellent fundraising, organizational and people-management skills, which can transfer – with help – to business consulting. Applicants from the military often have many traits that are highly desirable in the business world, such as leadership and operations management, even if they have not worked in a business setting.

Remember to have a Plan B

An MBA program that accepts you wants to feel confident that you will be employable at the end of their program. Part of your job in convincing them that you are a good investment is to show them that if your ideal career path takes a circuitous route or doesn't pan out, you are agile enough, smart enough and prepared enough to have a credible Plan B in mind. Our economy has endured several volatile years, and the pace of change in the economy keeps increasing faster and faster, forcing changes in almost every industry. How ready will you be to adapt? Is your vision specific enough to show focus, yet also broad enough to embrace the need to change course if necessary? If you are a career changer or are trying to enter a field where the bar to entry is already very high, such as venture capital or private equity, be prepared with an alternate career route that will eventually get you to your dream goal.

Where do you want to live during school, and where do you want to work after school?

Your career goals and the knowledge and skills that you need from an MBA education remain the primary focus as you target your schools, but don't gloss over other important considerations. For example, an increasing percentage of MBA applicants to U.S. schools are from outside the United States and are passionate about returning to their countries of origin, bringing with them a sophisticated set of business skills that they will apply to enhance an industry or field back home. If this is your situation, look for programs that offer coursework and programs that specialize in doing business in the part of the world where you plan to establish your career, including highly regarded MBA programs abroad.

And speaking of geography, you will likely spend two full years in an MBA program. Where will you be happiest living during that time? Do you want to live in a big city or small college town? Do you prefer a big university or a smaller, more intimate environment? Are you excited by the cultural opportunities of a lively urban center, or would you rather not be distracted and prefer a more rural setting? Your lifestyle, values and budget will also dictate which schools are better matches for you than others. And if you are married or living with a partner, how does your spouse or partner feel about moving to these new locations with you? Will he or she be able to find a job?

Curriculum style, clubs, recruitment history, and other considerations

In thinking about your post-MBA goals, you also need to consider several aspects of your target schools that can best support those goals and likely career path. These will all involve looking closely at their curriculum, programs, clubs, recruitment history and financial aid/scholarship possibilities. I'll develop this topic in much more detail in Chapter 2, but for now, keep in mind that each school offers different educational approaches. Before choosing a school, make sure you understand their teaching methodology and flexibility of the curriculum. Does the program have specialty tracks in your field? For applicants with specific goals, this criterion plays a more significant role.

I hope that by now I've convinced you beyond any doubt that taking the time to fine tune your career goals, short term and long term, is an invaluable investment of your time. No matter how busy you are now, you need to take the time for this kind of self-reflection, which will result in applications that show the admissions committee that your goals are carefully considered, informed and appropriate for you. While some of my clients at first balk a little at doing this work, they have all thanked me for it afterward, saying how much clearer and more confident they feel about their applications and their goals.

As Dean Robert Bruner of the Darden School of Business (University of Virginia) once wrote on his blog, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there. As the Proverb says, 'Without a vision, the people will perish.' A big red flag is having no vision for your future. Without a vision, you might as well throw a dart to select a school. Better yet, without a vision you might as well defer your enrollment until you have figured things out."²

Once you have your vision, you are better prepared to identify the schools that are the best match for *you*. That's what we will do in the next chapter.

2 <http://blogs.darden.virginia.edu/deansblog/2007/04/deciding-to-accept-an-offer-of-admission-what-role-should-rankings-play/>

The Bottom Line

- Invest the time and energy to **define your goals** for an MBA education and beyond.
- **Look inward** to discover what you enjoy and where you excel. Then **look outward** to consider likely professional paths that will maximize your strengths and maximize your chances for professional fulfillment.
- **Distinguish between short-term and long-term goals** and how you will map your course from where you have been to where you want to go.
- **Research** the educational approach, curriculum flexibility, specialty tracks, recruitment possibilities, location, financial aid, and even extracurricular clubs and student life at your target schools.
- Clear, well-defined goals are as much a requirement in successful MBA admissions as GMAT, GPA, and work experience. They are front and center in the minds of admissions readers. **Put goals front and center in your mind as you prepare to apply.**

Like what you've just read?

Then you'll love what's still to come.

MBA Admission for Smarties is loaded with expert advice on choosing the right schools, writing persuasive MBA essays, drafting a compelling resume, securing the best recommenders, and more.

Plus, it's cheaper than a first-run movie!

Buy your copy of *MBA Admission for Smarties: The No-Nonsense Guide to Acceptance at Top Business Schools* now!