

In the classroom, online, and through newly popular hybrid models, **innovative graduate programs** help executives bring fresh thinking and valuable skills to the workplace.



New Options in Postgraduate Learning

HEATHER SERRANO WAS AN executive at a California-based financial services firm several years ago when she decided to go back to school. “There were more and more strategy issues coming my way and I didn’t feel fully prepared to deal with them,” she says. To remedy that, Serrano enrolled in Michigan State University’s Eli Broad School of Business, and after 20 months of online classes, she graduated last August with a master of science degree in management, strategy, and leadership.

The program included a weekly videoconference with her classmates and professors, and a course schedule of test dates and assignments. “So much of business is conducted remotely these days, so I felt the online aspect of the degree was actually very helpful,” she says. “When your client is on the other side of the world, you’re not having in-person meetings, so it’s important to know how to use technology to your advantage.”

Serrano is among a growing group of executives finding value and fulfillment by returning to the classroom—in person or virtually—to hone their management skills. The chance to network and the added expertise can quickly deliver improved job opportunities and earning power. After completing her degree, for example, Serrano leveraged her new skills from MSU to land a more senior position with another global bank.

Some universities are combining the best features of online and on-campus executive learning to create so-called hybrid programs. At Oklahoma State University (OSU), for instance, candidates in the three-year executive Ph.D. program attend classes at the Tulsa campus for three consecutive days every month; the rest of the degree is completed online. This blended format, explains Toby Joplin, director of the executive doctoral programs, appeals to senior managers who like the networking opportunities of the on-campus classes but need the flexibility of online learning.

Executives who apply tend to be senior managers with 25 years or more of experience, based in the U.S. or overseas, who are tasked with making data-driven decisions. “Unlike an MBA, which is more case study-driven, this Ph.D. program is a true and rigorous research degree,” says Joplin, who earned his doctorate at OSU in 2014.

At Villanova University, companies can create custom-designed online certificate programs that address the specific needs of their managers and industry. Brooklyn, New York-based health care provider MJHS, for example, recently put 30 midlevel managers through a Six Sigma certificate course designed and taught by Villanova professors.

Robert Leamer, senior vice president and general counsel at MJHS, says the program helped managers solve complex problems. “Getting the certificate was great,” he says. “But the real payoff comes when people can incorporate those skills in their job.” ●

ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES YANG

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