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M.B.A. forum focuses on more flexibility

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Try to see the world through the eyes of an alien who wants to know how to fit in among this planet's inhabitants. He notices that most people wear pants, and he wonders where people get them.

He finds out that, even though they could buy pants by computer or by telephone, most go to a store. Why? People say they like to try them on.

How, then, would this alien imagine our stores? futurist Edie Weiner asked nearly 70 business school leaders from around the nation who met Friday at Villanova University.

The alien likely would picture lots of big fitting rooms and great customer service. As Weiner had intended, her audience - there to discuss the M.B.A. of the future - laughed.

Her point was that every industry has its version of the fitting room. One trick to surviving in a world of rapidly accelerating change is figuring out what your fitting room is and capitalizing on it. Another is learning to think like an alien.

Weiner spoke to members of the MBA Roundtable, a 10-year-old organization whose members discuss curriculum issues. James Danko, dean of Villanova's business school, is the group's president. Friday's meeting focused on meeting the changing needs of students and employers at a time when schools are being criticized for everything from the ethical lapses of corporate leaders to the sometimes esoteric research of professors.

Another business school group, the Middle Atlantic Association of Colleges of Business Administration, also met in Philadelphia last week to discuss changes at the undergraduate level. A research team from La Salle University concluded that there haven't been many.

Leaders at both meetings said college political forces, walls between departments, and entrenched programs make change difficult.

At a time when computers can teach through gaming and virtual reality, the fitting room of M.B.A. programs is not a professor talking, Weiner told the Villanova group. Far more important are the social networks that programs provide and the value of their brands.

As school leaders think about the future, Weiner cautioned them to be wary of a common failing she called "educated incapacity... knowing so much about what you know that

you're the last to be able to see the future for it differently." She would never go to doctors, she said, to divine medicine's future.

She said schools should also rethink whom they admit, taking fewer students who get A's in everything - she saw that as a sign of being too risk-averse to take harder courses or too good at regurgitating information - in favor of more creative thinkers. As we enter what she called the "virtual economy" - one dominated by competition between large networks - companies will pay the most for intelligence. That, she said, "is the ability to figure something out when you have never learned it before."

Ronald Hill, Villanova's senior associate dean of intellectual strategy, questioned Weiner's assumptions about students who do and don't get good grades. Many good students are, in fact, creative, and they succeed because they work hard, he said. Some are failing in school not because they are creative, but because they are not all that interested in doing well.

Schools should be experimenting with new classes and new ways of teaching, a panel that included people who specialize in corporate training told the crowd. There should also be more emphasis on learning through experience and preparing for the global marketplace.

M.B.A. programs can differentiate themselves from other learning programs, said panelist Jerry Wind, professor of operations and information management at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. They can do that, he said, by generating knowledge. M.B.A. forum focuses on more flexibility

At the earlier meeting in Philadelphia, which was hosted by St. Joseph's University at the Sheraton Society Hill, James Talaga, a La Salle University marketing professor, said undergraduate business school curricula have changed little since 1993. He recently compared current course offerings and requirements for 309 schools with those in 1993. The top 12 required courses - classes like accounting I and II, marketing and microeconomics, are the same.

The number of required quantitative courses - subjects like intermediate microeconomics, money and banking - has fallen. The percentage of business schools that required no math courses rose from 8.7 to 12.9.

Colleges are now more likely to require courses in introduction to business, international business and business communication.

Given how little change there has been, Talaga said he doesn't foresee big undergraduate changes in the future.