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Courting the Younger Business School Student

You'd be hard pressed to find it written in most business school literature, but common wisdom says the successful M.B.A. student has five years of post-college work experience. While 26 or 27 remains the average age of entering students at many top programs, business school officials are looking to shatter the myth that there's an age associated with the model applicant.

In a move meant to deliver that message, the Harvard Business School last week [unveiled a deferred admissions program](#) that allows applicants to be considered while they are still undergraduates. Rising college seniors who are admitted through the 2+2 program, as it is called, will enroll in Harvard's M.B.A. program after working for two years at a company or organization that has agreed to participate.

"Our message is apply when you think you're ready," said Carl Kester, deputy dean for academic affairs and a professor of finance at Harvard Business School. "We are concerned that interesting and outstanding students are being fast tracked at jobs and are not considering business school until reaching a certain point in their careers. We said, 'What if we opened up a channel to resolve that uncertainty?'"

The program, part of an early-career initiative begun by the business school several years ago to attract younger applicants, is taking aim at students who might not otherwise consider a business school education — such as those who major in fields that aren't business school feeders, Kester said. While the school wants more diversity of age and experience, it isn't expressly addressing race or gender with its new program.

While it's rare for Harvard Business School to admit students straight out of college, already about a third of its entering class consists of students who are 25 and under and most likely have three years or fewer of work experience. The expectation is for up to 10 percent of the school's incoming class of 900 students to be admitted through the deferred track. The first round of applications will come next summer, and the first class will begin the program two years from now.

Google and Teach for America are among the employers that have already signed on as recruiting partners, and Harvard is looking to make arrangements with roughly 100 businesses, including a mix of consulting firms, banks and technology companies. Students can choose their employer but still need to arrange an interview and formally apply (and be hired) for a job.

During the summer between the first and second year of work, Harvard is organizing an orientation and business skills program for the admitted students. A career coach also will be assigned and have light contact with students during their two years of employment.

The idea of courting motivated students to business school through a deferred admissions program isn't entirely new. In an effort to increase diversity among its M.B.A. student pool, the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin already has a [similar arrangement](#) in which six corporations agree to take on admitted students for three years after they graduate college, after which time the students start school.

David A. Wilson, president and chief executive officer of the Graduate Management Admission Council, said he applauds Harvard's effort to bring more diversity to its business school class, in part because it shows that the school is willing to bet on students who are clear on their career goals.

"What they've done, effectively, is said, 'We're going to find some of the brightest students and make sure they get two good years of experience,'" Wilson said. "Often when someone starts a job it may take four years to get one good year of experience."

Dan LeClair, vice president and chief knowledge officer at AACSB International: Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, said the challenge has always been for M.B.A. programs to think about how to get diverse applicant pools and at the same time ensure that the quality of the programs are not diminished by younger students who don't have experiences to draw on that add to class discussions.

One reason why business schools have been wary of taking on the early-career applicant in recent decades is the perceived importance of rankings. Admissions officials say if such tabulations take into account professional salary upon entry or graduation, it's hard to justify taking on younger students. Thus, schools go with the older student, seen largely as a safer bet.

In many cases, the state of the economy dictates whether students apply to business school en masse. Some who are already on the corporate fast track [make the financial decision to skip it altogether](#).

Harvard's program, LeClair said, is a "clever way" of creating more value for students, because they receive coaching and career development during the two-year work period — an unusual experience for students.

Robert Franek, vice president for publishing at Princeton Review and author of several college guidebooks, said he expects the program to change the way some of the other competitive programs think about attracting younger students. Wilson agreed, saying he'd be surprised if others didn't follow.

But interviews with leaders at some of the top business schools show that while officials are keeping a close eye on Harvard's initiative, they aren't ready to jump in quite yet. Paul Danos, dean of the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College, said the school isn't looking at going toward the deferred admissions model now but may consider it in the future.

"One size won't fit all in this case," Danos said. "Harvard isn't doing this out of necessity, and if Tuck did this, it would be to foster more diversity. Right now we're not feeling pressure to expand the applicant pool, but who knows, that could change."

Tuck has for years run a summer program for college students who want non-credit, pre-M.B.A. training. It is a feeder program for the school, which gets applications for many of the 250 students who participate.

At Tuck, the average applicant has about five years of work experience, and the distribution ranges typically from two to 10 years. While the average has come down in recent years, "it's not doing so by much," Danos said.

The Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, another highly rated program, doesn't admit students without professional work experience, and the average there is also about five years of work experience, said Beth Flye, assistant dean and the director of admissions and

financial aid. Flye said the school wants to attract more applicants with two or three years of experience, but it is still seeing the most interest from those in their later 20s or older.

“It depends largely on the individual and on how the school wants to position itself,” she said. “We adhere to the school of thought that some professional experience is necessary. But we are interested more in the quality of work experience than anchoring our requirements to a certain number of years.”

While Flye said Kellogg is paying attention to Harvard, she doesn't see the school going to the deferred admissions model anytime soon. Another of Harvard's competitors, the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, has an early-career option in which students, either directly from college or with one year of work experience, can apply. (The school asks these students explicitly why they want to get an M.B.A. at this early stage.)

Thomas Caleel, director of M.B.A. admissions and financial aid at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, said the school doesn't support the idea of deferred admissions, but is trying to welcome younger students. Wharton long publicized that applicants needed four years to be considered, but two years ago began removing that from its material to prospective students. Students with zero to three years of experience still make up only a small percent of the population, but of those students, about half are female.

Gender and age are concerns often linked when it comes to business school diversity, as women often see attending business school later in their career as untenable. Mark Zupan, dean of the Simon Graduate School of Business at the University of Rochester, said schools limit their ability to draw talented women in comparison to other professional schools that admit students out of college, which is “unfortunate,” he said “because getting an M.B.A. earlier in one's career may well be significantly more valuable.”

Rochester has a scholarship program for younger students with zero to three years of experience. The college partners with 25 liberal arts institutions that recommend their graduates for a scholarship of \$5,000 or above that Rochester offers. In part due to this effort, Zupan said, 31 percent of Rochester's students are female.

Zupan said of Harvard's program, “We used to be worried about staying ahead of the curve [in getting the younger student], but we found that everyone gains by the competition, so we welcome it.”

Added Kester, of Harvard: “For a time it may be a competitive advantage for us, but this is a field in which innovation is easily observed and imitated. If it works, others will in their own way follow suit. We're doing it because it'll be good for us and good for all the M.B.A programs out there if students begin to think about an M.B.A degree earlier.”

— [Elia Powers](#)