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## Talking B-School

# How to Raise Female M.B.A. Enrollment

By **RON ALSOP**

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Boosting female enrollment in M.B.A. programs has proved to be one of the most stubborn challenges facing business schools. The percentage of women has held fairly steady for many years -- in the 25% to 35% range at most schools. That "glass ceiling" troubles Elissa Ellis-Sangster, executive director of the Forté Foundation in Austin, Texas, an organization of companies and schools dedicated to increasing the number of women in M.B.A. programs and the business world. Earlier this month, she talked with M.B.A. Track columnist Ron Alsop about obstacles schools face in attracting more women and some strategies to try to overcome them.

**WSJ:** *Are there any signs of progress in increasing female enrollment?*

**Ms. Ellis-Sangster:** For a long time, we'd see a half percentage or full percentage point increase, but then it would often fall back the next year. Last year, however, we saw a little more uptick at some top-rated M.B.A. programs. Among schools that belong to the Forté Foundation, for example, there was a gain in female enrollment of nearly two percentage points. This year, I would expect another increase, but it's too early to know how much.


*Why don't more women enroll in M.B.A. programs?*

Timing has been one of the big reasons that it's so difficult to move the needle. When schools raised the work experience level to five years or more, it became a big issue for women who wanted to go back for their M.B.A. soon after college, before they started thinking about having a family. Recently, more schools have started to pay attention to that timing problem, taking women with only two or three years of experience and even allowing a few top-notch undergraduates to go straight from college into an M.B.A. program.

*But don't most corporate recruiters demand quite a bit of previous work experience?*

It's a catch-22 because you don't want women graduating with no experience and being considered unqualified for M.B.A.-level jobs. Banks and consulting firms have told me that job candidates really need at least two to three years of experience. But for many companies, there doesn't seem to be a huge difference between two to three years and four to six years.

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*Do young women not realize the business opportunities that could be available to them?*

It isn't as clear what you do with a business degree as it is with a degree in law or medicine. Many women have feelings of trepidation and like to see things clearly laid out before them. If they don't have a parent or close friend in business, they tend to explore careers that are more familiar to them. Law school is one of our biggest competitors. Liberal arts women who are good at speaking and writing are often advised to go to law school. When they think about business school, they worry about the quantitative challenges.

*How can women learn more about different industries and jobs in business?*

They can do research online through some of the major career sites. And at Forté, we offer Career Lab events at undergraduate colleges that provide an introduction to financial services, consumer packaged goods and other industries. Women hear stories from other women about how they got where they are -- the classes they took, clubs they belonged to and how they found internships. We're doing the career labs at about 10 schools and hope to expand the number.

*At how young an age should schools and companies promote business careers to women?*

There's definitely a need to plant the seed earlier, in high school if possible. But it's a bear to figure out how best to reach high-school students. For now, we're focusing on college-age women. We're building an online program that we'll roll out over the next year to 18 months, including podcasts and videos of women speaking about their careers. We also want to create an online game that's interactive and takes women through different life choices. And we're trying to get women to take the Graduate Management Admission Test before they leave college so they already have it in their pockets. Compared with men, there's a higher chance that women won't take the test later in life.

*Which strategies do you believe work best in attracting women to business schools?*

Personal, targeted approaches are best. By their junior and senior year of college, we need to go beyond online outreach and get women to attend events, have internships and talk one-on-one with a counselor. Women want to have personal access to other women who have already done it and can inspire them. At our Forté Forums for women 22 to 29 years old, there's a lot of discussion about work-life balance. They ask the businesswomen there how spouses support them and what kind of treatment they get in the workplace. Women want to feel valued and fulfilled.

*Can schools be more accommodating to the needs of women, particularly those who have families to care for?*

There are things schools could do to be more progressive. Day care, lactation rooms and the like could ease the day-to-day burdens of mothers in M.B.A. programs. But those things are pretty resource-intensive for schools. The flexibility of the curriculum might be a bigger issue for women rearing children who would like to switch to a part-time schedule for a period of time. But ultimately, I don't think pleasantries make or break a woman's plan to go back to business school.

*Should schools reach out more to parents, who tend to be so heavily involved in the lives of their children these days even after they leave home?*

Reaching out to parents is certainly a hot topic at our Forté board meetings because the millennial

generation is so connected with their parents. I never get calls from mothers, but I do get calls from fathers, often asking whether their daughter should get an M.B.A. right after college. I think dads can be a big influence. If they have a business career, just exposing their daughters to what they do is very important. They also can tell their daughters about the network of contacts you can build through an M.B.A.

*How do European schools compare with U.S. schools in terms of female M.B.A. enrollment?*

They struggle even more and are definitely behind U.S. schools. It's probably reflective of their cultures. Most European countries are five to 10 years behind the U.S. in terms of putting value and importance on diverse leadership. My sense is that Asian and Latin Americas schools are even further behind the U.S. in bringing women into M.B.A. programs.

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