

Does Your Online M.B.A. Program Feel Too Remote? There's a Bot For That

Robert Monroe, teaching professor of business technologies at Carnegie Mellon University's Tepper School of Business, filmed a class he led in the school's online M.B.A. program.

As business schools struggle to lure young professionals out of a hot U.S. job market, more are promoting online M.B.A.s with a twist: They are promising the convenience of a virtual degree, but with the social-networking benefits of a traditional one.

Some programs are turning to technology to try to replicate the campus clubbiness that many students say is a valuable part of a masters of business administration degree.

At Carnegie Mellon University's Tepper School of Business, for instance, remote students can connect to a robot with a tablet-attached "face" that lets them to virtually attend professional-networking events and even participate in graduation ceremonies from afar.

The University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, which is launching an online M.B.A. program next year, is creating a digital version of the school's atrium-like Davidson Winter Garden, complete with discussion boards and a suite of digital resources where online students can go to "hang out" virtually and work on projects together. Meanwhile in Houston, roughly two dozen students who enrolled this past July in Rice University's first online M.B.A. class meet weekly in live, small-group class sessions, with their faces appearing on computer screens in a grid like the opening of "The Brady Bunch," to recreate the back-and-forth of a college seminar.

"The technology is here, offering programs this way is here, and the stigma of 'Oh, you did that online' is disappearing," says Susan Krycza, a principal consultant at Elevate Higher Ed, who advises business schools on crafting online programs. "It's another way of the schools saying: 'We consider this the same quality as our face-to-face' " programs.

While the overall number of applications to U.S. M.B.A. programs [continues to decline](#), online business-degree programs are proliferating, aiming to attract professionals loath to pause careers for full-time studies. The number of online or remote M.B.A. programs in the U.S. jumped 42% to 528 from 373 during the five years that ended in the 2016-2017 school year, according to U.S. Department of Education data.

The online option typically offers students flexibility to remain in jobs, do class assignments wherever they are and in some cases complete the degree at their own pace. But more than with most graduate degrees, getting an M.B.A. is about forging bonds with class peers and influential alumni that could turn into an entrée into the upper echelons of the business world.

For traditional full-time students, that happens through intense socializing, professional gatherings and even school-organized trips together—networking experiences that remote M.B.A.-ers easily miss out on. Business schools say their goal now is to preserve that crucial element of the degree for online enrollees too.

Carnegie Mellon's Tepper school, in Pittsburgh, introduced its online M.B.A. program in 2013. Two years ago, it began experimenting with the "TepperBot 3000," a robot that looks much like a Segway with a tablet perched on top, to help online students participate in networking and other campus events.

Andrew Adrian-Karlin, a 31-year-old technologist at a Chicago financial-services firm and member of Tepper's M.B.A. class of 2019, attended an alumni-networking event on campus virtually last year, thanks to the TepperBot. A university technician helped him take it for a test drive earlier in the day, showing him how to log in through an online portal and control the robot remotely.

Later, wearing a button-down shirt and sipping coffee at his computer at home, Mr. Adrian-Karlin steered the TepperBot through the crowd, his face appearing on the tablet's screen as he pulled up to clusters of people to make small talk. "It was the best ice breaker I've ever had," he said.

Benjamin Harris, an Erie, Pa., radiologist, says a family obligation kept him from going to his graduation from Tepper's online M.B.A. program in May 2017, but he and another graduate were able to attend virtually, sharing a TepperBot that they took turns logging into.

Sitting at his computer wearing a polo shirt and pajama bottoms, Mr. Harris navigated the bot across the stage, pausing as Tepper's dean attached his diploma to the TepperBot's "shoulder."

"People chuckled as we rolled across the stage," he said.

Tepper's online M.B.A. students do other forms of virtual networking. Patty Cobleigh, who plans to graduate in 2020, opted for the online degree because she didn't want to leave her job as a senior manager at Comcast Corp. in Philadelphia. A big surprise, she says, has been how close she and her classmates have become. They often gather via the program's videoconferencing system for Friday night happy hours. And after she gave birth in August, she introduced her daughter while everyone was logged on for an economics class.

Schools are building in more time for online students to meet face-to-face. At Indiana University's Kelley School of Business, online M.B.A. students come together for a boot-camp-like week at the beginning of the program and periodically throughout their studies. They work in competitive teams on a company's business challenge and present their solutions at the end of the week. After that, "it's not like you're in a class with a bunch of random people that you don't know," says Gretchen Kohler, an online M.B.A. student at Kelley.

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University administrators say smaller class sizes help. Scott DeRue, dean of University of Michigan's Ross School says he expects the school's first online M.B.A. program to have fewer than 100 students the first year and no more than 200 after that, to help the classes feel tight knit. Administrators at Rice's Jones Graduate School of Business say they too aim to keep online M.B.A. classes small for the same reason.

Will Geoghegan, assistant professor at Indiana University's Kelley School of Business, has been teaching online classes for more than a decade and says video technology helps him and his students learn about each other.

"It's fun to see certain people...and the little artifacts they have, the cat that's walking across the screen, or the child that they just had to pick up," he says. "We spend so much time in front of the screen now, most people are comfortable communicating that way."