At the Los Angeles Business Journal, we have always been keen observers of the executive education and schooling landscape of our region. Education, after all, may well be the most crucial element in terms of increasing our odds of success – for ourselves, our employees – and our families throughout the greater Los Angeles region. And there are a number of questions that we've been hearing repeatedly from readers navigating the terrain of continuing education. But how best to answer those questions?

We decided now would be the ideal time to once again assemble a think-tank of local education experts and invite them to participate in an open forum, Q&A-style roundtable. Several questions were posed to this brain trust and what follows is a transcript of their responses.
The MBA curriculum has undergone changes in recent years to address changes in the market and demographics. Traditionally, the MBA focused on knowledge in classic areas, such as finance, marketing, and accounting. Today, MBA programs are innovating to better capture the interwoven nature of these areas and other areas in terms of how organizations actually operate.

THOMAS A. HORAN, PH.D.

Drucker’s seminal work on the “Practice of Management.” Through a series of courses the students are immersed in experiential learning, coupled with core business courses and leadership assessment and coaching, in order to be successful in a variety of management circumstances. This approach facilitates a more integrated and hands-on knowledge of critical management skills that need to assume leadership roles.

VENKATACHALAM: An MBA program should provide students with both leadership and decision making skills in a collaborative and diverse environment. The purpose of the MBA program at the Beacom School of Business is to develop leaders for business, industry and government. The program emphasizes decision-making, analytical and critical thinking, problem solving, understanding the role of business in society and developing leadership ability and social responsibility. All Beacom courses involve a tremendous amount of collaboration between students, faculty, and industry to help prepare graduates for their new roles as leaders.

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TEETER: The MBA degree develops leadership potential in students by providing a comprehensive set of skills that allows them to enhance their analytical and reasoning abilities such that they can more readily solve challenging business problems that arise in their companies. This advanced skill set enhances a graduate’s ability to interact effectively, both organizationally and interactively, to make strategic recommendations to senior level officials, and to reflect more extensively on the root causes of difficult business issues. The MBA degree strengthens graduates’ abilities to lead organizations, enabling them to promote a vision that will inspire and guide others, creating a culture of ethics, transparency and professionalism that develops and retains staff for the long term. MBA graduates develop leadership skills that enable them to see their firm as a system that works as one entity, as opposed to a set of silos. The MBA skill set raises the ability of graduates to lead cross-functional groups that leverage the full capability of organizations.

WANG: The MBA degree provides business skills that can be used in entry level, middle management, or executive level. Becoming technically proficient in a particular business function allows MBA holders to advance through their organization into more senior leadership roles, regardless of when in their career they obtained their degree. The breadth of skills taught in these programs allow graduates to speak with confidence in the variety of business languages, from marketing to accounting, and humanities to operations management. Successful MBA graduates often move up through their organizations or are recruited into more and more senior roles at other organizations within their industry. This career mobility can propel professionals into leadership positions in direct experience by providing the MBA curriculum to a variety of settings.

The higher education model of lecturing, cramming, and examination is being challenged by entrepreneurial students who want to learn by doing. Coupled with changes in institutional funding streams, institutions are looking for alternative ways to serve their students. New models, both physical and virtual, are being created, allowing for multi-disciplinary learning opportunities that combine fields such as management, economics, and computer science. Students learn by developing relevant solutions that addresses current and future challenges, often taking on real societal and business needs. Acclimating and adapting to real-world applications available to students in every single course, in association with a specific program, or risk having students grow impatient and possibly become lackadaisical about their studies. In addition, a global and international perspective is critical to the success of any educational program, including courses in international studies and study trips abroad. The focus of this approach is to provide students traveling to overseas destinations to enhance their studies and build their skills. Furthermore, graduate programs are also focusing more on soft skills, providing students with greater training in empathy, oral and written communication, and an appreciation of workplace dynamics such that a newly minted MBA graduate can more readily understand and adapt to the culture of the firm. These perspectives are now all being harnessed within a plethora of new online graduate professional degree programs being offered by many leading universities and colleges.

HORAN: There is an undeniable trend in terms of students demanding relevance in their advanced studies. This includes relevance to contemporary organizational and business challenges, ranging from global supply chain management to sustainable business practices. We also see a particularly strong interest in how management knowledge can be applied to the creative industries, as this is one of our fastest growing areas. The demand for relevance also encompasses specific skills that are needed to be successful in the marketplace. Employers are looking for talent that can bring both “hard” and “soft” skills to the table. Therefore, we have to balance our analytics courses with courses that include aspects such as team management skills.

WANG: Higher education stands on the precipice of a change similar to that which followed the invention of the printing press where learners could not only listen to lectures but also read materials at their own pace on their own time. For us, that “printing press” is the online learning tools that allow for synchronized and asynchronous delivery modes that are becoming more and more prevalent and acceptable. One example, outside of the courses offered by specific universities, is MOOCS, some of which attract a high number of learners. Some universities now allow credit from MOOC courses to be applied towards a degree. I am sure that in the future such integration of on-line offering into the curriculum will be increasingly common.

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SMITH: Higher education is more focused today on preparing students for careers, and the workplace requires more individualized and adaptable educational programs. Today’s workers will work in multiple careers over their lifetimes, and the rapid pace of technological development will make much training and education obsolete. With competency-based education (CBE), students are evaluated so individualized plans can be developed for them to learn the new knowledge and skills necessary to achieve their goals. There are, however, at least two red flags. First, CBE requires greater evaluator and individualized counseling, and it will be a challenge to do so with excellence. Second, higher education still has a purpose beyond career preparation. Educators must still meet traditional goals such as developing critical thinking skills, creating an historical context, and asserting the importance of civic engagement and responsibility.

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SMITH: The MBA offers a strong foundation in the traditional areas of business administration, and the interrelationships among the various functional business disciplines. A student graduating with an MBA will have the skills to incorporate theory from various disciplines with the practical application of onsite leadership at their place of employment. As such, the MBA necessarily prepares students to assume leadership roles precisely because the degree provides broad exposure to the contemporary skills of management across disciplines and business modalities.

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As our world continues to get smaller, how can applicants be certain that the MBA program they choose offers a truly international perspective?

HORAN: Many MBA programs include international travel as part of the academic experience. International travel courses allow students to experience first-hand the culture and business practices of a different country. However, these travel courses tend to only be 10 to 14 days so cultural immersion may be limited. Applicants should also consider exchange programs where they have the opportunity to live abroad for at least three to six months. Exchange programs are a good way to immerse oneself in the culture of a foreign country. Finally, applicants should also consider the diversity of the student body. Applicants should inquire on the number of countries represented in the student body. The opportunity to work with a teammate from a different country and perspective could potentially generate innovative ideas or a creative way of changing practice.

WANG: Applying to business school can be stressful and complicated. Many important factors such as fit, student body profile, and even academics can be overlooked. It is vital for the future success of the applicant to apply to graduate programs that fit his or her profile. The best way to truly see whether a school is the right fit for your graduate studies is to “test drive” their “product.” Like any major purchase, you want to make sure that the “product,” in this case the classroom experience/academics, should match and exceed your expectations. In today’s society, many prospective students and applicants are looking for schools that offer diversity in the means of a true international perspective. To ensure that you are choosing the right school in terms of a true international perspective; To speak with current students, speak with professors, sit in on a class, Skype with an alumni and ask for a school’s class profile. Take your time, do your research, and make the right decision.

VENKATACHALAM: Selecting a business school that has earned and maintained the AACSB International accreditation distinction will ensure the program represents the highest standard of achievement for business schools, worldwide. Less than five percent of business schools worldwide have earned this prestigious designation. Achieving accreditation confirms the university’s commitment to quality and continuous improvement through a rigorous and comprehensive peer review. AACSB Accreditation is known, worldwide, as the longest standing, most recognized form of specialized/professional accreditation an institution and its business programs can earn and it is part of the Beacom School of Business’s mission statement.

TEETER: Applicants to MBA programs should insist that any graduate business program have a study-abroad component that emphasizes the importance of international business and globalization. Without a global perspective, the MBA graduate is handicapped and unable to understand trends, challenges, and opportunities that firms are confronted with in the marketplace, both abroad and at home. Courses including extensive discussion on international business and trade, in addition to opportunities to travel overseas to pursue studies are critical to the success of any graduate business program today. Without the international component within the curriculum, the MBA student does not attain a complete, holistic education.
training in graduate business study and will not have a comprehensive view of the world business issues that drive so many decisions made within domestic U.S. companies today.

◆ What are the advantages of focused certificate programs vs. degree programs?

HORAN: A focused certificate program is time-effective for those who need to complete their education in a short period of time. Certificate programs can range from six- to eight-week classes, while a series of certification courses can be completed within a few months. Degree programs, on the other hand, tend to take longer, usually with a one- to two-year commitment at the graduate level. Further, certificate programs are typically less expensive than a bachelor’s or master’s degree. Certificate programs are usually designed with working professionals in mind; thus, online options are available and class meetings tend to be at night or on weekends. Finally, certificate programs tend to have flexible educational requirements—minimum or prior educational requirements may not be necessary and the application process is not as rigorous.

TEETER: Focused certificate programs assist companies by meeting a specific need for employees. Business schools offer certificates in such areas as project management, entrepreneurship and many other disciplines to strengthen the skill set of employees while allowing them to leverage their already extensive skill sets and backgrounds. Certificate educational opportunities ensure that businesses have the opportunity to develop staff skills in a variety of areas, without necessarily needing to complete a full degree program. Certificates, because they are more limited in nature as opposed to a full degree program, enable organizations to have employees focus on specific topics for which the firm may have limited resources or depth. Certificate programs can also be completed beyond normal work and experiential than a full degree program. While not providing the holistic perspective of a comprehensive degree program, certificate education maintains an invaluable niche in the higher education market by providing corporations a chance to meet the short-term vocational needs of their staff.

◆ What should higher education institutions do to ensure their programs, certificates and offerings are aligned with the specific needs of employers in the region?

WANG: Higher education institutions should implement a continuous communication process with employers and industries that their programs are well suited to help maintain focus on workforce needs. This dialogue can come in the form of “Advisory Council” participation, feedback from internship employers and organizations hiring recent graduates, as well as from relationships emerging out of consulting arrangements between the institution and industry organizations. Schools that maintain open dialogue and interaction while continuously evaluating the merits of their curricula are the ones that will maintain their currency with respect to what employers need in the 21st century workforce.

TEETER: Institutions of higher education must ensure that their academic offerings are relevant to the needs of the local marketplace. This can be done in a variety of ways, the most important of which is to hire faculty members with strengths in critical areas where there is high programmatic demand, for example, Project Management. In addition to building a cutting-edge faculty that is able to teach students the most relevant skills, institutions should regularly seek the advice of local business leaders, through advisory boards and other groups that can provide strategic guidance to academic planners as they build curricula for students. Institutions must also actively participate in the community to ensure long-term relationships with local service and business groups. While maintaining connections to regional and national corporations.

SMITH: It is important that the Department Chairs and faculty remain current in the topics and trends within the field of study and in each region classes are being offered. Staying current enables faculty to adjust curriculum in ways that will address emerging realities in the workplace. Research, conferences and networking with industry leaders are all tools for remaining relevant. Creating diverse certificate programs, more concentration options or classes that are imbedded in a degree will assist in expertise and workforce preparation. On the course level, assignments targeted to unfolding trends in the field are among the most meaningful to students. Exposure to industry leaders through various venues such as a guest lecture or speaker series is helpful in assisting students to gain broader, better informed perspectives.

HORAN: Higher education should do the fundamental task of any organization: listen to their customer! For us, this listening takes a variety of formats. Our number one customer is our student, past, present and future. For example, we listen to our alumni, many of whom work for employers throughout the region. We also consider employees as our customer, for not only do they often provide some tuition support for students, but we are also aiming to fill their ongoing pipeline needs for talented employees. Part of this listening is formal, most schools have formal structures as well. For example, we have recently established the Drucker School Industry Advisory Board. The Board consists of high-level individuals who can speak of the trends and needs of their industries, both in practice in student employability. The advisory board provides feedback on the skills needed in the market, and we use this input to make updates to the curriculum and program offerings.

◆ How can all universities, colleges and higher education institutions in the region collaborate toward full employment?

WANG: Universities often find it difficult to collaborate when it comes to full employment for their respective student populations, as each college competes with neighboring or similarly ranked colleges. The most successful collaboration takes place when colleges and universities, who are similarly involved in mission and recognition, can come together to promote a consortium-style Career Fair. Here in Southern California, the Hire SoCal Graduate Business Career Fair is a very good example of this. The Graduate Schools of Management at the University of California–Riverside, Cal State–Long Beach, Cal State–Fullerton, Pepperdine, Chapman, and Claremont’s Drucker School held a very successful Career Fair last year with 30 companies and nearly 500 students attending, and will do so again this February. These six colleges also collectively sponsor nationally known authors and career experts to speak to their students at various forums. This private/public university partnership is an excellent example of how universities can col-
collaborate to develop a win-win partnership that delivers impactful results.

TEETER: Institutions of higher education can support full employment by ensuring that course curricula offer skills and training that are aligned with the needs of regional and local industries. This starts with community colleges working closely with local high schools to develop feeder programs to ensure students have pre-requisites for specific vocational courses and programs that are highly desired by local employers. Colleges must also consistently understand the pulse of local trade and collective bargaining organizations to understand developing labor trends, and where local employers are hiring for skilled labor. Universities, on top of curriculum, must emphasize the importance of professional networking for students and should continually work to establish recruiting opportunities for candidates by actively participating in hiring regimes in their local regions. Oral and written communication skills, critical thinking abilities and the development of social skills should be emphasized for all undergraduates, not to mention job-interviewing skills through regular mock interview simulations.

VENKATACHALAM: The Beacom School of Business constantly strives for continuous improvement of academic programs and strengthening our engagement with alumni and business partners. We’ve started new initiatives that aim to make the Beacom School of Business the business school of choice for top quality students, employers and a major player in economic development in the state and the region through a transformative learning community. These initiatives include development of a Career Success Center which is dedicated solely to maintaining business connections and placing our students on career paths in their field upon graduation; establishing centers of excellence to showcase our competencies and accomplishment; selecting Dean’s Ambassadors who showcase the caliber of students at the Beacom School of Business; and developing and Entrepreneurs-in-Residence program, designed to focus on innovation and entrepreneurship.

◆ What types of partnerships should higher education, business and community be engaged in?

HORAN: Providing real world opportunities via internships and practicum projects to students is an effective way to develop partnerships with businesses and not-for-profit organizations. Through experiential learning, students can immediately apply what they have learned and provide value to small business owners, non-profit organizations, entrepreneurs and managers. Faculty research and community engagement can also provide exchanges in innovation and potentially create change.

VENKATACHALAM: It is important for higher education institutions to engage in their communities and in the global community. Business schools have a unique responsibility to partner with firms, both domestic and international, to maintain relevance and ensure they are training high quality and ethical future business leaders. The Beacom School of Business partners with major firms in a number of industries including financial, health care, manufacturing, and small business development. In addition, Beacom’s partnerships extend globally with notable partners in areas such as Germany and Japan.

WANG: Partnerships between higher education, business and community can take place on a number of levels. Public Universities are mandated to serve their local communities and many partner with local businesses to provide real world opportunities to students. This can include internships, practicum projects, and other collaborative efforts.
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YUNZENG WANG, PH.D.
In what ways are colleges and universities keeping pace with the significant changes brought about by advances in digital technology and social media?

TEETER: Colleges and universities have embraced social media institutions such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn to promote their programs and also to support their professional networks. Constant posts to Facebook and Twitter provide students, faculty, alumni and friends with quick news about important issues facing the school, or about the football team’s success, or the appointment of a new senior executive. The recent tragedy at UC Merced underscored the power of social media by news outlets following the school’s Twitter feed to learn the outcome of the attack that took place on the campus. Social media amplifies the institution’s ability to promote the organization’s brand and to outreach to its alumni and other constituent groups. Without a focus on social media, the institution of higher learning and its programs will lag behind the competition with a limited online presence that may not be fully understood.

What leadership skills are important for leading multigenerational teams?

SMITH: Ninety-five percent of today’s workforce is made up of three distinctive generations, and age differences may span as many as 50 years. Leaders may have team members approaching the ends of their careers and others just starting out. This can create multiple challenges, so, perhaps the best strategy is to recognize that no single group or perspective is dominant, and that all perspectives are relevant to advancing the agenda. It is important to build teams with different ages, genders, and cultural backgrounds. When conducting business, leaders should utilize a variety of methods. Options for professional development should be available to everyone – not only the most senior members of the team, and all members of the team should have the opportunity for advancement.

Other than MBA programs, what academic programs are preparing undergraduate business students to become future leaders in the greater-LA business community?

WANG: More and more people are becoming interested in specialized master’s degrees that focus on a single area such as finance, or accounting. These programs are often one year in duration (on a full time basis) and allow students to focus on a more narrow discipline and usually take more coursework in that field than they would in an MBA focused on the same topic. Additional programs becoming popular recently are more skills-based courses or certificates, such as MOOCs and self-paced courses where participants earn badges instead of degrees.

What role do internships in job placement/preparation?

VENKATACHALAM: Internships are exceptionally important for students to gain industry experience in their field of study. They also provide students with networking opportunities prior to and immediately upon graduation. The Beacom School of Business builds on a tremendous liberal arts foundation and upon graduation. The Beacom School of Business builds on a tremendous liberal arts foundation and offers a 92 percent job placement rate, state-of-the-art classrooms and facilities, low faculty-to-student ratio and prestigious AACSB International Accreditation – all of which help bridge the gap between student and professional. Working hand-in-hand with business and community prepare students for the business world, Beacom uses its Career Success Center and industry partnerships to ensure students are prepared for careers in their areas of study.

What types of experiences can education programs provide to students to help them embrace partnering and volunteerism as they move forward?

WANG: Universities can contribute much to helping their students to give back to their communities through volunteering or by being involved in internship partnerships. Many schools are offering academic credit for such experiences. At UCR’s Graduate School of Management, MBA students are required to do an internship in order to graduate. This coming year UCR will sponsor a Post-Graduate MBA Fellowship Program, which will match five students who are graduating in June to five non-profit in...
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Southern California, for six-month long consulting projects. This program is designed to give business students exposure to working in the non-profit world and is also a way for UCR to give back to the Inland Empire Community. Washington Monthly in 2015 ranked UCR, in its annual University and College Survey, as 2nd in percentage of federal work-study funds spent on service and 3rd in community service participation and hours served in the United States.

What are some things MBA applicants should look for to be certain the program they choose provides life-long learning opportunities?

TEETER: Applicants seeking a culture of life-long learning must select MBA programs that encourage graduates to return for future study, allowing the student to return to continue to invest in her/his degree and to sharpen one’s skills years after graduation. Applicants should also seek MBA programs that have active alumni programs that promote intellectual engagement via speakers, networking activities, and other professional events that encourage alumni to re-engage with alma mater in a constructive way. Applicants should also ponder the executive education opportunities offered by business schools in reinforcement of lifelong learning approaches to business study.

VENKATACHALAM: In addition to considering cost, applicants should ensure programs are AACSB accredited, boast high quality faculty with a commitment to excellence in teaching, have a strong focus on leadership, analytical and critical thinking, and social responsibility, and partnerships which guarantee student success upon graduation. The Beckman School of Business, in addition to being affordable exemplifies these characteristics and is continually looking to improve programs, partnerships, and student success.

Looking to the future, what is the single biggest change coming to the world of higher education in the next 10 years?

TEETER: The high-tuition/high-aid model that prevails in higher education today is likely to cease functioning within the next decade. Given the crisis of student loan debt that has infected the last generation and the consistent increases in tuition, higher education will likely need to develop a new model of scaling its activities to slow the growth of tuition, not to mention administrative costs. The book, “Why Does College Cost So Much?” by Archibald and Feldman (2010) emphasizes the underlying costs supporting the high-tuition/high-aid model but in the long run, colleges and universities will have to become more creative, scaling more programs online, restructuring their staff levels, and revising academic programs in an effort to reign in costly annual tuition hikes that are no longer affordable. These pressures on cost, combined with ever-increasing demand for online educational offerings from students, is likely to bring about a major shift in the landscape, leading some institutions to merge, close, or to restructure their academic offerings entirely.

HORAN: The one trend I would highlight is the growing demand for customized and personalized educational offerings. We are already seeing that in the rise of specialized masters degrees, such as our Art Business degree. However, these specialized degrees are but the first wave of this trend. Students will come to prefer and then demand (with their pocketbooks) that the graduate education be highly tailored to their personal and career aspirations. The Drucker School already does that with our Executive MBA program, but it will inevitably move its way through our entire curriculum. Moreover, this customization will have to be highly location and time responsive. For the first time in Claremont Graduate University’s 90-year history, we are opening a location in downtown Los Angeles. And we are doing it because that is where our creative industry students want to be. And we are addressing the time responsive issue though intensive, and blended (online/in person) offerings. As regards to full online, while that will continue to grow, we still think there is terrific value in providing high quality in person educational experiences. Everyone’s time is just so limited, educational establishments need to be smart about how they structure these in person experiences for maximum value and what we allocate to the online learning realm.

SMITH: The single most important change that Higher Education will be facing in the next decade is increasing accountability in the context of reining in cost and ensuing quality. Universities are under mounting pressure to contain cost as tuition levels are driven higher and higher, and that has led to the highest levels of debt carried by American students in history. At the same time, universities must continue to develop well-rounded, educated, and competent adults who can compete globally and are responsible citizens in our free society. A recent article in Fortune magazine stated that American millennials are among the world’s least skilled. Universities must own this reality, and they must ensure that students are learning the skills and values they need to be competitive.

Relevance in the classroom.

University of La Verne
in Burbank

Patrick Stluka balances his time between working as National Labor Relations Manager at Toyota Motor Sales and teaching at the University of La Verne as a senior adjunct professor in ethics and other organizational studies. His day-to-day anecdotes at Toyota transfer into the classroom, giving La Verne students a real-world perspective on human resources. “If they’re able to make some change in their organizations, I feel like I’ve done some good.”