Online vs. In-Person MBA: Benefits and Differences

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Completing a Master of Business Administration (MBA) program can help individuals build the strategic planning and leadership skills needed for success in a

management career. Professionals in management roles have a median annual salary of $122,090, according to May 2024 data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). From 2024 to 2034, 1.1 million management job openings are expected to be available annually, based on BLS projections.

Prospective MBA students can choose to earn their MBA online or in person. In 2018, 62 percent of MBA students attended fully in-person programs, according to research by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). That number dropped to 51 percent by 2023, as a growing number of MBA students chose online or hybrid program formats. But what are the benefits of and differences between an online and an in-person MBA?

What Does an Online MBA Entail?

While earning an MBA online might seem like a new concept, the first online MBA program dates back to 1987, according to the Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC). However, as technology has evolved in the decades since then, so has the experience of earning an online MBA.

Today, students enrolled in an online MBA program complete core business classes in management, finance, strategic operations, and marketing. They often choose a specialization to focus their course of study. They participate in experiential learning through business simulations, real-world projects, and internship opportunities.

Online MBA programs deliver content in several ways. Students generally complete on-demand course modules on their schedule. This format benefits working professionals with busy schedules. Some online programs also use live sessions to connect students with faculty members and their classmates.

MBA students increasingly prefer the flexibility of an online delivery format. While 14 percent of MBA students attended an online program in 2018, that number doubled to 28 percent by 2023, the AACSB reports. More than 47,000 MBA students attended fully online programs in the 2021-2022 academic year, according to AACSB research.

What Does an In-Person MBA Entail?

The majority of MBA students still earn their degree in person. This format brings MBA students to campus regularly to attend business school classes.

Traditional two-year MBA programs dedicate the first year to core MBA classes followed by a summer internship to gain hands-on experience. Second-year MBA students then complete specialized coursework and a capstone project.

As is true for most online MBA programs, in-person MBA programs typically offer both full-time and part-time enrollment options. A part-time MBA program, also known as a professional MBA program, often appeals to students who want to continue working while pursuing their advanced degree.

In-person learning often appeals to students who benefit from a more structured format. Some students also prefer connecting with faculty and classmates in a physical classroom.

Key Differences Between Online and In-Person MBA Programs

Online and in-person MBA programs share many similarities. Both offer core business classes and specialization options, meet high academic standards to hold business school accreditation, and prepare students for management and leadership careers. However, their unique delivery formats do shape the experience of earning an MBA.

Learning Experience

Students enrolled in online and in-person MBA programs may take the same classes and complete the same assignments, but their overall learning experiences are different. Online students use distance learning tools in a location of their choosing to access course content, while in-person students attend on-campus courses at set locations and times.

The delivery format in an online MBA can include asynchronous coursework, which students complete at any time, and synchronous components with set meeting times. Some business schools also offer a hybrid option, which combines online and in-person learning. Prospective students can consider which delivery format best fits their learning style and schedule.

Student Body

The student body differs in online and in-person MBA programs, with the flexibility of online learning appealing more to certain types of students.

According to a 2024 application trends survey from the GMAC, women make up more of the applicant pool for online MBA programs than for in-person full-time MBA programs, accounting for 41 percent of online program applicants in 2024 compared with 35 percent of in-person full-time program applicants. First-generation applicants are also more likely to apply to online programs than in-person programs.

Networking Opportunities

Both online and on-campus MBA programs prioritize networking opportunities. Connecting with classmates and professionals in the field helps MBA students develop their skills and prepare for the job market. However, the networking opportunities may differ between online and in-person MBA programs.

In online MBA programs, classmates network through discussion boards, group projects, and online events. They also can build a network outside of their program by attending job events and by networking during their internships. In-person MBA programs connect classmates through on-campus events, including career services and alumni events. Online MBA students may need to be more proactive to take advantage of networking opportunities.

Specialization Options

By choosing a specialization for their MBA, students can focus their studies to prepare for a particular career path. Common specialization options such as finance and marketing help students build career-focused skills.

MBA specializations may differ between online and in-person MBA programs. At Tulane, for example, online MBA students can customize their program with a specialization in business analytics, finance, marketing, or strategic leadership. Students in the in-person MBA program can choose to specialize in energy and sustainability.

Find Your MBA Program at Tulane University

The Freeman School of Business at Tulane University offers multiple Master of Business Administration programs, including online, in-person, and part-time MBA options.

At Tulane, MBA students complete a rigorous curriculum that emphasizes strategic thinking and decision-making. Students who choose an in-person MBA option, attending either full time or part time, gain hands-on experience with companies in New Orleans. Students who choose the online MBA option get to combine flexible on-demand coursework with live roundtable discussions, which gives distance learners opportunities to engage directly with faculty members and their peers.

The online and in-person MBA programs at Tulane hold AACSB accreditation and meet the highest standards for business education. Contact Tulane today to learn more about our MBA programs.

Sources:

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