

BUSINESS EDUCATION

M.B.A. Programs Debate Dropping GMAT

Business schools that waived the test for this fall are extending their policy to 2021, though elite programs are hesitant to join



Harvard Business School administrators say the GMAT is still a crucial part of their evaluation process.

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By [Patrick Thomas](#)

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Some business schools are temporarily loosening their standardized testing requirements, a move that could help struggling programs attract more applicants and increase diversity but also make it harder to evaluate candidates.

Schools across the country began waiving test requirements for the fall semester as the coronavirus pandemic closed centers where students take the GMAT, the standardized test required for most graduate business and management programs.

In recent weeks, a growing list of M.B.A. programs, including the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business and the Wisconsin School of Business, said they plan to extend their test-optional format to the 2021 admissions cycle. Several other M.B.A. programs say they are considering a similar move, citing challenges students continue to face

despite the exam moving online. Schools also say the test-optional format enables them to recruit from a broader pool of applicants.

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The re-examination of the GMAT comes as various selective colleges have said they won't require applicants to submit scores from the widely used college entrance exams ACT and SAT, including Harvard and Stanford universities, next year.

Some top-tier graduate-level business programs, however, have been more reluctant to remove the GMAT requirement. Harvard Business School and other prestigious business programs say the GMAT is still a crucial part of their evaluation process and that a waiver for the in-person test isn't necessary because they accept results from online versions of the GMAT and GRE, a different standardized test required for admission to many graduate schools.

“The GMAT and GRE became available remotely pretty quickly, and it doesn't seem like there has been a significant shift in the validity of it,” said Peter Johnson, an assistant dean at the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley. “We're sticking with it for now, but we review it every year.”

For the 2021 admissions cycle, Virginia's Darden school is asking applicants to provide evidence they can succeed academically without a GMAT score. The school may evaluate an applicant's certifications such as being a chartered financial analyst or certified public accountant, past scores from ACT or SAT exams, or professional experience in a financial field such as banking, said Dawna Clarke, executive director of admissions.

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“We view this as broadening admissions criteria. I feel it’s very progressive,” Ms. Clarke said.

A spokeswoman for Graduate Management Admission Council, the nonprofit organization that distributes the GMAT, defended the test’s relevance as an evaluation tool and said more than 10,000 students have already taken an online version of the exam since it launched in April.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison’s business school decided to extend its test-waiver policy through next year after initially waiving GMAT requirements ahead of the coming fall semester, said Blair Sanford, assistant dean for full-time M.B.A. and master’s programs. The policy pertains to M.B.A. candidates who apply with at least five years work experience and at least a 3.3 GPA in undergraduate studies or applicants who have a terminal degree.

“Some of the reasons why we decided to expand policy in the first place still exist. The pandemic is still in place,” Ms. Sanford said. “In addition, it gives us a broader reach to attract qualified students in a difficult environment.”

The University of Maryland’s Robert H. Smith School of Business said it is considering extending its testing-waiver policy for the coming admissions cycle, said Pasquale Quintero, senior director of its full-time M.B.A. Sevin Yeltekin, dean of the University of Rochester’s Simon Business School, said her program will most likely extend its waiver

policy for its M.B.A. program for the 2021 cycle and will make an announcement in the coming weeks.

Some schools are changing their policies amid concerns about recruiting students from a wider range of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. M.B.A. admissions training programs, used to coach students on how to get into the most selective programs, can cost students thousands of dollars.

“It’s expensive to take test prep courses, it’s expensive to hire admissions consultants. There are other accessible ways to show you’re prepared,” said Ms. Clarke, who previously worked in admissions consulting.

Jeremy Shinewald, founder of admissions consulting firm mbaMission, said without testing, the application process becomes more about a candidate’s story, and they will need to learn to communicate more of their subjective strengths, such as work experience.

“How do you really assess community impact or personal accomplishments and then compare across 10,000 Harvard Business School applicants,” he said.



Jessica Timperman was accepted into Purdue University's Krannert School of Management's full-time M.B.A. program without a GMAT score.

PHOTO: JESSICA TIMPERMAN

The test waiver could also help some schools see a rebound in M.B.A. program applications and enrollment, administrators say. Wisconsin's full-time M.B.A. program was under pressure before the pandemic and considered closing the program in 2017. After initially waiving GMAT requirements earlier this spring, Ms. Sanford estimates fall enrollment will be up about 30% from a year earlier.

The Darden school and the George Washington University School of Business are also among the M.B.A. programs seeing a surge in applicants after waiving testing requirements. Ms. Clarke of Darden said the school saw an influx of qualified applicants who had been furloughed or laid off amid the pandemic.

Just weeks after getting her undergraduate degree from Purdue University, Jessica Timperman, 22, was accepted into Purdue University's Krannert School of Management's full-time M.B.A. program without a GMAT score.

Ms. Timperman hadn't planned on going to graduate school, but when the pandemic hit and her job prospects dwindled, she started studying for the GMAT. When the university dropped its test requirement, she applied right away.

“For someone who just graduated from college, I knew I had to get a good score to get in, but then they dropped it,” she said. “Now that I have a plan I feel so much better.”

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