

2016 mba.com Prospective Students Survey Report

ABOUT THIS STUDY

The mba.com Prospective Students Survey is a product of the Graduate Management Admission Council® (GMAC®), a global nonprofit education organization of leading graduate business schools and the owner of the Graduate Management Admission Test® (GMAT®).

The GMAT exam is an important part of the admissions process for more than 6,100 graduate management programs around the world. GMAC is dedicated to creating access to and disseminating information about graduate management education; these schools and others rely on the Council as the premier provider of reliable data about the graduate management education industry.

EXPLORE INTERACTIVE REPORT

An *Interactive Data Report* accompanies the *2016 mba.com Prospective Students Survey Report*, and is available exclusively to schools that accept the GMAT exam scores for admission to one or more of their programs. The *Interactive Data Report* is an online tool school professionals can use to customize data searches by multiple survey response variables such as student motivations, program preferences, self-reported GMAT scores, school selection criteria, preferred marketing channels, and more. This year's *Interactive Data Report* features expanded data categories to further help schools develop targeted messaging and recruitment strategies, including:

- 16 countries of citizenship and 14 locations of residence;
- US underrepresented populations;
- Geographic regions within China and India;
- Generations—Generation Z, Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers, and;
- Student career goals.

Note: The interactive report is best viewed in Internet Explorer 10+, Google Chrome, Safari, or iOS browsers. This summary report is publically available at www.gmac.com/prospectivestudents.

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INTRODUCTION

Graduate business programs set admission goals, develop marketing plans, and try to enhance their yield to meet enrollment objectives each year. The mba.com Prospective Students Survey that the Graduate Management Admission Council conducts yearly aims to provide relevant, timely, and actionable information about the prospective candidate pipeline to help schools better connect with prospective students around the world. The *2016 mba.com Prospective Students Survey Report* explores the business school pipeline from the prospective students' point of view, analyzing motivations, intended career outcomes, and program choices shared by 10,017 prospective students in 2015. Their responses are compared with previous respondents from 2009 to 2014. Key aspects of candidate behaviors and preferences covered in this report include:

- Timelines for considering graduate management education, the need for early school branding efforts to get on a student's short list of schools, trigger events that motivate candidates to pursue graduate management education, and ongoing reservations about costs;
- Increased selectivity about potential career outcomes after graduation and continued interest in international studies and employment; and
- Differences in information sources that most influence students' choice of program type, and educational and career goals that differentiate students in their school selection choices.

KEY FINDINGS

School branding efforts to prospective candidates need to begin early in the consideration process.

- Prospective students begin considering graduate management education, on average, two years before applying to a program and they form consideration sets (or short lists of schools) one year prior to application, on average.
- A specific event or circumstance often triggers the journey to business school. The most common event is when a prospective student initiates a job search and realizes he or she lacks the knowledge, skills, or abilities to be competitive for the desired job.
- Cost continues to be the biggest reservation for candidates, with many concerned that business school may require more money than they have available (51%) or they may need to take on large debts (46%).

Prospective students are very deliberate about their postgraduate career path.

- Seventy-one percent of prospects cite a single industry of interest for postgraduate employment compared with only 58 percent in 2014. Similarly, prospects are more focused on a specific job function in 2015 (61%) compared with 2014, when 46 percent considered only one function for postgraduate employment.
- The economy may play a role in this phenomenon as prospective students may perceive it to be easier to go after their "dream job."

Candidate interest in specialized business master's degrees is on the rise across regions, but MBAs remain the most considered program type.

- Globally, 50 percent of prospective students consider only MBA programs; slightly more than a quarter (28%) are considering both MBA and specialized master's programs; and one-fourth (23%) are considering only specialized masters' programs.
- The share of prospective students looking only at specialized master's programs has increased from 15 percent in 2009, a trend observed worldwide. MBA programs remain the most considered program type, however.
- On average, prospective students consider 2.8 program types, such as full-time two-year MBA, or full-time one-year MBA, or Master of Finance, for example. This is down from a median of 3.1 program types considered in 2014.

Prospective students maintain a strong interest in international study and employment.

- More than half (57%) of prospective students prefer to study internationally, which is down slightly from 59 percent in 2014 but still higher when compared with 2011 when 51 percent of respondents preferred international study.
- Globally, 35 percent of prospective students seek international careers, a proportion that is down slightly from 38 percent in 2014 but still high compared with five years ago when 29 percent of candidates intended to seek international jobs. Half of prospective students wanting to study abroad also prefer to work abroad (52%).

Prospective students consult a variety of sources to research graduate management education.

- More sources are used by prospective students when they are first learning about available graduate management education programs in their area of interest (average of 8.3 sources) compared with the second phase of their investigation when they research specific programs in-depth to determine where they will apply (average 6.8 sources).
- Word-of-mouth is widely used to first learn about and research graduate management education programs including friends and family, coworkers and peers, current students and alumni, and college or university professors.
- Use of social media is pervasive, used by nearly all respondents (96%). Two-thirds (67%) of prospective students use social media in a variety of ways to learn more about business schools, including actively researching graduate management education, searching for upcoming events and activities, and connecting with a program's faculty.

Effectively targeting candidate groups involves understanding their mindsets based on their program preferences.

- **Full-time MBA candidates** tend to have a couple of years of work experience and plan to take time out of the workforce to acquire their education. They are more likely to look to business school for planning a career switch, pursuing entrepreneurship, networking, and seeking ways to have an impact on others. They are more focused on getting the best education they can, and as a result are focused on the quality, reputation, and career outcomes of their selected program.

- **Candidates for specialized business master's programs** are the youngest and tend to have little to no work experience. They are more open to a variety of postgraduate career opportunities, consider a wider set of programs, and are more focused on developing technical expertise compared with other candidates. Similar to full-time MBA candidates, career outcomes of business school and quality of the education are the most influential information they seek.
- **Professional MBA candidates** have the most work experience and are most likely to continue working while pursuing their degree. They want to gain more respect and recognition in the workplace and advance professionally to the next level through promotions and salary increases. They are more driven by information that shows how a program can fit into their life (e.g., distance to work/home, class format, and schedules).

Two-thirds of prospective students are determined to get into the best school possible, so quality and reputation of program are top school selection factors.

- Prospective students weigh the quality and reputation of a program more heavily than they do financial aspects; however, total costs are among the top three factors they consider.
- Most students seek a blend of classroom and online learning, but the mix varies by program type. Those preferring online MBA programs still expect 10 percent of their program to be delivered in person. Full-time MBA candidates prefer 84 percent of their coursework delivered in a classroom.

METHODOLOGY

Findings in the 2016 *mba.com Prospective Students Survey Report* are based on analysis of data provided between January and December 2015 by more than 10,000 individuals who registered on mba.com — the GMAT website for prospective graduate management students. Each month, starting in January 2015, a random sample of individuals who registered on the website three months earlier was invited to participate in this ongoing research study. Findings in this report also are based on analysis of data collected in calendar years 2009 through 2014 from more than 105,000 individuals who registered on mba.com between October 2008 and September 2014. Please note that the survey data was not weighted this year as it had been in previous years; thus, statistics in the 2016 report should not be compared with previously released results as the statistics will not be directly comparable.

PURSUIT OF GRADUATE MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

The decision to pursue a graduate business school degree is a highly deliberate and extensive process that requires time, energy, and money. Most prospective students begin considering a graduate management education (GME) almost two years before applying to a program (**Figure 1**). Individuals can be in very different places in their lives, personally and professionally, when they first begin thinking about earning a graduate business degree:

- Specialized business master's (non-MBA) candidates typically consider GME one month after graduating from their undergraduate program;
- Candidates for full-time two-year MBA programs consider GME two years after graduation, on average; and
- Individuals considering professional MBA programs, such as the part-time, online, flexible, or executive MBA, first consider GME 4.5 years after graduation.

Typically, candidates solidify the list of programs they plan to target for application almost a year after they begin considering GME. If a program is not on that short list, it is unlikely they will apply to it.

SCHOOLS HAVE TWO-YEAR TIME WINDOW FOR SCHOOL BRANDING AND RECRUITING ACTIVITIES.

Figure 1. Suggested timeline for school activities to attract prospective candidates

Years before candidate application	Suggested activity to build awareness of GME programs and recruit candidates
2	Begin school branding efforts to increase awareness among prospective students, since they are just starting to research their GME options.
1	Target recruitment to improve chances that a school's program is on candidates' short list, which they solidify with a year before applying.

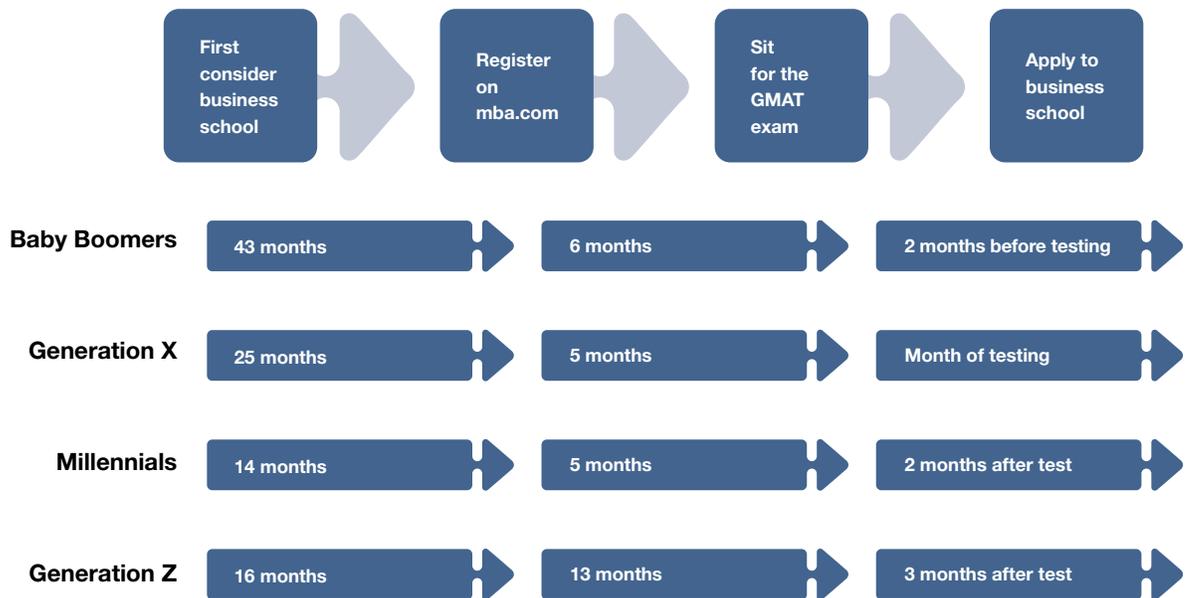
The timeline to business school differs by generation (**Figure 2**). Baby Boomers in the GME pipeline today take longer to first consider business school than Millennials or Generations X or Z.¹ Once candidates enter the GME pipeline, older prospects also spend more time considering GME than the younger generations. Baby Boomers are more likely, however, to apply to business school *before* taking the GMAT exam, whereas members of younger generations apply to business school one to three months *afterwards*.

¹Generational cohorts, as analyzed in this report, are defined as Baby Boomers (born between 1948 and 1964); Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980); Generation Y or Millennials (born between 1981 and 1995); and Generation Z (born from 1996 to 2010).

For the first time, members of Generation Z, born between 1996 and 2010, showed up in sufficient number (nearly 100) to include in our survey data analysis. Most of these respondents are still completing their undergraduate degrees and some have registered for the GMAT exam.

TIME SPENT IN THE BUSINESS SCHOOL PIPELINE VARIES BY GENERATION.

Figure 2. Average number of months in the business school timeline from first consideration of GME to application, by generation

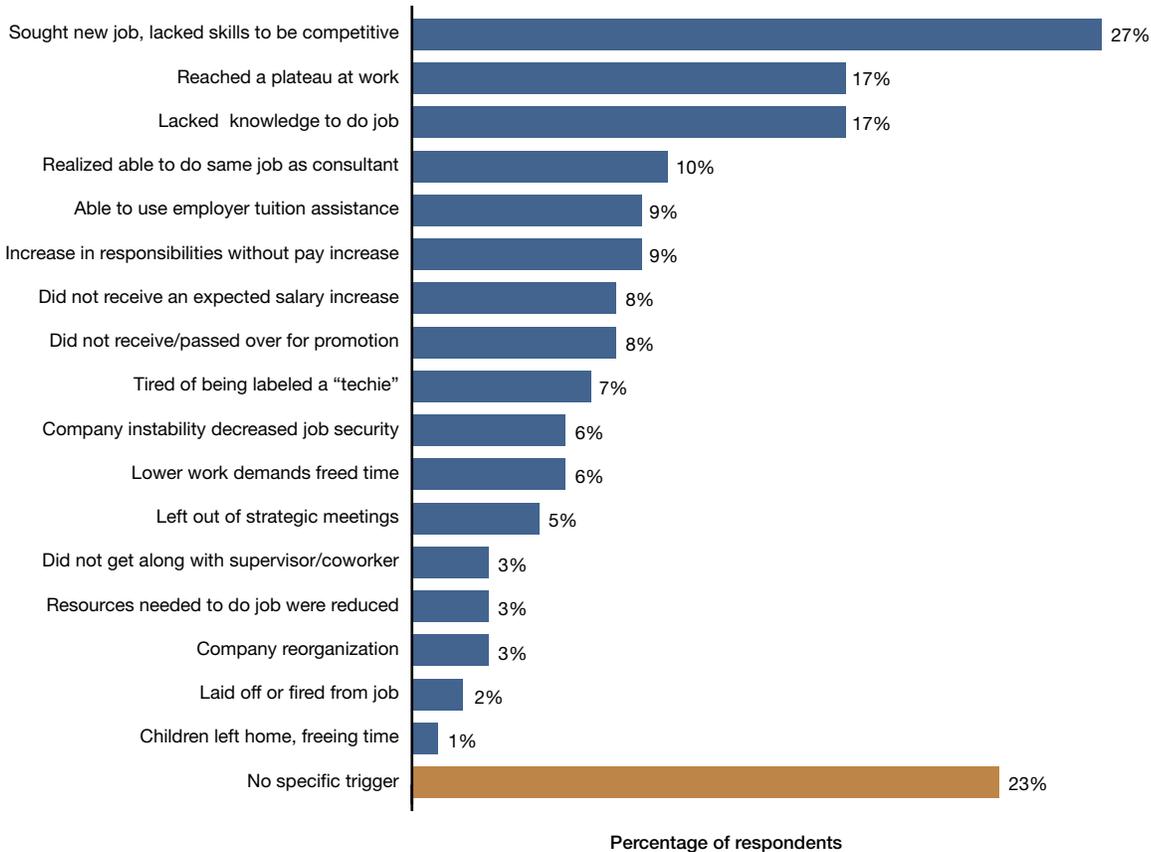


Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

A specific life event or circumstance typically provides the incentive to consider a graduate business degree. Three in four (77%) prospective students first considered business school because of a specific event or trigger (**Figure 3**). The most common event is when a candidate starts a search for a new job and realizes he or she lacks the necessary knowledge, skills, or abilities to be competitive for the position they seek (27%). Though this is a common trigger for many who consider business school, it is specifically relevant to those whose triggers center on a need to increase their marketability (97%), job instability (40%), or dissatisfaction with their current salary and promotion potential (28%).

A SEARCH FOR A NEW JOB IS KEY TRIGGER FOR PURSUING GRADUATE MANAGEMENT EDUCATION.

Figure 3. Typical events or situations leading prospective students to consider a graduate management education, by percentage of respondents



Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

No matter what first leads individuals to consider a graduate business degree, they have similar goals:

- Develop general business knowledge and managerial and leadership skills;
- Increase their earnings potential;
- Receive more challenging projects at work;
- Have access to more career opportunities; and
- Gain a personal sense of accomplishment and achievement.

Motivations of prospective students vary depending on program preferences (Figure 4). Combined with the timelines above, an understanding of this information can allow school marketing teams to share the right message with the right candidates at the right time.

**MOTIVATIONAL GOALS VARY BY PROGRAM PREFERENCE:
FULL-TIME MBA CANDIDATES PRIMARILY SEEK CAREER CHANGE VS.
BUSINESS MASTER'S CANDIDATES WHO SEEK TECHNICAL EXPERTISE.**

Figure 4. Prospective students' motivational goals for pursuing GME vary by program preference.

Full-Time MBA	Professional MBA	Business Master's
<input type="checkbox"/> Change career <input type="checkbox"/> Entrepreneurship <input type="checkbox"/> Networking <input type="checkbox"/> Make a difference <input type="checkbox"/> Solve some world problems <input type="checkbox"/> Impact communities	<input type="checkbox"/> Develop managerial skills <input type="checkbox"/> Obtain a credential <input type="checkbox"/> Accelerate career <input type="checkbox"/> Become more effective on the job <input type="checkbox"/> Obtain a promotion <input type="checkbox"/> Personal marketability <input type="checkbox"/> Gain respect <input type="checkbox"/> Have a sense of accomplishment	<input type="checkbox"/> Technical expertise

Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

Prospective students are not without reservations in their decision to pursue a graduate management education, however. Nearly 9 in 10 (87%) respondents express some potential reservations. An understanding of these reservations can guide schools in developing tools and programs to assist candidates in overcoming these potential stumbling blocks:

- Cost continues to be the biggest reservation for candidates. Half of prospective students (51% of respondents) are concerned graduate business school may require more money than they have available or they may need to take on large debts (46%).
- Other concerns focus on the time and energy business school requires (26% of respondents) and how that will affect a candidate's personal relationships (22%) and personal plans (19%).

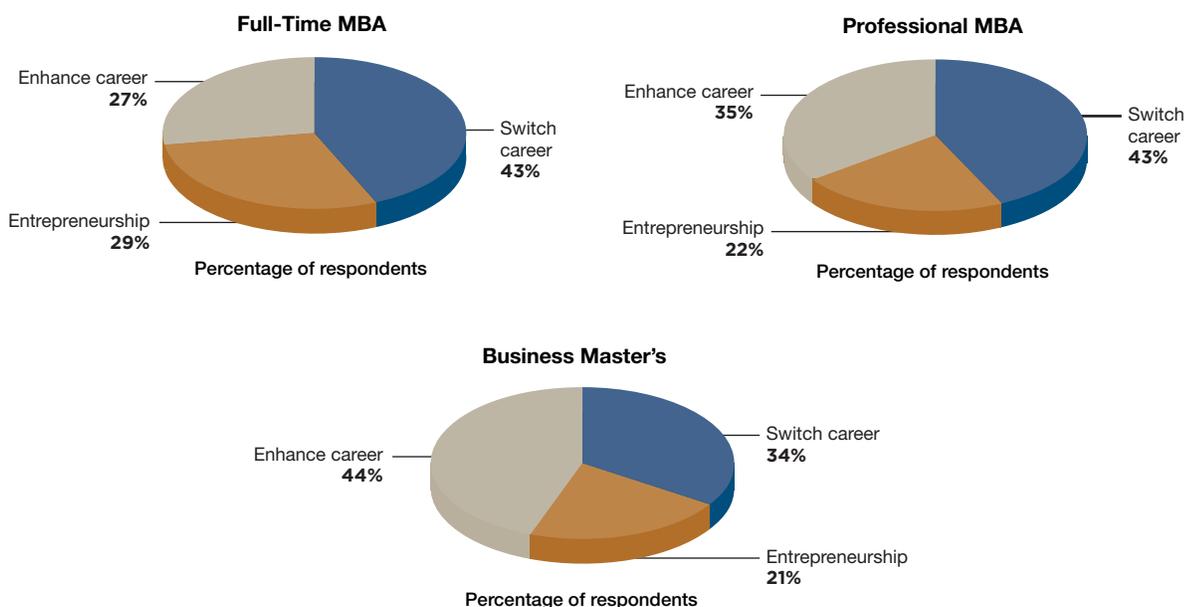
CAREER GOALS

Students deciding to enroll in a graduate business program typically have three general career goals in mind for their postgraduate employment: 1) continue on their current career path, 2) switch careers, or 3) start a business (**Figure 5**). The majority anticipate they will either continue along in their existing career path (34%) or switch career paths into another job function or industry (40%).

Overall, 1 in 4 prospective students (26%) surveyed in 2015 expressed a desire to start a business, which represents a decline from 30 percent of prospective students who declared such interest in 2013 and 2014.

BUSINESS MASTER'S CANDIDATES ARE MOST INTERESTED IN ENHANCING CAREERS; FULL-TIME MBA CANDIDATES ARE MOST LIKELY TO START THEIR OWN COMPANY.

Figure 5. Prospective students' intended career outcomes vary slightly by preferred program type*



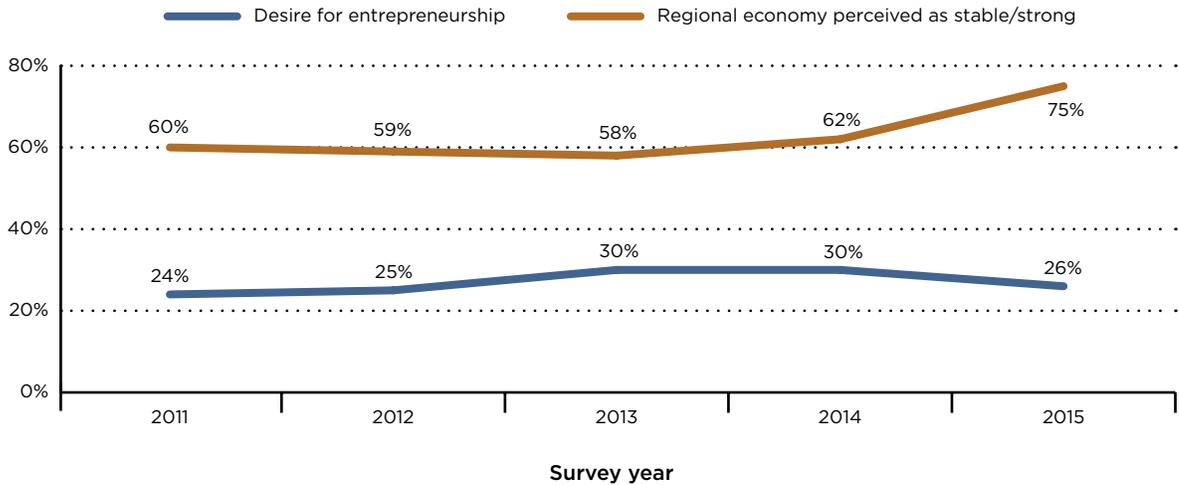
*Percentages do not sum to 100 due to rounding.
Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

Entrepreneurship as a goal is most prevalent among those who prefer to study in a full-time MBA program. Prospective students working in senior (28%) or executive (37%) positions are more likely to consider entrepreneurship as a postgraduate goal than those who are currently in entry-level (21%) or mid-level (23%) positions.

Regional economic conditions may be an indicator of the likelihood to pursue entrepreneurship. As individuals perceive that economic conditions are improving, their desire to start a business declines (correlation coefficient = -0.31). In a growing economy, there are more jobs available, so prospective students may feel more confident about finding employment and less of a need to set off on their own. **Figure 6** shows the inverse relationship between economic indicators and student goals, overall and by region, in a five-year comparison.

CANDIDATE PERCEPTIONS OF REGIONAL ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND LIKELIHOOD TO START A BUSINESS ARE INVERSELY RELATED.

Figure 6. Five-year comparison shows variation in entrepreneurial goals and perceived strength of regional economy, by percentage of respondents citing entrepreneurship as career goal.



Candidate Residence	Percentage of Respondents with Entrepreneurship Goal		Perception of Stable/Strong Regional Economy	
	2011	2015	2011	2015
Africa	40%	44%	42%	40%
East & Southeast Asia	26%	23%	81%	82%
Canada	21%	24%	84%	75%
Central & South Asia	37%	36%	73%	77%
Eastern Europe	25%	31%	24%	31%
Latin America	32%	37%	69%	45%
Middle East	25%	28%	67%	61%
United States	19%	17%	49%	88%
Western Europe	23%	19%	51%	65%

Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected in each calendar year, 2011 and 2015.

Prospective students appear to be more selective or deliberate today regarding their expected job outcomes after graduation. An improving economy may play a role in this phenomenon. Rather than aiming broadly at a number of industries, nearly three-quarters (71%) of prospects cite a single industry of interest for postgraduate employment compared with only 58 percent who had such well-defined career goals in 2014. Similarly, prospects are more singularly focused on pursuing one particular job function in 2015 (61%) compared with 2014, when only 46 percent of prospective students were so deliberate about their postgraduate job choices. As more job opportunities open up, prospective students may perceive it to be easier to go after their dream job rather than thinking about plausible alternatives.

Overall, the top industries they target for postgraduate employment are similar to previous years' findings and include consulting (32%), finance and accounting (31%), and products and services (25%), although by generation, Baby Boomers are most likely to seek jobs in the nonprofit/government sector (Table 1). Their top job functions differ from those reported in previous years. In 2014, prospective students sought

positions in consulting (38%), finance (37%), and operations and logistics (35%). In 2015, job functions of interest to the greatest share of prospective students include marketing and sales (30%), finance and accounting (28%), and consulting (26%). One in 5 candidates expressed interest in general management (21%) and operations and logistics (19%).

Possibly due to their limited prior work experience, Millennial and Generation Z cohorts are more likely to consider a greater number of industries and job functions for their postgraduate career than candidates in the Generation X or Baby Boomer cohorts.

THOUGH FINANCE AND CONSULTING REMAIN TOP INDUSTRY CHOICES FOR EACH GENERATION, BABY BOOMERS ARE MOST INTERESTED IN NONPROFIT AND GOVERNMENT CAREERS.

Table 1. By generation, respondents identify their top industries for postgraduate employment*

Baby Boomers	Generation X	Millennials	Generation Z
Nonprofit/government (30%)	Consulting (25%)	Consulting (33%)	Finance (49%)
Consulting (29%)	Finance (22%)	Finance (32%)	Consulting (44%)
Finance (14%)	Products/services (21%)	Products/services (25%)	Products/services (24%)
Technology (12%)	Nonprofit/government (19%)	Technology (16%)	Technology (21%)
Products/services (11%)	Technology (16%)	Nonprofit/government (11%)	Nonprofit/government (11%)
Manufacturing (10%)	Energy/utilities (11%)	Energy/utilities (9%)	Manufacturing (9%)
Energy/utilities (7%)	Health care (9%)	Manufacturing (7%)	Health care (8%)
Health care (6%)	Manufacturing (8%)	Health care (6%)	Energy/utilities (7%)

*Percentages in each column do not sum to 100 due to multiple selections.
Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

Globally, one-third (35%) of prospective students seek international careers, a proportion that is down slightly from 38 percent in 2014, but still high when compared with five years ago, when 29 percent of candidates intended to seek international jobs. The United States (47% of respondents), United Kingdom (12%), and Canada (8%) are the top employment destinations for these candidates.

Prospective students who prefer to study abroad are split in their international postgraduate employment options. Half (52%) who want to study abroad also prefer to work abroad, whereas 48 percent plan to work back in their home country.

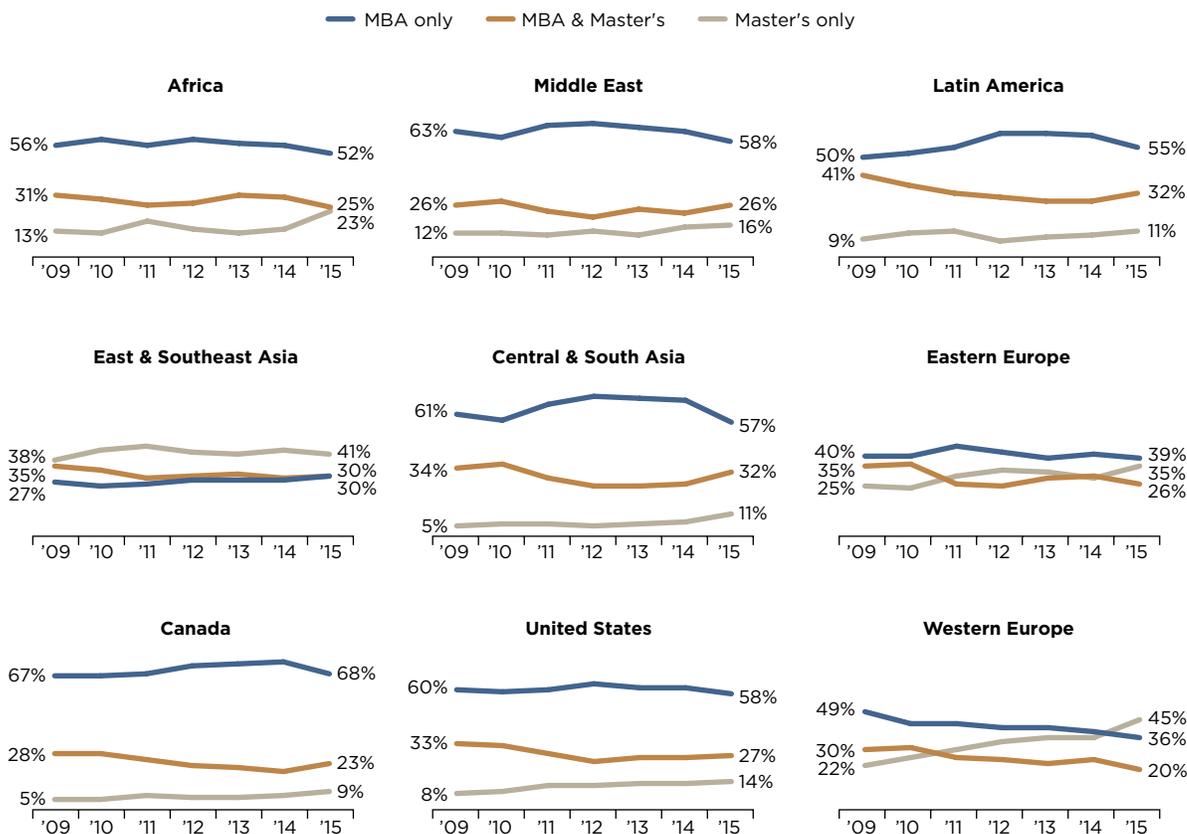
International students seeking employment abroad are most likely to pursue job opportunities in the country where they prefer to pursue graduate management education (68%).

PROGRAM CONSIDERATION

Students consider a variety of graduate business programs when evaluating how best to achieve their expected personal, educational, and employment goals. Globally, half of prospective students are considering only MBA programs (50%), slightly more than a quarter (28%) are considering both MBA and specialized business master's programs, and one-fourth (23%) are considering only specialized business master's programs, such as Master of Accounting or Master of Finance. The share of prospective students who are looking only at business master's programs has increased since 2009, a trend observed worldwide (Figure 7). MBA programs remain the most considered program type, however, even though this has declined slightly in some regions.

CANDIDATE INTEREST IN SPECIALIZED BUSINESS MASTER'S DEGREES ON THE RISE ACROSS REGIONS BUT MBAS REMAIN MOST CONSIDERED PROGRAM TYPE.

Figure 7. Graduate business programs considered, by regional citizenship, percentage of respondents, 2009 to 2015

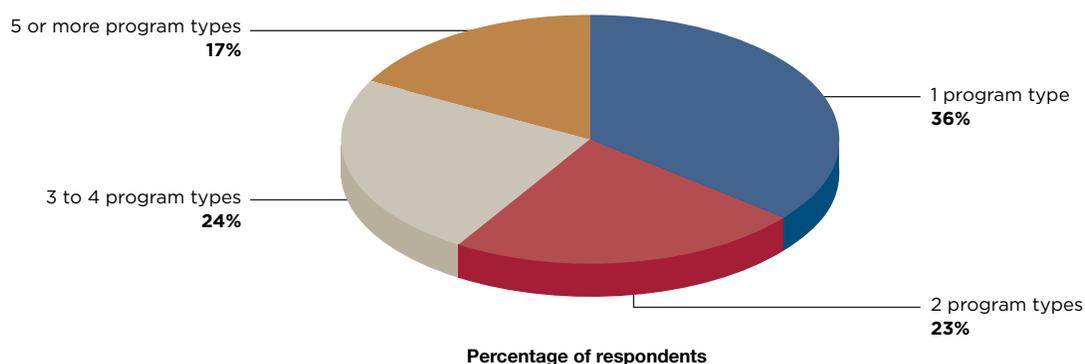


Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected in each calendar year, 2009 to 2015.

Not only are prospective students more narrowly focused in terms of career objectives, they seem to be more precisely targeting the types of programs they are considering. On average, students consider 2.8 program types, such as full-time two-year MBA or full-time one-year MBA or Master of Finance, for example. This number is down from 3.1 program types considered in 2014 (**Figure 8**). And similar to the differences seen in generational career choices, younger candidates are more likely than their older counterparts to consider a broader range of program types.

MAJORITY OF PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS STILL CONSIDER MULTIPLE PROGRAM TYPES.

Figure 8. Average number of program types considered, by percentage of respondents



Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

Even though prospective students in general are focusing on a narrower range of potential programs, business schools still have a lot of room to compete for their attention since 64 percent of candidates are considering more than one program type (**Table 2**).

- Students considering full-time MBAs are the least likely to consider other program formats. Approximately half (57%) of the candidates considering a full-time two-year MBA and 49 percent of candidates considering a full-time one-year MBA would prefer to enroll in these programs, the highest proportion across all business program types.
- Candidates considering part-time, flexible, online, and executive MBA programs also tend to look at other professional MBA programs within this space.
- Specialized master's programs face more competition from other program types than MBA programs as students who prefer business masters consider the greatest number of program types.

PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS HAVE CLEAR TOP CHOICE OF PROGRAM TYPE, BUT OTHER PROGRAM OPTIONS STILL COMPETE FOR THEIR ATTENTION.

Table 2. Other GME programs considered, by preferred program type and percentage selecting

Preferred Program	Other Programs Considered (% of Respondents)		
	First	Second	Third
Full-time 2-year MBA	Full-time 1-year MBA (32%)	Master of Finance (14%)	Master in Management (9%)
Full-time 1-year MBA	Full-time 2-year MBA (39%)	Master of Finance (14%)	Flexible MBA (14%)
Part-time MBA	Flexible MBA (26%)	Online MBA (14%)	Full-time 1-year MBA (14%)
Flexible MBA*	Part-time MBA (46%)	Full-time 1-year MBA (35%)	Full-time 2-year MBA (30%)
Executive MBA	Full-time 1-year MBA (30%)	Part-time MBA (28%)	Full-time 2-year MBA (20%)
Online MBA	Part-time MBA (39%)	Flexible MBA (29%)	Hybrid MBA (23%)
Hybrid MBA*	Part-time MBA (53%)	Flexible MBA (52%)	Online MBA (47%)
Master in Management	Master of Global Management (35%)	Master of Finance (24%)	Full-time 1-year MBA (21%)
Master of Global Management	Master in Management (47%)	Master of Marketing (30%)	Master of Finance (26%)
Master of Accounting	Master of Finance (29%)	Master of Taxation (25%)	Full-time 1-year MBA (11%)
Master of Finance	Master of Accounting (27%)	Master in Management (21%)	Full-time 1-year MBA (18%)
Master of Marketing	Master of Global Management (27%)	Master in Management (26%)	Master of Entrepreneurship (18%)
Master of Supply Chain Management	Full-time 1-year MBA (26%)	Master of Global Management (24%)	Master in Management (19%)
Master of Data Analytics	Master of Business IT (41%)	Master of Finance (26%)	Full-time 1-year MBA/ Master of Project Management (20%)
One-year PGP program	Full-time 1-year MBA (53%)	Executive MBA (33%)	Two-year PGP (23%)

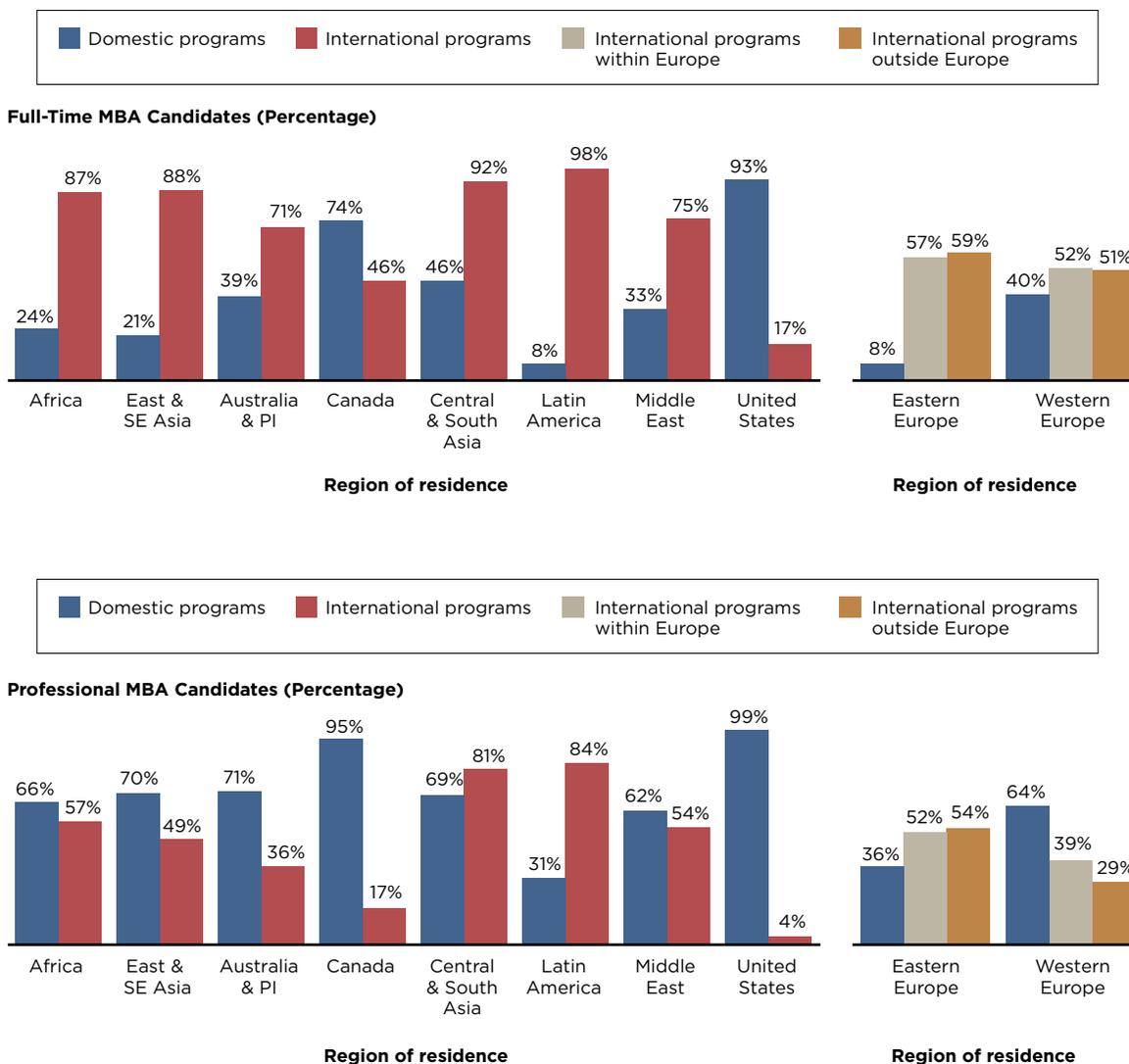
*A flexible MBA provides both full-time and part-time options. A hybrid MBA combines online and in-class instruction.
Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

STUDY DESTINATIONS

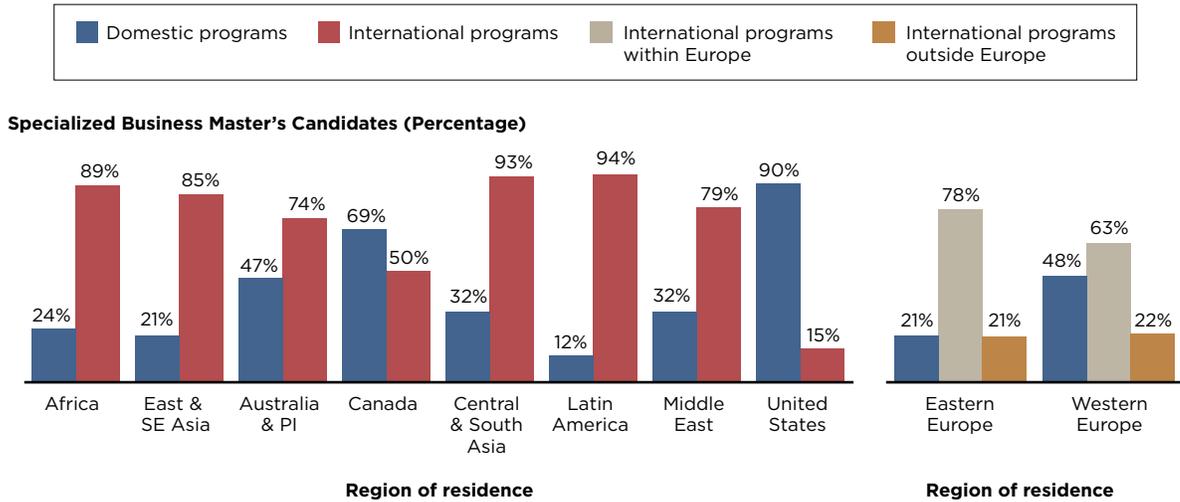
More than half (57%) of prospective students surveyed in 2015 prefer to study internationally, down slightly from 59 percent in 2014, but still high compared with 51 percent in 2011. These internationally minded prospective students are not limiting their business school options to programs abroad, however. A fourth (25%) of prospective students who prefer to study outside their country of citizenship are submitting applications to domestic programs at the same time. And those who prefer to study domestically are also submitting applications to international programs, although at a lesser rate—17 percent. **Figure 9** displays prospective students' application behavior by preferred program type and region of residence.

PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS OFTEN PLAN TO SUBMIT APPLICATIONS TO BOTH DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS, IN SPITE OF STUDY DESTINATION PREFERENCE.

Figure 9. Percentage of applications destined for domestic & international programs, by candidate residence and program preference



Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

Figure 9 (continued)

Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

Overall, the primary reasons why candidates select a specific study destination are the reputation of the educational system (57% of respondents), better career preparation (46%), attractiveness of location (40%), and international careers (40%).

More so than their peers who intend to study in domestic programs, prospective students who prefer to study abroad want to:

- Improve their chances of having an international career (60% vs. 14% of domestic study candidates),
- Build an international network of colleagues (49% vs. 14%),
- Study in a country that offers English language education (36% vs. 13%),
- Experience learning amid a diverse student body (32% vs. 13%), and
- Have opportunities to learn or improve their English proficiency (25% vs. 7%).

On the other hand, those preferring to study in their home countries are more likely than international study candidates to do so in order to be closer to their families (32% vs. 10% of international study candidates) and to obtain a more affordable education (42% vs. 30%).

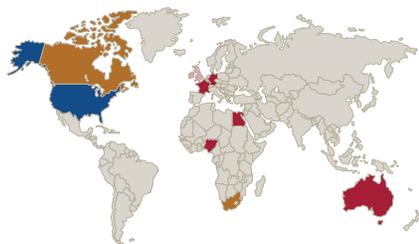
Overall, the top 10 study destinations for students who wish to study abroad are (in descending order): the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, France, Germany, Singapore, Australia, Netherlands, Spain, and Switzerland. As **Figure 10** displays, the United States is the most popular study destination for most citizenship groups across major world regions. The heat map for each region shows preferred study destinations for students interested in study abroad, ranging from more preferred to less preferred country options for each citizenship group.

THE UNITED STATES CONTINUES TO BE THE MOST POPULAR STUDY DESTINATION FOR PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS.

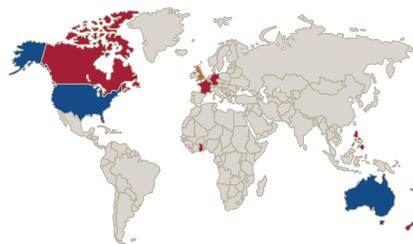
Figure 10. Top study destinations preferred by candidates, by citizenship.

Lower preference (% of students) ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ Higher preference (% of students)

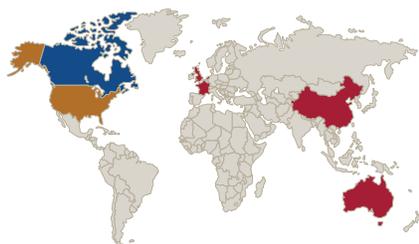
African Citizens



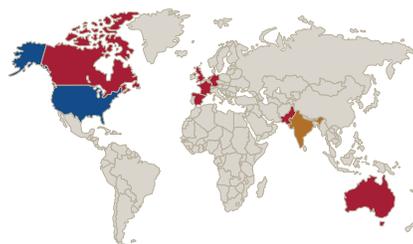
Australian & Pacific Islands Citizens



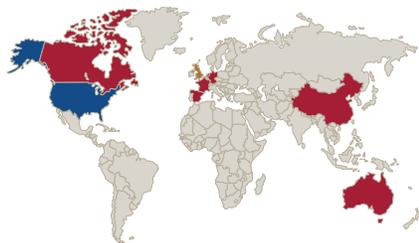
Canadian Citizens



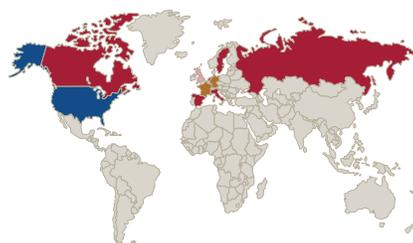
Central & South Asian Citizens



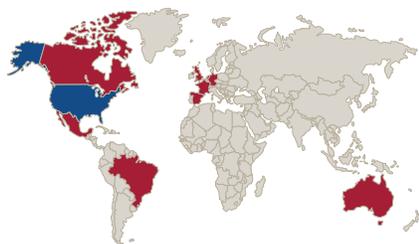
East & Southeast Asian Citizens



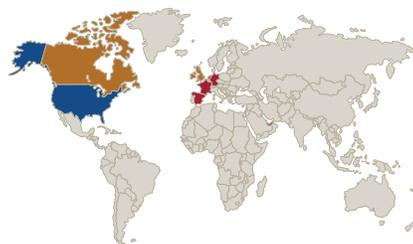
Eastern European Citizens



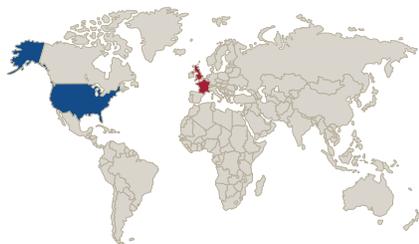
Latin American Citizens



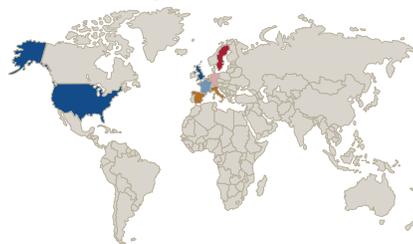
Middle Eastern Citizens



United States Citizens



Western European Citizens



Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

INFORMATION SOURCES

Building school brand awareness and becoming a part of the prospective student's program consideration set (short list of schools) requires an understanding of how information about graduate management education is gathered and consumed. Prospective students use a variety of information sources to research their graduate business school study options (Table 3).

BASED ON PROGRAM PREFERENCE, PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS CONSULT COMMON INFORMATION SOURCES TO RESEARCH AND SELECT PROGRAMS.

Table 3. Top information sources consulted by prospective students, shown in descending order by program preference

Full-Time MBA		Professional MBA		Business Master's	
Learn about Programs	Select Programs	Learn about Programs	Select Programs	Learn about Programs	Select Programs
School websites					
GMAT website (mba.com)	School admissions professionals	GMAT website (mba.com)	School admissions professionals	Friends/family	School admissions professionals
Friends/family	Friends/family	School brochures/publications	Friends/family	School-related websites	Friends/family
Ranking publications	Ranking publications	Friends/family	Ranking publications	School admissions professionals	Ranking publications
School brochures/publications	Current students/alumni	School-related websites	Coworkers/peers	Ranking publications	School-related websites
School-related websites	School brochures/publications	Ranking publications	School brochures/publications	GMAT website (mba.com)	College/university professors
School admissions professionals	School-related websites	Coworkers/peers	School-related websites	School brochures/publications	School brochures/publications
Current students/alumni	GMAT website (mba.com)	School admissions professionals	Current students/alumni	College/university professors	Current students/alumni
Coworkers/peers	Coworkers/peers	Current students/alumni	GMAT website (mba.com)	Current students/alumni	Career/school advisors
Networking events	Networking events	Employer/supervisor	Admissions consultants	Networking events	GMAT website (mba.com)

Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

They tend to use more channels when first investigating graduate management education programs available in their area of interest (average of 8.3 sources) and fewer (average 6.8 sources) when they begin researching and selecting specific programs where they want to apply.

Focusing a school's branding efforts requires knowledge of the different channels prospective students use to first learn about graduate management education. Prospective students are more likely to use the GMAT website—mba.com (43% vs. 28%)—as well as school websites (77% vs. 63%), school-related websites (41% vs. 32%), print online magazines and newspapers (28% vs. 19%), social networking sites (24% vs. 16%), school-related guides and publications (29% vs. 21%), and school brochures and publications (41% vs. 33%) to first learn about available programs than when they later research them in depth and make their program selections.

Social media is a pervasive medium—96 percent of prospective students engage with it. Two-thirds (67%) of social media users use it for activities related to the pursuit of their graduate management education programs, for example, researching graduate management education, learning about upcoming school events and activities, and connecting with program faculty (**Table 4**). Facebook and LinkedIn are the most popular social media sites used globally, with the exception of China, where QQ is the most popular.

MANY PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO RESEARCH PROGRAMS AND CONNECT WITH CURRENT STUDENTS, ALUMNI, AND FACULTY.

Table 4. Primary uses of social media, by citizenship and percentage of respondents

Candidate Citizenship	Get program news/information	Learn about upcoming events or activities	Connect with current students	Connect with alumni	Research graduate management education	Connect with program faculty
Africa	49%	44%	36%	33%	40%	32%
East & Southeast Asia	42%	38%	29%	26%	28%	23%
Australia & Pacific Islands	32%	27%	27%	29%	27%	25%
Canada	25%	28%	18%	23%	22%	16%
Central & South Asia	47%	39%	40%	37%	38%	27%
Latin America	34%	33%	28%	26%	24%	21%
Middle East	32%	37%	30%	27%	22%	24%
United States	18%	21%	20%	20%	14%	13%
Eastern Europe	37%	43%	39%	30%	22%	21%
Western Europe	27%	33%	31%	27%	16%	17%

Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

The specific types of information candidates seek and the influence that information has in their application decisions vary by preferred program type. Across all program types, information related to quality of the faculty, program accreditation, rankings, job offers, total costs, completion time and the curriculum were among the top 10 most influential elements prospective students evaluate.

Those preferring full-time MBA and specialized business master's programs focus more on job placement reputation and starting salaries. Candidates preferring professional MBA programs are more focused on course format, convenient class schedules, and proximity to home as they tend to be maintaining their career while pursuing their degree and seek information about managing work-life-school balance (**Figure 11**).

FULL-TIME MBA AND BUSINESS MASTER'S CANDIDATES ARE MORE FOCUSED ON EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES; PROFESSIONAL MBA CANDIDATES SEEK INFORMATION ON MANAGING WORK-LIFE-SCHOOL BALANCE.

Figure 11. Program information ranked in order as most influential* in application decisions, by candidates' preferred program type

Full-Time MBA	Professional MBA	Business Master's
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percent of graduating class with job offers • Quality of faculty • Availability of scholarships • Total tuition and required fees • Graduates' starting base salary and other compensation • Program accreditation • School's job placement reputation • Program completion time • Program's published ranking • Specific curriculum offered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program accreditation • Total tuition and required fees • Course type offered (on-campus, off-campus, online/distance learning) • Program completion time • Quality of faculty • Convenient class schedules • Program's published ranking • Proximity to work or home • Specific curriculum offered • Percent of graduating class receiving job offers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percent of graduating class receiving job offers • Total tuition and required fees • Quality of faculty • Availability of scholarships • Program accreditation • Program completion time • Graduates' starting annual base salary and other compensation • Specific curriculum offered • Program's published ranking • School's job placement reputation

*Influence is calculated based on the percentage of prospective students seeking information multiplied by the percentage considering the information extremely/very important in their decision.

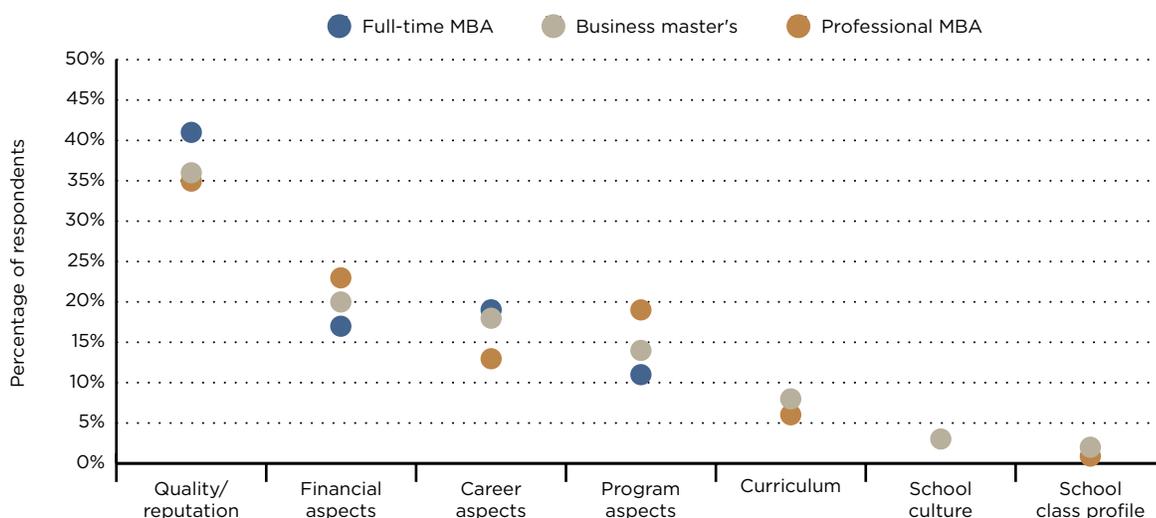
Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

SCHOOL SELECTION CRITERIA

There are many factors at play in the school selection process that determine where students ultimately will apply. Overall, prospective students weigh the quality and reputation of a program more heavily than they do the financial aspects of program attendance; however, total costs are among the top three factors considered for each program type (Figure 12).

QUALITY AND REPUTATION OF BUSINESS PROGRAMS ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT SELECTION CRITERIA FOR MANY PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS.

Figure 12. Most important program selection criteria, by percentage of respondents and preferred program type

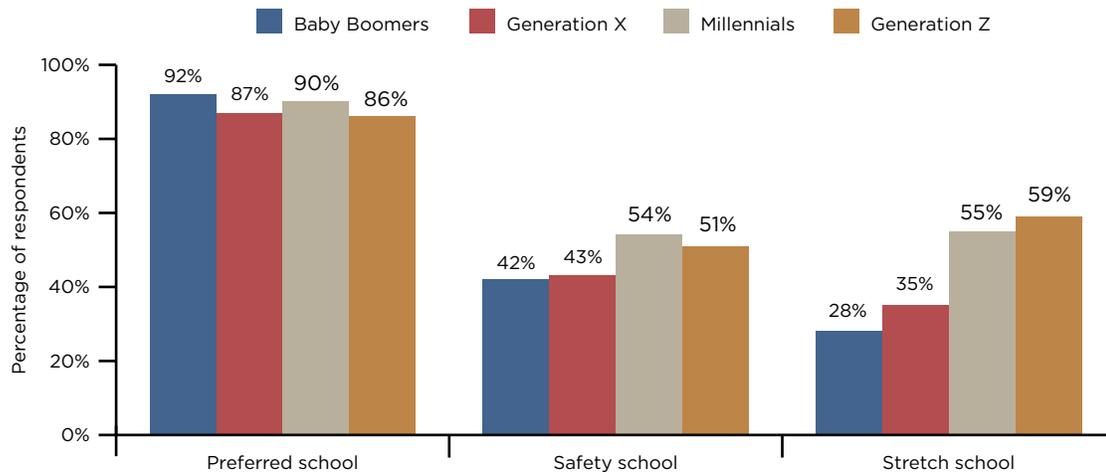


Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

Two-thirds of prospective students (65%) feel it is important to get into the best program possible. Only 59 percent say they have thoroughly researched the programs where they intend to apply. But, no matter where students are in their deliberation process of applying to business school, the vast majority (90% overall) have identified a preferred school from which they want to earn their degree. This is true for 94 percent of those already applying, for the 89 percent who are still planning to apply, and for the 79 percent of those still deciding whether or not to pursue a graduate management education. At the same time, however, the majority of prospective students (53%) also have identified safety schools. Those with high GMAT exam scores are equally as likely as those with lower GMAT scores to have selected safety schools. A majority of Millennial (55%) and Generation Z (59%) cohorts are most likely to consider “stretch” schools, even though they may not qualify (Figure 13).

YOUNGER GENERATIONS ARE MOST LIKELY TO CONSIDER BUSINESS SCHOOLS FOR WHICH THEY MIGHT NOT QUALIFY—THE STRETCH SCHOOL.

Figure 13. Majority of prospective students' school selections include preferred schools, but many also include safety and stretch schools

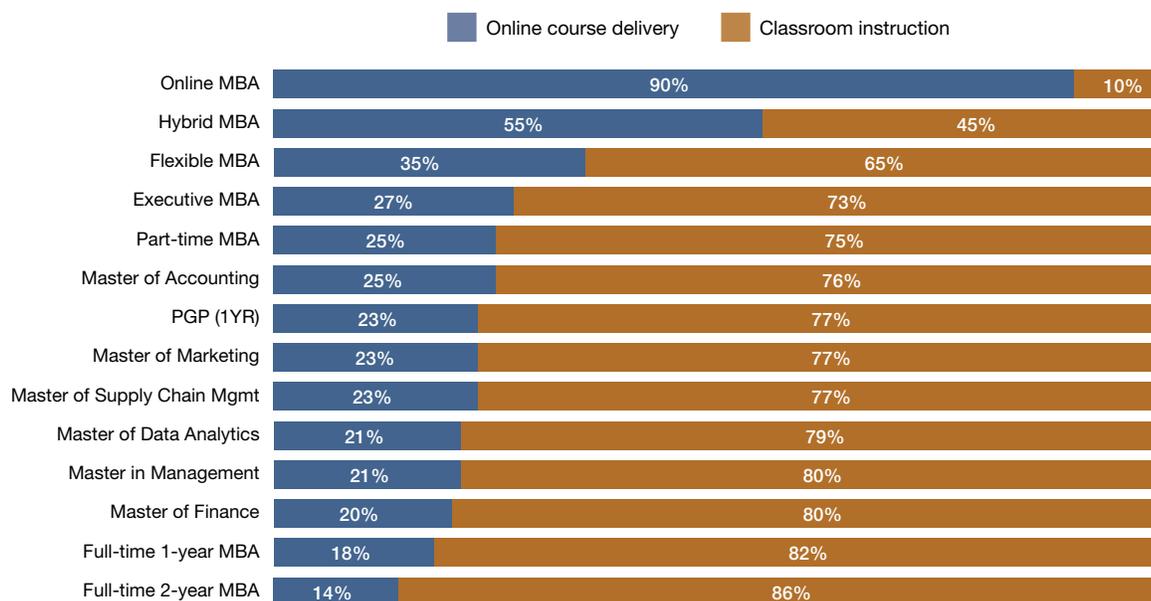


Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

Course delivery format does not rank among the top 10 most influential factors in the decision-making process of prospective students when considering program formats [see **Figure 11**]. Nearly half (47%) of candidates seek this information, however, and at least three-fourths of them (76%) consider it extremely or very influential in their decisions. Most students seek a blend of classroom instruction and online learning, although the mix varies by program type. At one end of the spectrum are those who prefer to enroll in online MBA programs. Yet, even these candidates expect 10 percent of their program to be conducted in-person, to allow for networking or engaging in experiential learning opportunities. At the other end of the spectrum are full-time MBA candidates who prefer to experience 84 percent of coursework in a classroom setting (**Figure 14**).

PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS WANT SOME ONLINE COURSE OPPORTUNITIES REGARDLESS OF PREFERRED PROGRAM TYPE.

Figure 14. Percentage of course delivery preferred online & in classroom, by preferred program type*



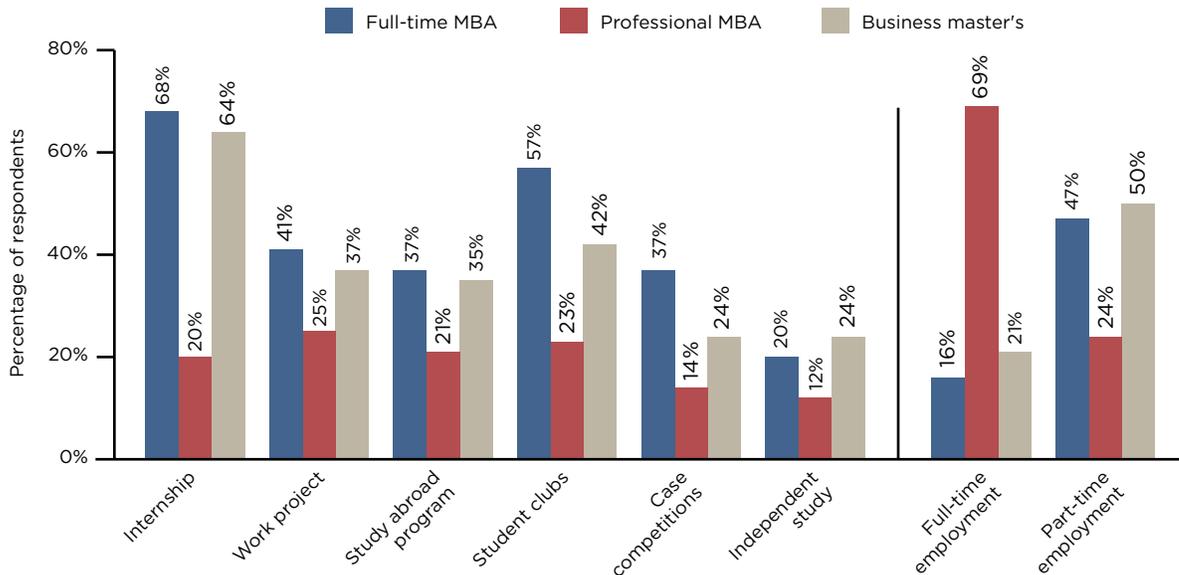
*Flexible MBA provides both full-time and part-time options; hybrid MBA combines online and classroom instruction. Note: Percentages may sum to more than 100 due to rounding.

Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

Seven in 10 prospective students (70%) view a graduate management education as an opportunity to explore what they want to do in life and with their careers. To that end most seek to be actively engaged in many of the co-curricular offerings available in business school. Candidates for full-time MBA (73%) and business master's (70%) programs are more likely than those considering professional MBA (62%) programs to see business school as an exploration process. This is reflected in the types of activities they intend to engage in once enrolled. Candidates for professional MBA programs are the least likely to be involved in internships (20% of respondents) and student clubs (23%) and most likely to be working full-time (69%; **Figure 15**).

CANDIDATES FOR PROFESSIONAL MBA PROGRAMS ARE MOST LIKELY TO CONTINUE WORKING WHILE ENROLLED; LEAST LIKELY TO PARTICIPATE IN CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES.

Figure 15. Candidate preferences for co-curricular activities, by preferred program type



Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

Even though cultural fit with a school is less important relative to other factors in their school selection decisions, candidates have clear preferences about particular aspects of school culture, such as smaller class sizes that facilitate a more personal atmosphere and closer-knit community, a diverse student body, collaborative learning focused on teams rather than the individual, and learning that is active, rigorous, and fosters critical discussion, with egalitarian professors. Prospective students are more divided on other aspects of school culture such as academic versus vocational curriculum, teaching versus research-oriented approach, interdisciplinary versus concentration focused, and casual versus formal. For these aspects, preferences become more distinct based on candidates' preferred programs.

FINANCING BUSINESS SCHOOL

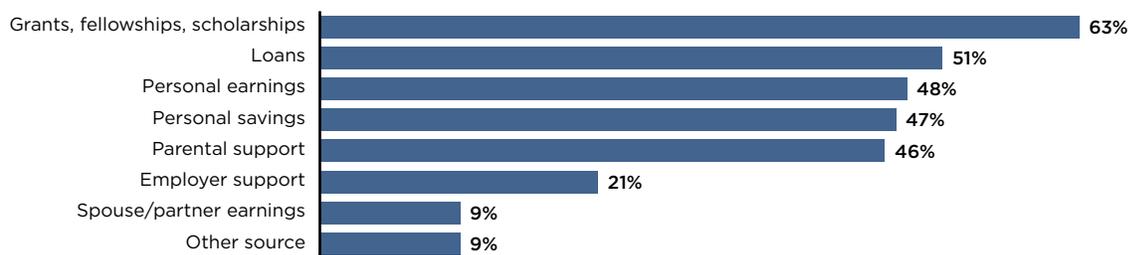
The cost of a graduate management education continues to be a key concern for prospective students and an important factor in deciding where they will apply and enroll. Prospective students anticipate using a variety of resources to fund their degree although they expect to finance almost half of their education through a combination of grants, fellowships and scholarships (26%) and loans (20%). **Figure 16** displays the expected financial sources that prospective students expect to rely upon to help pay their educational costs. It also displays the average percentage of each source expected to be part of the total financial mix of funding for their education.

Baby Boomers and Generation Xers are more likely to rely on personal savings and earnings as well as employer support to pay for the costs of their education; whereas Millennial and Generation Z cohorts will be more dependent on parental support. There are also important gender differences to note within the expected financial mix for different age groups. Among prospective students 24 years of age and younger, men are more likely than women to rely on loans and personal savings, whereas women expect to rely more on parental support. Among those aged 24 to 30, women are more likely to rely on spousal or partner earnings and employer reimbursement than men their age, who expect to rely more on loans. Among those aged 31 and older, women will rely more on a spouse's or partner's earnings and men will rely more on personal savings.

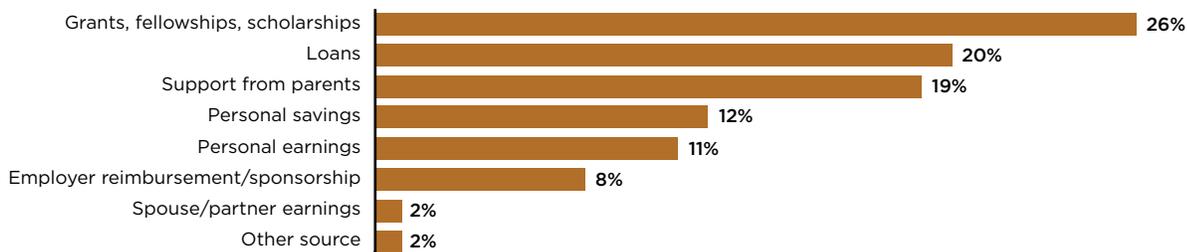
GRANTS, FELLOWSHIPS, AND SCHOLARSHIPS AND LOANS MAKE UP NEARLY HALF OF FUNDING SOURCES FOR PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS ALTHOUGH PARENTAL SUPPORT IS CRUCIAL SOURCE FOR MILLENNIALS AND GENERATION Z.

Figure 16. Expected funding sources, by percentage of respondents; and financial mix anticipated to pay for graduate business degree.

Expected Financial Sources



Financial Mix (Average Percent Expected)



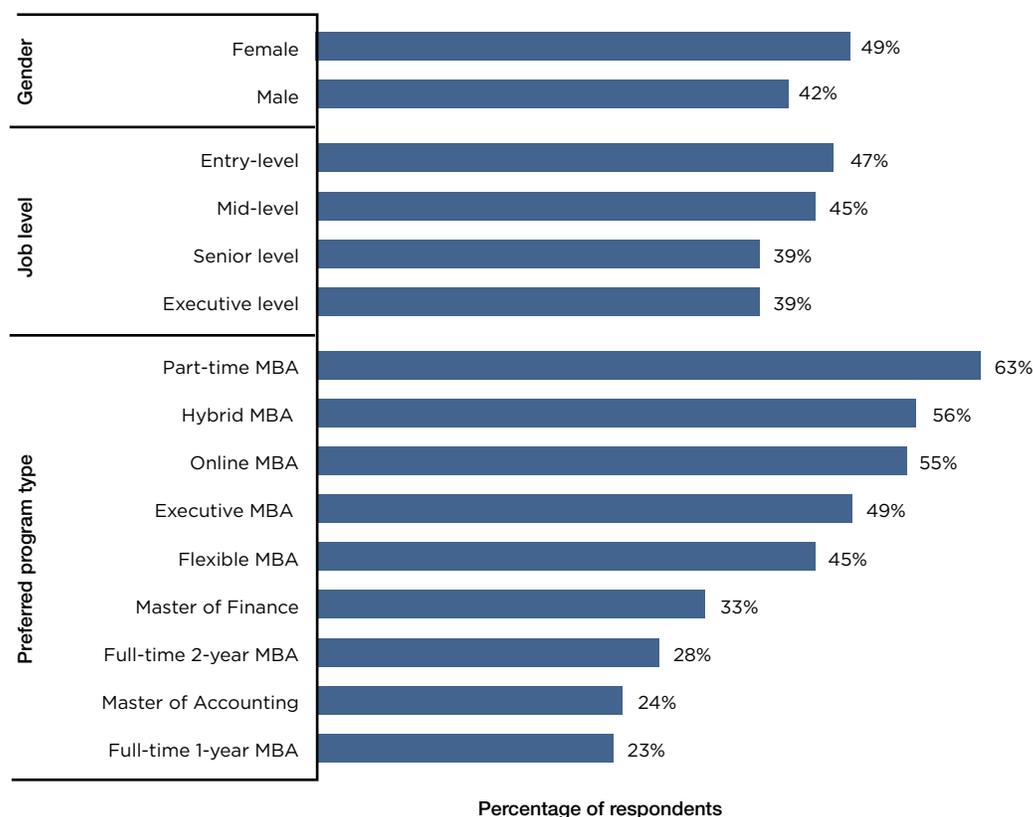
Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

Prospective students who are employed and who plan to continue working full-time while attending business school face challenges related to levels of employer funding, which continues to decline. Currently, 45 percent of this group anticipates receiving employer tuition assistance or reimbursement to help pay for their education, down from 54 percent in 2009. In addition, these individuals anticipate their employer assistance will cover, on average, just 52 percent of their educational costs, down from 55 percent in 2009.

Employers who help finance their employees' graduate management education often reap multiple benefits as a result of their investment, ranging from workers who now have acquired new skill sets to improved employee retention. Three in five (62%) prospective students who expect employer tuition assistance intend to remain with their current employer versus 26 percent of those not receiving such assistance. Among candidates most likely to anticipate using employer-funded tuition (e.g., those currently employed who plan to continue working full-time while completing their degree) are women, candidates in entry and mid-level jobs, and those interested in professional MBA programs (**Figure 17**).

WOMEN, CANDIDATES WORKING IN ENTRY- OR MID-LEVEL JOBS, AND THOSE PREFERRING PROFESSIONAL MBA PROGRAMS ARE MOST LIKELY TO ANTICIPATE EMPLOYER FUNDING.

Figure 17. Percentage of prospective students anticipating use of employer tuition assistance*



*Analysis is based on prospective students currently working for an employer who stated their intent to continue working full-time while enrolled in graduate business school. Only programs with a minimum sample size of 50 respondents are reported in the preferred program type section.
Source: GMAC (2016) mba.com Prospective Students Survey. Data collected January to December 2015.

CONCLUDING NOTE

GMAC's mba.com Prospective Students Survey continues to be a major source of information and market intelligence about the graduate business school candidate pipeline. In addition to this public summary report, business school programs that use the GMAT exam for admissions can access the interactive data tool that accompanies this survey, which allows users to explore the survey question-by-question and filtered by a variety of geographic, demographic, and psychographic characteristics of the prospective student. GMAC also offers the graduate management education community a variety of resources to assist with various tactical and strategic recruitment goals. For example, how do your application volumes compare with those of your competitors? Participate in the GMAC Application Trends Survey in June to find out. Do your alumni reap the benefits they expected from their graduate management education? How do their outcomes stack up against other alumni? Participate in the Alumni Perspectives Survey in the autumn to learn more. Visit gmac.com/surveysignup to ensure your school is reflected in future survey results.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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CONTRIBUTORS

The following individuals from the Research Services Department in the School Products Division of GMAC made significant contributions to the publication of this report: **Rhonda Daniel**, Survey Research Manager, questionnaire design, analysis, and survey management, interpretation of data, and drafting of the manuscript for intellectual content; **Gregg Schoenfeld**, Director, Management Education Research, review of questionnaire, analysis, and drafting of the manuscript for intellectual content; **Devina Caruthers**, Research Associate Manager, administration of survey; **Paula Bruggeman**, Research Publications Manager, editorial review and publication management; **Tacoma Williams**, Research Senior Coordinator, sample development and quality assurance; **Matthew Hazenbush**, Research Communications Manager, manuscript review and quality assurance; **Alex Chisholm**, Senior Director, Research Services, peer review; **Rebecca Estrada-Worthington**, Survey Research Manager, peer review; and **Robert Alig**, Executive Vice President, School Products Division, manuscript review.

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■ **Corporate Recruiters Survey**

Launched in 2001–2002, this annual survey helps schools better understand the job market, clarify employer expectations, and benchmark their career services practices. Employers use the survey results to benchmark the MBA recruitment activities of their companies.

■ **Alumni Perspectives Survey**

This annual survey explores the career journey of alumni after business school and tells the story of their career progression, expectations, attitudes, and the value of their education.

■ **Application Trends Survey**

Since its debut in 1999, this annual two-part survey compares current and previous year application data for business school programs worldwide, highlighting trends by program type and world region.

Survey Reports provide an overview of data in addition to offering context for and discussing implications of the research. They frequently are used to help drive strategic decision-making processes in graduate business schools.

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