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UC Berkeley's Haas business school to launch flexible online MBA

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UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business will offer a new flexible online option for its MBA program, the school announced Thursday.

Dubbed the Flex option, it's not a separate program from its on-site offering, but a new way for students to access the same education within Haas' existing part-time evening and weekend program. It features the same curriculum and access to professors that students would expect were they to take classes on campus.

I spoke with Jamie Breen, assistant dean of UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business, to unpack the new remote learning option and how it will open up enrollment to students that may otherwise have not applied.

How did you come to the decision of going fully online? We take a class and put them into cohorts of about 72 to 75 students. So



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there are two evening cohorts and two weekend cohorts, and now we're going to have a fifth cohort, which is what we call the Flex. And the way we have structured this is all of the students take a set of core classes for the MBA and then they have a set of electives — all of them will be in a remote format — and so about half the content will be asynchronous, developed by our tenured faculty, but half will be synchronous delivered either over Zoom or by the virtual classrooms that we installed last year.

We have virtual classrooms that mimic faculty teaching in a normal classroom where they can see all the students and interact with them. Those classes will meet every week with the professor. About half of the content is at their own pace.

So students can participate in the Flex option from anywhere?

Yes. Our synchronous sessions are probably going to be during the week from 4 to 6 pm. So that opens it up for students outside the West Coast and actually makes it quite accessible in multiple time zones, certainly in the U.S. and possibly worldwide.

We do know that by having such a high proportion of synchronous content, it does make it harder for people to meet at the same time, but our faculty felt very strongly that the discussions in the classroom and (students') interaction with each other and with the faculty is a critical component to deepening the understanding of the academic theory and the kind of material you can absorb asynchronously on your own. Those two had to be equally strong and complement each other.

Do you anticipate other programs at Berkeley offering something sort of similar? We don't have plans on the books or the drawing board. But we're certainly talking about it a lot, and we are as an institution looking to see how this goes to learn from it. We need to know how to meet student needs and learn how they engage with us, so it's certainly going to deepen our conversation after some actual experience.

Does cost differ with the Flex option? No. The tuition will be the same as our evening and weekend tuition.

Do most students work full time when attending the program? Our students work full time. Students may quit the program — a

fair number of students go into the startup world or start businesses part way through the program — but use the resources at Berkeley, where they may decide based on what they've learned in school and from their peers that they want to take their career in a different direction. But I would say the vast majority, probably 90% plus, are fully employed throughout the entire three years in the program.

Is three years standard for graduating? Three years is standard for students that work full time while going through our program — and that's sort of how it's structured. Students can accelerate and many complete it in two and a half years. The standard three years means that you don't take courses during the summer. We do offer them. And some students take electives during the summer and accelerate their degree that way. Some students take longer. They may take time off because they're starting a business, or because they got an opportunity to work overseas in another geography for six months or a year and they may delay it and come back.

Did discussions to go remote take place before the pandemic?

Yes, our faculty and the university approved this format back in 2015. We were pretty much all set — we had started to hire people. And then the University of California at that time was having some financial challenges. So they asked that we delay the implementation. Then the pandemic struck. We also had to shut down campus a couple of times because of fires and smoke and power outages. So our faculty had started learning to pivot to virtual delivery. I would say a year or so ago is when we got really serious about all the aspects of implementation, but this has been our plan for a long time, it's just now coming to fruition. And in the meantime, we created Haas digital that has deep instructional design capabilities that support our faculty in a much deeper and richer way than we ever could have five or six years ago, had we started then.

Were students vocal about wanting this flexible format? Our admissions team would hear from potential students who said, "I'd love to come to Haas, it would be my top choice, but I can't come to campus every week," which is what the original program requires. Or they'd hear that's just too hard given work or family schedules — or their location. And we didn't have a way to respond

to those, so there's a population of people out there that would be great students that we would really love to attend Haas, but the traditional arrangement was just too difficult for them.

Berkeley, as a public institution, has a mission to educate and we take that very seriously. And so this is another way to make education more accessible to folks who would like to take advantage of it.

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