

Fast track program can help you zoom to a double degree MBA



Students at NIU's new Fast-Trak MBA program complete 44 hours of classwork in one year in order to earn an MBA.

When Joe Walker was looking for an MBA program he wanted one that would get him back into the workforce quickly and that would challenge him enough to prepare him for a management job.

Walker believes he found the perfect program in Northern Illinois University's new Fast-Trak MBA program. In 12 months, Walker will complete 44 hours of classwork and earn a Master of Business Administration, as well as a master's degree in international management from the University Montesquieu Bordeaux IV, School of Management in France.

NIU officials tout the program as the first in the Chicago area to offer a double degree MBA.

Walker, who has a few years of experience providing technical support to court reporters, hopes the degrees and skills that he'll learn over the next year will land him a management job with a global tech company. "I wanted something that would be really engaging, that would challenge me," he says. "I wanted the work to be deadline driven and to be back in the workforce in a year."

Meanwhile, Sachi A. Moy joined the program directly out of NIU's undergraduate business school, where she majored in accounting. She plans to take the Certified Public Accountant exam and needed extra course hours to qualify. In addition, Moy says the program will give her exposure to other areas of business and give her more job opportunities in the future. "I think this program will be very valuable in the end," she says. "It sets us apart from every other job applicant out there."

Moy and Sachi are representative of the two types of students NIU expected to attract with the fast track program -- those with a few years of work experience and new college graduates looking for a fifth year before joining the workforce. But with the recession, the program also has drawn mid-career professionals looking for a change, says Paul Prabhaker, associate dean of graduate programs. Some students are taking a year leave of absence from their jobs and others are using the program to transition out of the military.

Tailored program

By creating the fast track program, NIU is catering to a niche of students who previously had difficulty taking time to get an MBA. "We needed to address the needs of the market," Prabhaker says. "We took the content for a regular MBA and scheduled it in a way without cutting any corners and then added some unique aspects to it."

Students move through the program together in a cohort, taking the same classes and working on teams to complete projects. Classes take place five days a week at the DeKalb campus.

For three weeks of intense residency in November and then again in March, students take 10 classes taught by French professors and learn about wine economics, international business law and international trade practices among other courses. They'll also visit companies like the Airbus factory.

The creation of the Fast-Trak MBA was a collaborative effort by faculty at NIU and the University of Bordeaux. Students and faculty are shared and exchanged between the universities.

The international component was a big draw for students, who can opt out of the international business degree and save on tuition and fees. Despite the cost, this year's entire class wanted the second degree.

Intensity level

Fifteen students are currently in the program with future enrollment expected to be between 20-30 students. They hit the ground running, says Brian Wilk, a faculty member who teaches principles of management. He sent students material two weeks ahead of time to prepare for his first class.

"This is intense," Wilk says. "The pace of this program is more like the work world than academia. Students will come out of this process with confidence because they did something significant in a compressed period of time."

Classes give students real world experience while teaching them how to work on a team, how to write reports and how to analyze cases.

Lisa Madlinger, an instructor who teaches financial accounting concepts, gives students statements from companies' annual reports and then teaches students how to analyze them. Teams of students might look at industry averages, compare competitors or do a trend analysis. "It's very practical," Madlinger says. "It parallels what they will find in the workforce."

One day a week, students visit corporations throughout the Chicago area like McDonald's to learn about different aspects of their businesses. A four-month capstone project will require teams to study actual problems presented by corporations and then to present solutions back to company officials.

"This really focuses on the students and helps them optimize their potential to reach their particular goals," Wilk says. "This program is reflected in the tagline 'Where the classroom meets the business world.'" For instance, he says the curriculum gives entrepreneurs a broader view of business and will help other students see career possibilities with larger organizations.