

The Executive MPA Program at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs: A Full Time MPA for People Who Can't Afford to Leave Work

by Steven Cohen and William Eimicke
School of International and Public Affairs
Columbia University

PowerPoint Presentation

Prepared for the Annual Meeting of the National Association of
Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, Indianapolis,
Indiana, October 21-23, 2004

The Executive MPA Program At Columbia University's School Of International And Public Affairs: A Full Time MPA for People Who Can't Afford to Leave Work¹ by Steven Cohen and William Eimicke

1.0 What is an Executive MPA Program?

In a review of the websites of the U.S. News and World Report's top 125 MPA programs, we were able to identify the 27 (22%) self-identified Executive Programs. The nature of these programs varies widely. Some are specifically tailored and feature specially scheduled course offerings, while others are tailored curriculum designs using existing course offerings. Some programs mix the two. Obviously, the cost of offering an executive program is much lower if it is possible to use existing courses rather than field new ones. Some executive programs are non-degree certificate programs such as those offered by the Heinz School at Carnegie Mellon. Most are courses of study leading to a Master of Public Administration.

Some Executive Programs, such as the one we have begun at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs, offer a weekend or evening schedule. This type of program is designed to tap into a large local market in a major metropolitan area, or to a more concentrated market in a government capital where students are expected to continue working while going to school. Other Executive Programs such as those at the Kennedy School and the Maxwell

¹ Portions of this paper are drawn from "Marketing an Executive MPA Program: The Case of the EMPA at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs," prepared for presentation to the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, Richmond, Virginia, October 19-21, 2000.

School offer intensive one-year in-residence programs for students willing and able to leave their jobs for a year. Some programs such as those at Rutgers-Newark and the University of Utah have weekend schedules complemented by intensive weeklong sessions in the summer.

The notion of an Executive Program may seem peculiar to many traditional MPA programs, since much of their current constituency are part-time students who are currently “in-service” to government. Many NASPAA schools are located in state capitals and serve as a professional education and training resource for state governments. The move by some schools to establish explicit, stand-alone Executive MPA programs appears to be an effort to imitate the successful practices of business schools to develop and market a separate program and support system for mid-career students.

At Columbia, and many other schools with executive programs, this tends to be characterized by some or all of the following features:

- A curriculum that replaces internship requirements with work experience.
- A schedule that allows, and in fact requires, students to continue to work while in school.

- An effort to allow the student to utilize their workplace as a subject for research projects, and assignments which require the student to use workplace examples in place of more traditional case material.
- Additional support services such as automatic registration, assistance in obtaining reading materials, and additional help in quantitative courses.
- Conference-like amenities such as higher quality, professional-style classrooms and meals or snacks provided by the program.

Business school Executive Programs sometimes charge a premium over regular program tuition levels for the additional services provided to mid-career students, and we saw some evidence of this in Executive MPA Programs (e.g. The EMPA Program at Baruch College of the City University of New York). At Columbia we decided to offer about a 30% discount below the normal rate of tuition, but eliminated fellowship support for these students.

The remaining sections of this paper will focus on the development of Columbia's Executive MPA Program as a case study of one program's response to a changing constituency. This paper will discuss the challenges faced by the institution, the faculty and particularly the students who attend the program. We recognize that our program may not be typical, but hope that some of the lessons we have learned will be of value to colleagues in other MPA programs.

2.0 WHAT IS THE CURRICULUM OF COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY'S EXECUTIVE MPA PROGRAM?

Our first step in developing an Executive Program was to design a curriculum that we thought would have market appeal, but would maintain the rigor that our faculty would support and employers have come to associate with our program. For reasons of cost and space we designed a program that was totally separate from our non-executive program. Courses would be offered on Saturdays and weeknights in the summer, when no other courses were offered. This meant that the programs of study would offer no elective courses all students would take the same analytic core courses, courses on the context of public policy and concentration courses. This eliminated choice—a major marketing advantage of our non-executive program where MPA students were enrolled in approximately 300 different course sections and a large number of different concentrations during the 2003-2004 academic year. In place of choice, we opted for a clear, highly focused skill-building curriculum.

The decision to limit electives made our curriculum choices of critical importance. The core curriculum included a year-long course in applied microeconomics and policy analysis and a year-long course in statistics and applied quantitative analysis. In the fall semester, EMPA students enrolled in a public management case-based seminar and in the spring semester they were required to take our core course in financial management. These courses were

very similar to those offered to the non-executive students, but adjusted to meet the needs, background and schedule of the executive students.

When the program began six years ago, Executive MPA students were given advanced standing for the non-executive program's year long "Practicum". That course featured public sector speakers and discussion and analysis of the viewpoints presented by the speakers. This course has been replaced by a course combining practitioners with academics, but EMPAs continue to be exempt from the course. They were also given credit for the required course in professional development. These courses, as well as the internship requirement and the workshop in applied public management/policy analysis, were considered unnecessary for these more experienced students. In place of the workshop requirement, Executive MPA students enrolled in a Portfolio Presentation course. In that course they worked with a faculty advisor to develop a case study of a management problem faced by the organizations where they worked. They also were required to annotate at least five pieces of written work they drafted at their place of employment while at Columbia to indicate how their professional written work reflected lessons learned in the program.

In the non-executive MPA program, the MPA curriculum allows space for experimentation, growth, and novelty through "enrichment courses." Students make take up to 12 points of enrichment courses.

An enrichment course might introduce a new skill or policy area outside the

concentration. But it could also mean a course on language, culture, politics, or philosophy that expands horizons or just satisfies an itch to know. They also enroll in a year-long course, “Politics of Policymaking.” This course covers the political context of policymaking and includes public sector speakers who give lectures to the entire first-year class. The EMPA program assumes that our students are in the world of practice and while they would benefit from additional exposure from practitioners (and are free to attend the hundreds of public addresses at SIPA each year), a higher priority for these students is a set of courses on the environment of public policy. In the EMPA program students were required to enroll in three specific required courses on the context of public policy:

- The Political Environment of Policymaking
- The Economic Environment of Public Policy
- Public Sector Ethics

Initially, they were offered a single concentration, a five-course sequence in advanced management and finance with the following required courses:

- Accounting
- Public Finance
- Public Sector Marketing, Strategic Planning and Communication
- Nonprofit Management and Finance
- Management Innovation

The concentration in management was selected because it was the most popular area of study for Columbia’s non-executive MPA students. This decision was

made after a focus group of MPA alumni suggested that if only one concentration was offered that it be analytic and skill-building rather than oriented toward a specific policy area such as environmental policy or social welfare policy. After the program was underway for two years we considered adding an Executive Master of International Affairs program, but instead of doing that we developed a second concentration in International Economic Policy and Management : International Trade and Development, International Finance and Monetary Theory, International Economic Policy Analysis, Accounting and Advanced International Management. It also includes context courses in Macroeconomics, International Political Economy and International Policy Making Processes.

3.0 HOW DO WE MARKET THE EXECUTIVE PROGRAM AT SIPA?

Once we decided to launch an Executive Program, we developed and implemented a marketing plan that was in certain respects more ambitious than our marketing of our two other larger and older degree programs. Because it focused on a limited geographic market it was different from our more global approach to marketing our non-executive programs.

Executive MPA marketing benefits from the general SIPA branding accomplished through the SIPA-wide publicity effort. The Executive MPA marketing effort has a different emphasis than the school-wide campaign and a more specific geographic emphasis on the New York metropolitan area.

Marketing an executive program at Columbia University may differ in degree from marketing in other places, but it does not differ in kind. It is difficult and expensive to capture attention in a major media market like New York, but communicating to prospective students is a challenge to all programs. The Executive MPA recruiting program includes the following elements:

- Print campaign. In 2003-2004, we spent approximately \$60,000 on advertising in the Sunday New York Times (and one weekday). The New York Times ads are effective and also expensive at \$10,000 per placement. These ads were timed to advertise the program and our open house recruitment events.
- Mail campaign. A number of mailings were sent to about 600 regional alumnae of the regular MPA program, government, nonprofit and selected private sector human resource directors. The mailings included a flyer, a bulletin and a personalized letter. The school also purchased several mailing lists that were used in a mailing campaign. Mailings were sent to Federal, State and City agencies in New York City and to all mid and senior level managers at Columbia University. Also, all those who requested information by phone and Internet were sent information packets including the flyer, bulletin and a personalized letter. Finally, a voicemail message was sent to all university employees prior to the program's final open house event.
- The web. The program continues to develop a Bulletin-Brochure and a web site based on its content. The web is a critical marketing tool for

the program that is growing in importance. The site was “hit” by people outside the university about 20,000 times last year and was a major method of information dissemination for the EMPA Program.

- **Open Houses.** As the advertisement above indicates, the program held three Open House events, which drew between 30 and 50 prospective students to formal presentations and informal discussions with faculty, staff and students. Open House events coupled with one-on-one visits to the program’s staff, faculty and classes were critical elements of the marketing effort. The Picker Center for Executive Education at SIPA administers the EMPA program and program recruitment involves a great deal of one-on-one communication and is quite labor-intensive.
- **Site Visits.** In 2003-2004 Picker Center Director Eimicke conducted several visits to employers that might have employees interested in the program, and plan to conduct at least 50 such visits during the 2004-2005 academic year. This will include visits to government agencies and other private and non-profit employers. Site recruitment visits involve meetings with alumni of the school or with human resources directors to explain the program, and to request assistance in contacting prospective students and possibly holding a briefing for employees interested in the program.

4.0 HOW DO EMPAS FINANCE THEIR STUDIES?

The tuition at Columbia University is expensive, and even though the EMPA tuition is about 30% lower than our regular program, it is still far from inexpensive. In 2003-2004, tuition was \$868 a point. Students enroll in 45 points and are given advanced standing for 9 points that they do not pay for.²

This totals \$39,060 of total tuition costs; a number that rose by 6% in 2004-2005 to \$41,580. This is expensive until it is compared to the financial burden faced by our non-executive students. Our non-executive students forgo most of their income for twenty-one months, and must come up with about \$83,160 to cover two years of tuition and fees. While non-executive students are eligible for over \$5 million of fellowships, assistantships and work-study jobs, and can work part time during the academic year and full time during the summer, many still must borrow substantial amounts of money to go to school. In order to fund their tuition expenses, EMPA students have relied on a variety of strategies as indicated in Exhibit 3. About 16% are borrowing money to pay tuition, and about 20% are funded by their employers. Approximately 29% are relying on personal funds, 6% have signed up for monthly payment plans and 29% have combined methods. Some are combining partial employer sponsorship with loans, while others are combining loans with savings.

² *The advanced standing for EMPA students is given for the non-Executive MPA program internship, workshop and practicum courses. EMPA students do not enroll in this “pre-professional” core since they are already accomplished practitioners and they have no need for that element of the MPA curriculum.*

Exhibit 1: PAYMENT METHODS OF EMPA STUDENTS

METHODS

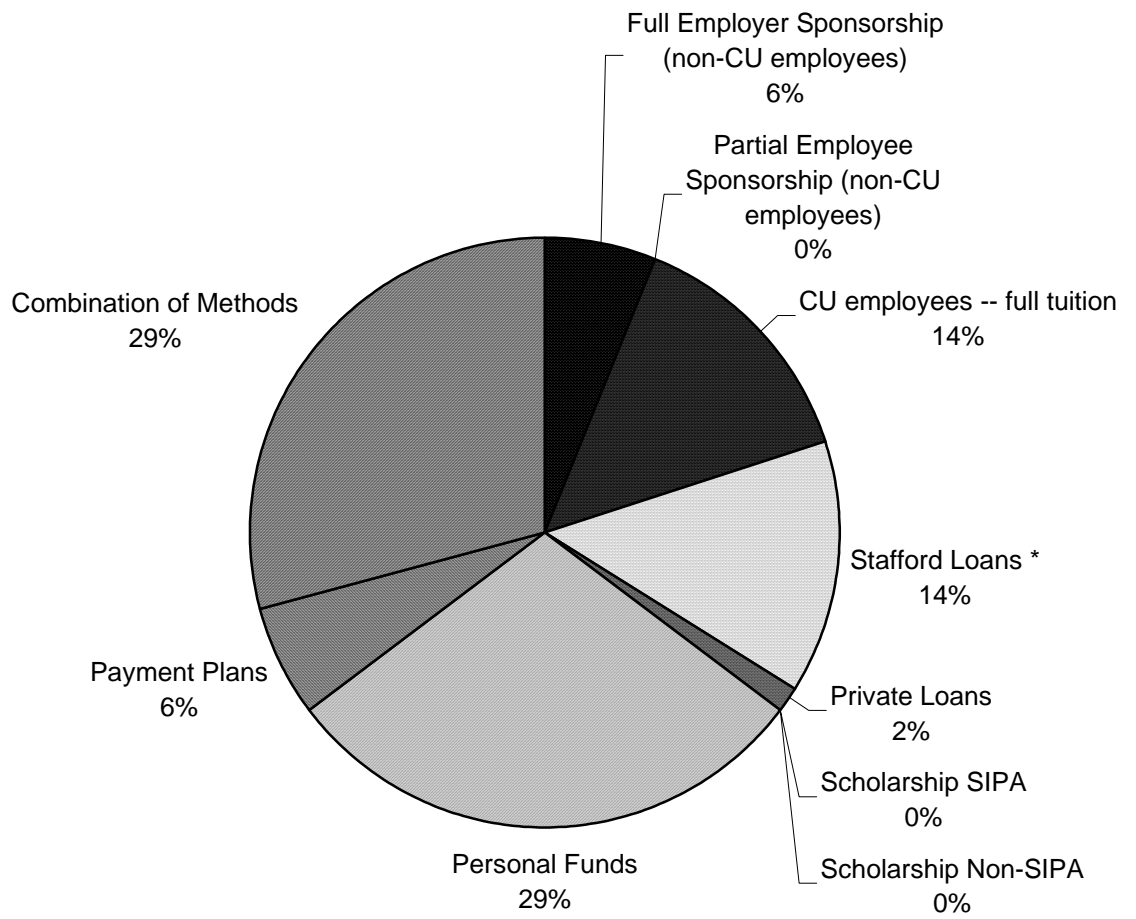
Sponsorship Full/Partial	55
CU employees -- full tuition	45
Stafford Loans *	57 borrowed \$1,120,017
Private Loans	16 borrowed \$190,710
Scholarship SIPA	0
Scholarship Non-SIPA	0
Personal Funds	98
Payment Plans	111
Combination of Methods	100
Total # of Students	156

BREAKDOWN OF COMBINATION METHODS

Stafford and Private	73
CU and Stafford *	45
Stafford and Company	55
Scholarship and Personal	98
Personal and Stafford *	57
Payment Plan and Stafford	57
Scholarship, Personal and Stafford	57
Personal and Employee Sponsorship	156
Total # of Students in Combination Plan	100

* Note: For most students in the two-year plan, the maximum amount of Stafford loans of \$18,500 does not cover tuition. However, the category of Personal and Stafford indicates students who borrowed a part of the \$18,500 to supplement their personal contribution. All others in the Stafford only category borrowed the full amount. Before 2000-2001 CU employees enrolled in the program were taxed at a rate of 47% for the tuition benefit they receive. Many borrowed to compensate for the loss in income. Under new rules, students whose employers certify that the EMPA degree is job-related do not pay tax on their tuition benefit.

Payment Methods of EMPA Students



5.0 WHO ARE COLUMBIA’S EXECUTIVE MPA PROGRAM STUDENTS AND WHERE ARE THEY EMPLOYED WHILE IN SCHOOL?

An analysis of the demographics of our Executive Program and their career backgrounds indicate that we are tapping into a market that previously went to other regional MPA programs or simply avoided graduate professional education. On average, new EMPA students are on average thirty-five years old, eight years older than our average starting non-executive MPA student. There are more people of color in this group, and, of course, all EMPA students are from this region –as compared to about 20% of the students in the non-executive MPA program. About one-third of our non-executive MPA students are from outside the United States, versus about 15% of the EMPA students. The international population of Columbia’s EMPA program reflects the diversity of New York’s regional demographics; however, all EMPAs have lived and worked in the region for at least a few years.

Exhibit 3 provides data on the current employers of our EMPA students. Note that only 14 students, or 22%, currently work in government. Due, in part, to the fringe benefit of free tuition for Columbia University administrators 16, or 25%, of the EMPA students are employees at Columbia University and 19, or 30%, of the student body work at educational institutions. Non-university non-profit organizations are the source of 20, or 31%, of our students, and 11, or

17%, work at private firms. If university employees were counted as they could be as employees at nonprofit organizations, then 61% of our students could be categorized as employees of nonprofit organizations.

Exhibit 3: Employers of Current Executive MPA Students

Admitted Students 2002 and 2003 Employment Break-Down

Governmental and Quasi-Governmental Organizations

Federal Reserve Bank of New York
Israeli Consulate
Kings County District Attorney's Office
Metropolitan Transportation Authority, New York
Mexican Tourism Board
New York City Department of Juvenile Justice
New York City Department of Labor
New York City Department of Youth and Community Development
New York City Police Department
New York State Assembly Ways and Means Committee
New York State Department of Transportation
The Port Authority of New York New Jersey
Town of North Hempstead, New York
U.S. Navy, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations

Non-Profit Organizations

Brooklyn Center for the Urban Environment
Brown Rudnick and Freed
Channel Thirteen News
Community Service Society of New York
East Orange General Hospital
Father Flanagan Girls and Boys Town of New York
FB Heron Foundation
Foreign Affairs
Governmental Accounting Standards Board
Homes for the Homeless
Hope Community
Humpty Dumpty Institute
International Rescue Committee
Intrepid Museum
Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization
Museum of Modern Art
New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation
New York Weill Cornell Medical Center
Our Ladies of Mercy Medical Center
Permanent Mission of South Africa to the UN
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Exhibit 3: Employers of Current Executive MPA Students (Continued)

South Nassau Communities Hospital
The College Board
Toru Fukuoka
UN General Assembly
UN Secretariat
UN Secretary General
United Nations Department of Peacekeeping (2)
United Nations Department of Peacekeeping (2)
YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

Educational Institutions

Columbia University (34)
Rutgers University

Private Companies

Advantage Human Resources
Alliance Capital Mangement LP
Bluedata International
Boston Consulting Group
Boston Consulting Group
Broadcast Music, Inc.
Credit Suisse First Boston
Credit Suisse First Boston
Deutsche Bank, High Yield Sales and Trading
Dresdner Kleinwort Wasserstein
Endeavor Global
Energex Do Brasil
France Telecom North Amerca
Glaxo Smith Kline
Goldman Sachs
Goldman Sachs Fixed Income Derivatives
Graubard Mollen and Miller
Herrick Feinstein, LLP
Hines Interests Limited Partnership
HSBC Trade Services
IBM
King and Spalding, LLP
Lazard Asset Management
Merrill Lynch
National Basketball Association
New Jersey Nets
NMSDC Business Consortium Fund
Polo Jeans Company
Price Waterhouse Coopers
Strook, Strook and Lava
The Economist
Vector Securities Brokerage

Exhibit 3: Employers of Current Executive MPA Students (Continued)

Educational Institutions (N=19)

Columbia University (16)
Mount Sinai School Of Medicine
Universidad Externado de Colombia
Weill Medical College of Cornell University

Private Companies (N=11)

Chase Manhattan Bank (2)
Credit Suisse First Boston
HypoVerinsBank AG
IBM, Global E-Business
IBM, Global Financing
Newsday
Pricewaterhouse Coopers LLP
Salomon Smith Barney
Vectormex
Yash Technologies

6.0 ANALYSIS AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Executive programs are a growing element of the array of products that MPA programs are using to maintain and increase their market. At Columbia, 145 (35%) of the 405 students enrolled in our MPA program are Executive MPA students. This program is in its sixth year and has already grown to double the size we had projected for full maturity. Changed patterns of employment contribute to the growth of executive programs and their increased popularity. Executive programs such as those at the Kennedy, Maxwell and Wilson schools benefit from the fact that fewer people spend their entire career with one employer and may make a choice to interrupt their careers to obtain a masters

degree. In the case of foreign students, changes in political regimes may provide an excellent opportunity to study in the United States, retool skills and refresh the spirit.

Weekend and evening programs benefit from the increased need for master's degrees for professional advancement. As our society has become more educated, the master's degree has replaced the bachelor's degree as a fundamental prerequisite for professional advancement. This degree inflation has been coupled with a labor shortage in recent years. Bright, ambitious students are recruited directly out of college and receive early promotions, but in some cases find that after a while they hit a ceiling and are losing opportunities to people who hold masters degrees. This is the market niche that Columbia's Executive MPA is designed to occupy. These students are unwilling to take a year off their career ladder to obtain a degree. For personal reasons they cannot forgo income for 21 months to obtain a degree. For these students, an evening or weekend program is ideal.

We noted earlier that for many traditional MPA programs, particularly those in state capitals, a large portion of their market is comprised of state government officials who work full time and attend school part time. Public administration as a field has long practiced in-service education. These programs may need to decide whether a move to an "executive education" format and support system is necessary. As public sector careers often involve employment in government, nonprofits and public-oriented parts of the private sector, we may

find that we are competing with business schools that are offering in-service education in an “executive education” format. In those instances some public administration programs may need to explore executive education as a method of holding onto their current share of the mid-career market.

The chief difference, other than the schedule accommodation is the set of support services and amenities we provide for Executive students. This includes amenities such as breakfast, coffee, soft drinks and snacks provided for free, but also services such as:

- Automatic and staff assisted registration
- Staff available to run interference with financial aid and other university offices
- Provision of reading materials for courses
- Brokering tutoring services

The idea is to provide as much help as possible in order to allow them to focus on their studies. Unlike traditional in service part-time education, executive education is intensive, with the expectation that the degree will be earned in a relatively short period of time. In our program the students do not take five or six years to obtain their degree. They are offered a two or three year option, with over 80% opting for the two year plan.

The design of our program is an effort to increase the market for our degree by acknowledging that people who work full time and in many cases are trying to

raise a family need all the help they can get to complete a masters degree. In addition to the extra support we provide, they are also in school with a cohort of about 60 people trying to do the same thing they are doing. Most go through the entire program with the same group of mid-career folks they begin with. Many of our courses have group projects and we encourage study groups and other forms of mutual assistance. Each course has a web site and many of the students have formed e-mail groups to facilitate communication.

The result is a new type of program that adjusts to the more intense work environment we find throughout American society and particularly in New York City. The results have been extremely satisfying. Student morale remains high, and our first alums are extremely loyal and some of our best sales people. Students are very satisfied with the program and we will continue to adjust to this dynamic market as it changes and we learn more about it.