January 2013

Factors Prospective Students Consider When Selecting an MBA Program

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Factors Prospective Students Consider When Selecting an MBA Program

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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Date of Approval:
March 26, 2013

Keywords: decision considerations, graduate business, marketing higher education, interviews, business schools

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................... iii

CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND .........................................................................................3
   A Changing Target Market .................................................................................... 4
   A Change in the Perceived Value of the MBA ..................................................... 5
   Market Fragmentation ......................................................................................... 7
   Increased Competition ....................................................................................... 7

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW ..........................................................................10
   Research Questions ............................................................................................ 14
   Grounded Theory ............................................................................................... 15
   Contribution to Existing Literature .................................................................. 18

CHAPTER 3: METHOD .................................................................................................19
   Sampling ............................................................................................................. 21
   Transcribing and Coding .................................................................................. 23

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS .................................................................................................24
   Time to Decision ............................................................................................... 26
   Why Pursue an MBA? ...................................................................................... 28
      More Money ................................................................................................. 28
      Career Change ............................................................................................. 29
      Required Credential .................................................................................... 29
      Need for Knowledge ................................................................................... 30
   Benefits of an MBA .......................................................................................... 31
   Where to Pursue the MBA? ............................................................................. 31
   Just One Answer .............................................................................................. 36
   Market-Specific Competition .......................................................................... 36
   Obstacles .......................................................................................................... 38

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION ............................................................................................40
   Limitations ....................................................................................................... 43
   Future Studies .................................................................................................. 45

REFERENCES ..............................................................................................................47

APPENDIX 1: RECRUITMENT SCRIPT......................................................................53
APPENDIX 2: IRB APPROVAL

APPENDIX 3: INFORMED CONSENT

APPENDIX 4: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

APPENDIX 5: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTIONS
  Incoming #1: Casey
  Incoming #2: Marsha
  Incoming #3: Ish
  Incoming #4: Woody
  Incoming #5: Angie
  Incoming #6: Chase
  Incoming #7: Fred
  Incoming #8: Mike
  Prospect 1: Jorge
  Prospect 2: JoAnn
  Prospect 3: Cassie
  Prospect 4: Cory
  Prospect 5: Tina
  Prospect 6: Lenny
  Prospect 7: Dani
  Prospect 8: John
  Prospect 9: Rusty
ABSTRACT

This paper adds to existing literature regarding MBA selection processes and helps identify and better understand the needs that motivate consumers to pursue an MBA degree. Through a series of qualitative, one-on-one interviews with 17 brand-new MBA students or prospective students, this research found that while many people have “always wanted” to earn the advanced degree, most have toyed with the idea of a graduate business degree for many years. The most frequent reasons that people cite regarding their decision to seriously consider an MBA at a large southern university centers around four desires. These are, not surprisingly, the desire to earn more money, the desire to change careers, the desire to advance their careers by obtaining a required credential, and the desire for knowledge that can be obtained by earning the degree. Further, this research identified the single most important factor that prospects considered when determining which university to attend for the MBA degree: the university's ability to help make them more marketable or advance their career. Other answers included cost, university's reputation, convenience, program duration, the university's location, and the caliber of peers in the classroom.
CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND

In recent years, according to trend reports from both the Association for the Advancement of Collegiate Schools of Business and the Graduate Management Admissions Council, the number of students enrolled in full-time, AACSB-accredited MBA programs has been, until 2012, flat or, in many cases, shrinking, while enrollment in other graduate business programs has been on the rise. Lifestyle and cultural shifts, as well as the health of the economy, are likely reasons for diminishing enrollment, but business schools themselves should accept some of the blame for sagging enrollment. Market fragmentation, program dilution, the creation of specialized graduate business degree programs, and ineffective marketing and branding programs appear to contribute to the problem.

Regardless of whether enrollments are rising or falling, it is important for business schools to employ effective marketing practices when promoting programs and, for the flagship program in particular, to create marketing messages by starting with the foundational question, “what motivating factors does our target market consider when determining whether and where to pursue the MBA degree?”

The factors prospective students consider in making a decision is not trivial information to be studied. The marketing messages and campaigns that may have “worked for years” no longer do. There is a plethora of competition, among public and
private non-profit institutions as well as national for-profit colleges. At the University of South Florida in particular, its competition in the non-profit arena is often equipped with much larger marketing budgets. In the for-profit arena, USF is faced with competitors that have national advertising campaigns, large marketing budgets, and more local staff recruiters who connect students with loans to support the educational endeavor. In addition, these for-profit schools often have less stringent entry requirements and may not require students to take standard admissions tests. Because of these challenges, marketers at programs such as USF must determine what matters to the target audience in order to craft effective strategic communications messages to recruit new students and hold on to market share as well as to tailor programs that students desire.

Traditionally, total enrollment (both full-time and part-time) in MBA programs in the United States has been countercyclical with the American economy. When the economy was bad, unemployed workers with time on their hands flocked to business schools to pursue an MBA full-time in order to make themselves more attractive to future employers. At the same time, employed businessmen (and women) pursued part-time degrees to remain competitive in the workplace. As a result, enrollment in MBA programs rose during bad economic times, despite the expense of the program.

Shortly after the turn of the century through the early 2010s, however, business school administrators and marketers have been bewildered as enrollment remained flat or rose by relatively small percentages during a sharp economic downturn. According to Dailey, Anderson, Duffy, Krimm and Thomas (2006), applications to BusinessWeek’s Top 30 MBA programs dropped roughly 30 percent between 1998 and 2006, some seeing declines in excess of 50 percent. The Graduate Management Admissions Council, the
organization that administers the test many business schools use to assess applicants’ qualifications for admissions, has been following the trend and, in its 2010 and 2011 reports, noted significant drops in both admissions and the number of people applying to take the entrance test (with the exception of China, where the number of test takers is on the rise). The organization publishes a preview report each fall; the 2012 report indicates that, for some universities, the downward trend did not continue this past year and that some saw improvements in application volume over the prior year, but that “fewer than half of each MBA program type reported increased volumes over 2011” (p. 4). Further, the report pointed out that growth in application volume was largely fueled by “application gains among online/distance offerings” and that “45 percent [of all MBA programs] saw declines and 10 percent reported no change” (p. 6).

The Wall Street Journal noticed the GMAT reports and, in a September 13, 2011, article, reported “one-third of full-time MBA programs reported drops of more than 10 percent, according to the survey, which included 649 MBA and other business programs at 331 schools world-wide.” And in academic literature, researchers Schlegelmilch and Thomas (2011) questioned the future of the program in their research titled, “The MBA in 2020: will there still be one?”

A Changing Target Market

The target market for the MBA is broad. For many public higher education institutions, and the University of South Florida in particular, the target market is comprised of adults who are at least a few years out of undergraduate programs. According to the 2012 GMAC Applications Trends survey, 57 percent of full-time MBA
applicants have at least three years of work experience; for self-paced part-time MBA programs such as the one offered at the University of South Florida, this report shows that 66 percent of applicants have at least three years of work experience (p. 36). The undergraduate program in which they studied is irrelevant, as the broad-based MBA is not designed solely for business majors. While the prospective student’s undergraduate major is unimportant, accreditation does matter as AACSB-accredited schools (and likely the vast majority of respected universities) only accept candidates with degrees from institutions accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Educational background is not the only area that varies for this target. Today’s target includes more dual-income married couples. Classrooms are becoming more equal in terms of gender. Many people, especially in large, metropolitan areas, work full-time and attend school part-time. Thus, some within the target market may not earn an undergraduate degree until their mid-to-late 30s. Thus, the MBA target classroom is a multi-generational one, comprised of people ranging from their early 20s to mid-40s, the variance depending on whether (or not) students choose to earn an undergraduate degree straight out of high school by attending college full-time and graduating in four years. The 2012 GMAC Application Trends Survey reports that for full-time MBA programs, 63 percent of applicants are at least 26 years old; for the part-time self-paced MBA programs such as the one offered at USF, 71 percent of applicants are at least 26 years old (p. 36).
Marital status, ethnicity, and gender are not primary considerations when defining the target market.

Business schools may have (likely in an effort to differentiate themselves) fragmented the market by offering a wide variety of specialized master’s degree tracks as well as MBA-like and “MBA-light” programs. The following literature review includes a summary of key (sometimes called underlying) factors identified in previous studies.

**A Change in the Perceived Value of the MBA**

In recent years, it appears that the MBA is no longer considered a “special” degree and that, for many, there has been a significant drop in the perceived value of the program. A survey conducted by Accountemps and referenced by Rapert, Smith, Velliquette and Garretson (2004) found that 80 percent of top executives consider a graduate degree in business essential for rising to senior-level corporate positions. Countless business schools use feature stories and video vignettes of happy, smiling alumni to illustrate how the lessons learned in the program helped the former students gain a promotion or “take my career to the next level.” Hundreds of testimonials include the much-used cliché to say that success was just out of reach until attaining the MBA and its concomitant life and business lessons.

There is little question that the program has value, but there are mixed reviews over quality related to value. Regardless, when it comes to marketing the program to
prospective students, what matters is the *perceived* value. In 1997, Goldgehn and Kane reported a drop in perceived value of the MBA, going so far as to state that business schools had lost their mystique, that the business market had become dissatisfied with the MBA product, and to note that there is growing distance between academia and mainstream business. They noted that subjects in their study felt the MBA had become “an average degree, nothing special” and wrote, “the majority felt there is less of a return on investment with an MBA than there used to be” (p. 18). Twelve years later, in an article in the mainstream publication *BusinessWeek* (2010), DiMeglio opened a story on the difficulties of marketing graduate business programs by writing that the MBA program’s reputation is in “tatters.” Noting the rising costs, weakening programs, the fall of major business corporations led by MBA graduates, the collapse of Wall Street, and academia’s slow response to changing times, she wrote, “in some circles, [MBA degrees] constitute a negative brand: one that’s associated with ethical lapses, business failures, and the causes of the financial times.”

More recently, Nicholls, Harris, Morgan, Clarke and Sims (2011) wrote, “It is difficult to define what exactly constitutes an MBA degree because of the variety of product offerings” (p. 31). Nicholls et al. also pointed out that throughout the last two decades, the market has matured and, while prospective students in the 1980s might not have paid attention to differences between programs, the more mature market of the 2010s is more discriminating. Similar themes were echoed in the *Wall Street Journal*
(2011), including one where the headline writer clearly summarized the changing view:

“Business School: No Thanks.”

**Market Fragmentation**

Goldgehn and Kane (1997) suggested that fragmentation in the delivery system was to blame for a weakening MBA as curricula vary from market to market and institution to institution. Business schools no longer offer a traditional MBA program in a uniform format. There are two-year programs, one-year high intensity programs, fast-track options, online, extended, and executive MBA cohort programs. In addition, business schools have created master’s programs with entry requirements that are somewhat less challenging, such as the MS in Entrepreneurship, MS in Management, MS in Finance, etc., programs whose growth may have come, in part, at the expense of the institution’s own MBA program. Johnson, Thomas and Peck (2010) called the shift from traditional MBA programs to specialized programs a trend, saying these specialized programs are tailored to fit the individual student’s needs rather than a one-size-fits-all-MBA. GMAC noted that, in 2012, these specialized programs continued to enjoy robust growth in application volume.

**Increased Competition**

Not only are there new specialty programs to deal with, but there is also an
increase in competition. In its October 2011 newsletter, GMAC pointed out that 13,670 institutions worldwide offering a business degree. In addition to the sheer number of (accredited and unaccredited) institutions, the traditional on-site MBA program now competes with off-site or out-of-market programs, as well as the variety of less rigorous for-profit programs (that frequently have lower admissions standards) that use corporate marketing strategies. It is easy to see why these researchers consider market fragmentation to be cause for concern.

This thesis explores the reasons why students pursue a graduate business degree and the attributes they consider when selecting a particular institution. An analysis of what matters to both new and prospective MBA students, this study’s findings offer information that marketing personnel should consider when designing strategic communications plans and materials to promote the degree and focus on the things that matter most to potential students.

The following literature review sheds light on prior studies focused on MBA marketing and an overview of Grounded Theory, which served as a framework for this research. Chapter three of this manuscript outlines the methods used to collect data and analyze results for this study. Chapter four analyzes the results. The findings are discussed in the closing chapter.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides an overview of scholarly research related to the marketing of graduate business programs, particularly the MBA. After presenting the research question, this chapter concludes with an overview of Grounded Theory.

More than two dozen scholarly articles on the marketing of MBA or other graduate business programs worldwide have been written in the last 25 years. Researchers bemoan the fact that there is not a vast amount of published work specific to MBA marketing. Heslop and Nadeau (2010) wrote that “the marketing of higher education has attracted more controversy than study,” (p. 87) and other authors used phrases such as “paucity of information,” and called this niche an “important but little understood area” (Powell, personal communication November 2010; Dailey et al. 2006, p. 144; Ivy & Naude, 2010, p. 92). Because the target market for the MBA is no longer the same as it was in the 1980s and 1990s, only articles from the 2000s (with two exceptions, written in 1995 and 1997) were selected for this literature review, a selection further culled by choosing only articles focusing largely on North America. In addition to these scholarly articles, two unpublished studies were reviewed, as well as mainstream, non-scholarly articles and industry association reports.

In 2006, Dailey et al. gathered information on the reasons why students pursue an MBA, sorting them into broad categories such as “need for knowledge,” “general
noted that while the degree was still a credible, valued credential often required for
corporate advancement, its value had dropped over the last decade. Dailey’s research
identified 26 needs that an MBA fulfills. She concluded by stating, “it is apparent from
the results that the needs satisfied by pursuing an MBA degree are not homogenous” (p.
152).

Researchers approached the question of how to market the MBA differently,
some looking at hallmarks and elements of programs and process-related characteristics,
others at program inputs and immediate, short-term, intermediate, and long-term
outcomes. Some evaluated the importance of specific program features and benefits.

Carrel and Schoenbachler (2001) examined the “decision considerations” for
students choosing to study in an Executive MBA program as well as the considerations
sponsoring companies use when deciding to financially support employees pursuing an
executive degree. Classifying these considerations as personal, academic, financial, or
“other,” the scholars found that the most important decision factor for students was the
need for new knowledge (designated as a personal consideration), followed closely by the
convenience and flexible scheduling of classes (categorized as an “other” consideration).
Their findings indicated that students are interested in programs that enhance their on-
the-job performance and do not interfere with work schedules.

Rapert et al. (2004) compiled a list of attributes that students considered
“hallmarks” of quality programs and categorized them into metathemes of “in-class” and
“outside-class” environments. Heslop and Nadeau (2010) approached the question
differently, answering four questions in order to craft a list of “must-haves” and
“important-to-haves” for MBA programs. In the only published study (reviewed in this research) that examined views of prospects rather than current students in MBA programs or recent grads, Heslop and Nadeau (2010) surveyed MBA fair attendees to determine what important factors they used to determine whether or not to pursue the degree and what were the important qualities they used in determining the school at which they chose to study. The researchers used this same group to study the attributes of the “most preferred” institution to rank the importance of desired outcomes and rated MBA programs on their ability to deliver these outcomes. Looking at the ease or difficulty of the decision to pursue the degree, Heslop and Nadeau (2010) found that the primary decision factors included financial cost, investment of time, career uncertainty, future job opportunity, and an expressed interest in learning. Heslop and Nadeau (2010) then looked at the factors most often cited as critical for applicants in selecting a particular school in which to study. They found that reputation, quality (of both the faculty and the university as a whole), location convenience, personal fit of program style or goals, scheduling and programmatic flexibility (as well as ease of navigation), cost, and the ability to gain entry into the program were most important (Heslop & Nadeau, 2010). In discussing reputation as a critical factor, it was noted that applicants who were confused or overwhelmed by the myriad of MBA program choices available “can always fall back on others’ opinions (including those of ratings magazines), expressed as reputation, [which] makes justifying their choice of program and school to others very easy” (p. 101).

Next, Heslop and Nadeau (2010) looked at how prospects viewed the “most-preferred” school (as well as other schools researched) using this indirect approach to determine what was important to applicants. The authors found that applicants valued
certain immediate outcomes (a program with a challenging workload and studying in the functional areas of management), intermediate outcomes (developing a network of business contacts; learning strategic decision making, leadership, communication skills; learning how to work in a team and manage change and innovation; studying both business theory and business practice) and one long-term outcome (positioning themselves for a good career).

Moving on to look more specifically at the outcomes that prospects desired from MBA programs, Heslop and Nadeau (2010) then categorized the outcomes into immediate-, short-, and long-term outcomes. They created a top ten (out of 40) list of outcomes. Heslop and Nadeau concluded that the “most critical outcomes for MBA programs reflect general learning (resulting from a challenging course load and specific skills development), program content (skills and functional areas of business), employment and career [opportunities], personal fit (location), and status outcomes (reputation of school).” They determined this list by comparing the elements that appeared in the go/no go decision list, the outcomes that impacted the choice of which institution decision, the top ten ratings of the most preferred program list, and how two particular schools fared on their (perceived) ability to deliver. They then developed a key drivers list for MBA applicants, with “must-haves” and “important to haves.” Among the must-haves: learning leadership skills, a challenging workload, and the ability to develop a good network. Among the important-to-haves: location convenience, good career prospects, good reputation, and the opportunity to learn both theory and practice.

Noting that high rankings in magazines did not make either the “must-haves” or “important to haves” rosters, Heslop and Nadeau (2010) suggested that rankings serve
only as a quality signal verified by a third-party that could be used to help justify a student’s decision to others. The authors also noted that program delivery outcomes such as case studies, faculty experience and teaching ability, program customization, and immediate application of lessons did not make either list, suggesting that these important factors were less a determinant of the MBA program selection process.

In a paper presented at the 17th Annual Professional MBA Conference at DePaul University in 2010, Powell (2010) surveyed 1,100 prospective MBA students who were identified by four public and four private universities. Powell (2010) determined that job security outweighed advancement as a motive for seeking graduate business degrees. Pointing out that a decade ago students earned an MBA to broaden skills and take on additional responsibilities on the job, Powell called the changing goals of MBA seekers a “generational shift,” and suggested, in a news release distributed by the University of Texas at Dallas, that “business schools may need to carefully rethink many aspects of how they reach and teach this group of students.”

Noting that it is “almost as if they are pursuing the degree as an insurance policy,” the news release also pointed out that Powell (2010) found that today’s MBA prospects aim to keep themselves competitive and make themselves more valuable to their employer, to seek more security in their jobs, increase their salaries, and position themselves for promotions. Powell’s (2010) research paper, which looked solely at students’ expectations prior to matriculation, provided important information related to how to manage and meet expectations and examined the go/no go question. It did not delve deeply into the specific factors that prospects consider when selecting a program, but general conclusions were drawn that could aid both administrators and marketers.
Those specific to recruiting prospects included the following: most did not value information sessions; 25 percent of respondents earned less than $50,000, perhaps indicating the need for greater aid packages or payment options; the caliber of peers matters, as 70 percent of respondents expected to have classmates with high GMAT scores; and nearly half the respondents did not want schools to communicate with them via social media. In the classroom, prospects expect faculty to have both PhDs and practical experience; to have access to, along with feedback from and involvement with, faculty; and to have academic questions answered within 24 hours. Prospects no longer value study groups (64 percent plan to study mostly alone) but demand more writing labs, tutoring, and other out-of-class services (Powell, 2010).

While Powell’s research examined the expectations of prospective MBA students, Dailey et al. (2006) looked at the needs of the MBA consumer, categorizing them based on Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1987). While three needs were mentioned most frequently (career advancement, financial security, and job security), the authors found that a need for knowledge/job security, elevated social status/prestige, general business knowledge, and achievement/challenge fulfillment clustered relatively close together in a second grouping.

Research Questions

Whether selling consumable goods, durable goods, or intangible services and programs such as an MBA, marketers must understand consumers’ needs – what motivates them to buy and what factors they consider when searching for a product to meet those needs – in order to develop an effective marketing and mass communications
strategy. This study sought to determine:

R₁: What factors do prospects consider when determining whether to pursue the MBA, and, for those making that decision,

R₂: what program elements do they consider most important when opting to attend the MBA program at the University of South Florida?

**Grounded Theory**

Grounded Theory is often referred to as a theory, but, in a sense, it is really the process that is used to develop a theory that emerges or evolves during the research process, one that is “grounded in data from the field, especially in the actions, interactions, and social processes of people” (Creswell, p. 63). The idea is to generate or discover a theory by using a specific, reflective coding approach to discover processes. Creswell wrote that the theory “is a good design to use when a theory is not available to explain a process.” He also noted that “the literature may have models available, but they were developed and tested on samples and populations other than those of interest to the [particular] qualitative researcher” (p. 66). Because this research examines a particular population (one that has not previously been studied) and the process/behaviors of this group, Grounded Theory serves as an appropriate methodological basis for this inquiry.

Grounded Theory’s founders, sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1967), developed the theory for sociology scholars but, according to Goulding (2010), Licquirish (2011), and Payne (2007), among others, the theory has become a popular qualitative research method across disciplines. Dunne (2011) wrote that the theory has become quite popular
in the last two decades in fields ranging from software development processes to healthcare research. Goulding wrote, “given its emphasis on behaviour it is possible to argue that it has potential for theoretical advancements in the area of, for example, consumer research” (p. 22).

Payne (2007) pointed out that this experiential approach is concerned with inferring meaning about what people think, feel, and do. Given that the purpose of this study was to understand behavior, namely why consumers choose to pursue an MBA and what factors they consider when making this choice, Grounded Theory is, again, an appropriate theory for this inquiry.

Payne also noted that researchers could consider this theory when “relatively little is known about the topic area, there are no ‘grand’ theories to explain adequately the specific…behaviors under investigation [or]…researchers are interested in eliciting participants’ understandings, perceptions, and experiences” (2007, p. 70).

In addition, according to Dunne (2011), Grounded Theory is an “effective research strategy for topics which have been subject to relatively little research and about which there is a paucity of knowledge” (p. 116). It was pointed out earlier in this paper that researchers called this niche an “important but little understood area” and used phrases such as “paucity of information” to describe the amount of inquiry into this area. This gap in existing literature provides another reason why Grounded Theory was well-suited for this exploratory study.

In Grounded Theory, the researcher does not begin with a hypothesis but, instead, poses a question and remains open to whatever theory might emerge from the collected data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). According to Dunne (2011), the
researcher is not focused on testing a hypothesis as much as developing one from empirical data collected in the field. Dunne (2011) also suggested that Grounded Theory provides a framework for the qualitative researcher and provides systematic guidelines that counter criticisms that quantitative researchers had lobbied at their peers in the qualitative arena.

There are specific steps that should be followed when using Grounded Theory, particularly in terms of data collection and the method and timing of data analysis. Grounded Theory, according to Dunne (2011), “demands that data collection and analysis occur concurrently, rather than in a linear sequence” (p. 111).

Scholars use adjectives such as “zigzag,” “spiral,” “circular,” and “constant comparative” to describe Grounded Theory’s framework (Creswell, 1998, Dunne, 2010; Payne, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this process/theory, analysis and data collection are concurrent. The researcher begins data collection and, while it is still early in the data collection process, begins to analyze the data, reviewing and coding it right away, searching for major categories of information. After the initial data collection takes place, followed by open coding and reflection, Grounded Theory’s process calls for more data collection, followed by more coding – and possibly modification/refinement of the questions asked during data collection. Initial coding, also called open coding, involves assigning labels to topics that are mentioned in the interview. Open coding occurs relatively soon after the interview and, as a result, themes begin to emerge.

According to Goulding (2010), coding usually begins with a line-by-line review of the transcribed interview, during which the researcher seeks out key words or phrases that give insight into the subject’s thoughts or behavior. An important point that Goulding
(2010) makes related to the development of theory is that one may not emerge. She wrote, “even for those who do use the method correctly, it is wrong to assume that a theory will automatically emerge” (p. 30).

**Contribution to Existing Literature**

This study adds to the existing body of research in several ways. First, it uses an approach that has not been used in this area before; prior studies have largely been quantitative in nature. As such, prior work examining studies about motivators lacked the richness that comes with in-depth interviews. Second, it looked at two specific segments: new students who were about to start their coursework or were just a few weeks into their MBA program and prospective students who had not yet determined whether or not to pursue the degree.

Additionally, it examined a very specific population and used the University of South Florida as an illustration of an MBA program in consideration. As a result, this study closes with suggestions for improved strategic marketing and communications efforts at this specific university.

The next chapter discusses this study’s research design, sample selection, intercoder reliability, and data analysis.
CHAPTER 3: METHOD

This chapter begins with an overview of the method used for this study. It is followed by a description of the sampling method used to recruit interview subjects. It closes with a description of the transcription and coding process and the steps taken to avoid coder bias.

Goulding (2001) pointed out that interviews and observations are the most common sources of data for this type of research because “interpretations must, or should include the perspectives and choices of those studied” (p. 23). Additionally, according to Payne (2007), interviews were suitable for this study because they “build upon everyday experience of conversations and generally people are pleased to have the opportunity to talk with an attentive person in a face-to-face situation” (p. 72). Marketing researchers Griffin and Hauser (2001) pointed out the interviews are an effective way to gather customer input, saying that “to address both strategic and operational decisions, industry practice has evolved a form of customer input that has become known as the ‘Voice of the Customer’” (p. 2). They also wrote that this qualitative method of inquiry is effective in identifying customer needs. They suggested that a typical study should include “between 10 and 30 customers” who are interviewed for one hour in a one-on-one setting. Further, in the same paper, Griffin and Hauser (2001) wrote that “two one-on-one interviews are about as effective as one focus group…and that four interviews are about
as effective as two focus groups” (p. 7) and that “interviewing 20 customers identifies over 90 percent of the needs provided by 30 customers” (p. 9).

After approval for a qualitative inquiry was received by the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board, 17 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted between December 2012 and January 2013. The interviews began with a review of an IRB-approved consent form (see Appendix 3) and were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for cues into the factors that current students felt were important when considering graduate school and then, once that decision was made, when determining which university might be better suited for each individual.

According to Ruggeri, Gizelis, and Dorussen, intercoder reliability requires that different coders review the collected data and give the same scores on all dimensions. Such random checks help to assess reliability, but “it can be a daunting task to recode previously collected information…and limited monetary resources and time constraints can seriously derail a project” (p. 346). The researchers pointed out that there is no guarantee that spot-checks conclusively identify all major problems but such checks may allow researchers to estimate data reliability. For this thesis, to check against coder bias, a fellow graduate student in the mass communications program at the University of South Florida reviewed the first interview and transcript for accuracy, comparing the recorded interview against its written version. Later, another student randomly selected a different transcript and reviewed the way it was coded into a master spreadsheet that showed
question-by-question answers.

**Sampling**

A blend of random and purposeful sampling was used for this study. Numerous researchers (Payne, 2007; Gambett & Graffigna, 2012; Goulding, 2010; Licquish, 2010; and Creswell, 1998) stress that one of the tenets of Grounded Theory is theoretical sampling, which means that “participants are selected based on the basis of the emerging analysis…” (Payne, 2007, p. 664). This sampling method allows researchers to select additional participants as concepts are identified and the researcher notes that subjects with specific backgrounds, genders, etc. are needed to fill in gaps in the studied population and strengthen the findings. Thus, the sampling method for this research began with a random selection of students who were extended an invitation to participate in the study and the first interviews were conducted based on convenience and response order. Later, students were selected for interviews based on a review of the data analyzed at that point.

Subjects were selected at random from two lists provided by the University of South Florida. The first list contained names and email addresses for 38 students who had applied, been accepted, and had paid a deposit to begin MBA classes in January 2013. This group was labeled as incoming students. Invitations to participate in the study were extended via email (see Appendix 1) in three rounds (first to every fifth name on the list, second to every twelfth name on the list – numbers selected at random – then, finally, given that responses were largely female, to every male on the list who had not already been invited to participate). A total of 36 requests to be interviewed were sent via email.
Eight incoming students agreed to be interviewed. All were either about to begin their first semester of classes or were less than three weeks into their first semester of the MBA program.

The second list contained the names of 76 people who had made a reservation to attend an information session regarding the MBA program at the University of South Florida. This group was labeled as prospects. Potential subjects were selected at random and a total of 56 invitations to be interviewed were extended in three waves. The first group was invited via an email to every fifth person on the list; a second wave of invitations was extended only to every fifth person who actually attended an information session. A third wave of invitations was extended to all who had actually attended an information session as of December 2012. Nine interviews were conducted from this group (one person who had agreed to be interviewed but who had been denied admission into the program was not interviewed). See Appendix 1 for the script that was used to recruit participants.

These two different groups were selected to determine if there were any factors that one group recognized as key as compared to the other.

Questions for the interviews (see Appendix 4 for a list of questions) were crafted based on the work of Heslop and Nadeau (2010) and Powell (2010) as both of these studies focused on prospective MBA students and their expectations, rather than current students or recent graduates. Questions were clustered as follows: A) questions related to decision factors, B) questions related to choosing a particular institution, namely USF and C) demographic information. Questions were not always asked in the exact same order
and, based on the conversation and rapport established between the interviewer and subject, sidebar or follow-up questions were occasionally asked.

**Transcribing and Coding**

Grounded Theory’s circular approach requires that data is collected, analyzed, and reviewed as it is collected in order to search for major categories of information. This approach calls for more data collection, followed by more coding – and possibly modification/refinement of the questions asked during data collection. Open coding occurs relatively soon after the interview and, as a result, themes begin to emerge. For this thesis, interviews were recorded and posted on a private YouTube channel with a private link to be used solely by the researcher to transcribe interviews. Transcription took place within a few days of each interview. A graduate student who was not involved in this research reviewed the first interview and transcription for accuracy.

As is common in Grounded Theory research, the interviewer took notes during the interviews and additional notes were taken as the written transcriptions were reviewed by the interviewer. These notes included key words or phrases that may have been cited by others. These simple notes also included words to trigger the interviewer to compare at particular areas when evaluating all of the data.

After all of the interviews were transcribed, a master chart of all answers, by question, was created. Common themes were then identified from the responses contained in the transcripts. To protect anonymity, an alias provided by each person interviewed was used for the transcripts, analysis, and reporting of the results.

The next chapter discusses the results of this study.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Seventeen interviews were conducted, largely in-person (just two were conducted via telephone), at the University of South Florida, though locations were varied based on convenience for the subject, particularly prospective students who had not yet made a decision about studying at the university and did not have a parking pass for the university or regular business to conduct there. After a review of an IRB-approved Informed Consent Form (see Appendix 3), whereby subjects were informed of study goals, interviews were conducted and followed a similar format. The interviews lasted an average of 24 minutes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Per IRB standards, all subjects provided an alias that was used in the resulting transcriptions (see Appendix 5).

Subjects ranged in age from 23 to 44 years of age; most (59 percent, n = 10) were in their 30s. Respondents were nearly equally split in terms of gender (47 percent women, n = 8).

More than half of the subjects interviewed were single (nine people said they were single, two said they were divorced, five reported that they were married, and one person’s marital status was unknown). The majority of the subjects did not have children; only one of the subjects was a parent of more than one child.
In terms of ethnic or cultural background, 65 percent (n = 11) of the group was Caucasian and 20 percent of the people interviewed were Asian (n = 3). A quarter of those interviewed (n = 4) were internationals living in the United States; two indicated a desire to return to their native nations and use the knowledge gained from the MBA program to conduct business there.

Though they often share the classroom with MBA students, students pursuing specialized master’s degrees such as the Master of Science in Marketing or the Master of Science in Entrepreneurship were not interviewed. At the time the interviews were scheduled, it was unknown if a prospective student was considering the Executive MBA and/or traditional MBA program. Two people who were interviewed were considering the Executive MBA.

Nearly all of those interviewed were working professionals. Just two people considered themselves full-time students (and both had previously worked full-time); one person, who had formerly been employed full-time as well, considered herself a full-time parent. Subjects worked in a variety of areas, ranging from marketing and communications to school teacher to military analyst. Their employers also varied, with three people working for non-profits and three working for family businesses. Others worked for large employers such as Coca-Cola or Baycare Health Systems.

While it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from just 17 people, this suggests that, for communications purposes, the target market for prospective students could be comprised of working adults ranging in age from 20 to 45 years old, single or married, with no children or very young children. This further suggests that there may not be one specific industry that could be selected as a primary target market from which to recruit.
new students, though analysis of USF's entire MBA population might reveal the top two or three industries in which most current students work.

Regarding educational backgrounds, all subjects had earned an undergraduate degree within the last 12 years, with nearly 60 percent (n = 10) earning their degree more than five years ago. Nearly half (47 percent, n = 8) of those interviewed earned an undergraduate degree from the University of South Florida, though their undergraduate majors varied from business to communications. In total, just 47 percent (n = 8) of the people interviewed earned undergraduate degrees in business. Others earned bachelor's degrees in disciplines such as mass communications, Spanish, international relations, hospitality management, engineering, and microbiology.

Time to Decision

Regardless of area of study, more than half of the subjects (52 percent, n = 9) noted that they had thought about getting an MBA since they were undergraduate students, using phrases such as "always on my radar" and "when I first graduated from college" when asked how long they had been thinking about pursuing an MBA.

I thought about it for years, actually. But I just kind of stayed away from it because it is tough to do when you are working full-time. The opportunity cost of stopping making money is tough to swallow...coming back and not being employed made it an easy transition for me to come to school full-time...I get to, kind of, recalibrate my career. – Fred, incoming student

Since I graduated it was an option, but I, well, I started working with my dad and I kept putting it off and putting it off...really, since before graduation, all of my accounting professors pretty much suggested that if you're going to graduate, get an undergraduate degree in accounting, you might as well go for your MBA so you can be a CPA. All of them really suggested it. – Jorge
I always knew that I would go back and get my MBA. – Chase, incoming student

While subjects frequently stated that pursuing an MBA was a consideration they had for years, most people interviewed (76 percent, n = 13) indicated that they had been seriously considering an MBA for at least six months. This may indicate that the MBA sales cycle begins with faculty members and adjunct professors or instructors who promote graduate business programs in their undergraduate classrooms. Once people move to the ‘seriously considering’ stage several years later, the sales cycle ranges from a few months to three years. This may signal marketers, at least those in this particular market, that call-to-action MBA advertising campaigns don’t pay off until many months later.

This suggests that there may be fertile ground for to plant proverbial recruiting seeds by educating faculty about how their seemingly passing comments on graduate education are stored by students. As part of a strategic communications plan, faculty from the business school as well as those in areas far beyond this discipline should be educated about the benefits of pursuing an MBA and encouraged to suggest the graduate business program to their students by discussing the career benefits that could come with the advanced degree. Further, the strategic communications campaign should include outreach to business faculty and instructors that informs them of the impact their suggestions regarding graduate education have upon undergraduate students in their classrooms. It is likely, however, that faculty from other areas of study are likely to encourage students to pursue graduate education in the same discipline.
Why Pursue an MBA?

Subjects found it easier to answer questions about long-term career goals than to identify short-term career goals. Answers were clustered around moving into management or executive-level positions (59 percent, n = 10), or potentially launching their own businesses (23 percent, n = 4), or taking over the family business (12 percent, n = 2).

All of the people interviewed saw the MBA as a means to an end: a promotion, the opportunity to earn more money, the chance to take over family business, or to change his or her career. When asked if there was a specific incident that led to recent inquiries into the MBA, or, for those who were brand-new students, something that prompted enrollment in the program, answers clustered around four areas:

More Money

Eighty-two percent expressed that they considered earning the graduate business degree because they desire to earn a better salary (two people cited money directly, but 12 people (71 percent) cited a desire to advance in their careers, which implies earning more money (though, admittedly, money may not be the key motivator for upward mobility).

*Being able to change fields and make more money...it is really about finding a job that pays more money. – Angie, incoming student*

*Long-term, my salary. That’s pretty much it...[the] most important decision I want to make with this is if, you know, if I do get this job that I do make a better salary. That’s the main importance. So that, that it’s worth going. – Tina, prospective student*
Career Change

The desire to change careers or industries was mentioned by several people. A third (35 percent, n = 6) of those interviewed indicated that they are dissatisfied with their current job and/or want to change careers and see the MBA as a way to do so.

And so I said to my husband, "you know, if I just don't love my job making $37,000, why don't I not love my job making $100,000?" – Casey, incoming student

And also, a shift in the field of engineering. I am basically going to select an elective like healthcare. So a shift in the field from...software industry to healthcare provision, basically. – Angie, incoming student

...knowing, basically, that I wanted to switch careers, and knowing that without getting formal training it would be difficult to get into a new position...so I figured this is the best step in order to bridge the gap, basically. – JoAnn, incoming student

Required Credential

The desire to prepare for next step in career progression (using phrases such as “diversify skillset,” “become more marketable,” “position myself for promotion” or "can't move up without" an MBA) was mentioned by all but four subjects (76 percent, n = 13). More than half (52 percent, n = 9) of those interviewed pointed out that they feel they cannot move any further up the corporate ladder without the MBA. One referred to the MBA as a "required credential;" another pointed out that he needed the "three letters."

I think the long-term benefit would be general career advancement. I can't go any further without an MBA. – Marsha, incoming student

It's a competitive advantage over people who don't have a master's degree of some sort. And there are still a large amount of those people out there.
So any competitive advantage is going to get you the initial interview and hopefully will help. – Fred, incoming student

I thought that I wanted to get an MBA because, looking around, everybody has an [undergraduate] degree and an MBA would give me an edge, really, in terms of contacts. And also the quality of people....A lot of experience in hand. I'll be able to talk to the right people. – Ish, incoming student

When I talked to a few headhunters for the positions that I wanted, they, you know, they said "you should start thinking about getting an MBA; it would really help you." – Woody, incoming student

The long-term benefit of an MBA would allow you to move into senior-level management positions, such as, like a [chief operator officer] of the hospital, a vice president of a company, that type of position. – Cory, prospective student

I am really stuck in a place where I can't move up. So that's why. – JoAnn, incoming student

Need for Knowledge

Just four people (24 percent) expressed that their desire for business knowledge prompted their inquiry into the program; three of the four indicated that their career plans involved working in a family business, which, therefore, meant that they needed the business fundamentals that can be learned in an MBA program.

I know before I get too, get too far ahead in the company, that I really do [need], like you were saying, the financial aspect of things. I really do need to get that experience. I do intend to take over the company. I kind of have a five year plan. – Cassie, prospective student

So, if, you know, every once in a while I have an idea that's a great idea. I don't know what to do with it, you know, and so it's kind of... I want to have that kind of foundational knowledge so that I can branch out and
Benefits of an MBA

As one might expect, nearly every person interviewed said the long-term benefits of earning an MBA were related to career and/or salary growth. Prospects and incoming students alike used terms such as "workplace marketability," "differentiate myself," "competitive advantage," or "having an edge over other applicants" when describing how the MBA could help their careers.

When asked how long it would take for them to say "this was worth it" when reflecting on the MBA, the answers were varied. Several people struggled to find an answer to the question.

I think, ultimately, after the whole program I would hope to feel well-rounded enough. But I would imagine that starting in the courses I would start to see the return. And talking about those relationships and the people that you are going to be meeting. – Cassie, prospective student

Others looked at it more matter-of-factly, saying when they earn a salary greater than the cost of the program or obtain a position that they could not have obtained without the MBA credential. Of those who gave a specific timeframe, most said a few years after graduation (though, of course, some said immediately after graduation).

Where to Pursue the MBA?

Subjects were asked to simply cite factors they considered when choosing a particular university; they were not provided a list that included particular elements. Not unsurprisingly, 27 different factors were cited, ranging from ability to gain admission to
face-to-face content to opportunities for spring admissions. The most common factors cited were career opportunities that open up as a result of MBA (12 times), the university's reputation (11 times), face-to-face content preferred over online courses (11 times), and program content or design (10 times).

_It positions me in the workplace, right, for a higher level management role as a controller._ – Chase, incoming student

_Because I wanted face-to-face [classes] and it has, like, the classes are night classes. And they have that whole semesters divided (referring to 8-week and 12-week classes). The whole thing. The way they have this planned out so that you can work around your work schedule. It's awesome._ – Marsha, incoming student

There did not appear to be a significant difference in the things that mattered to prospects versus things that mattered to incoming students, however an interesting observation can be made by comparing the two groups. For incoming students, issue of timing was referenced using terms such as “the time is right in my life,” “time is right in my career,” and “job loss makes timing right.” Prospects did not use such terms, instead noting that they were considering the degree because of fears of job loss or a reduction in their company’s workforce or to position themselves to move up or withstand such a change. This might be explained by noting that of course “the time is right” for those who have made the decision to move forward with those who have not yet made this decision have not come to such a conclusion.

The opportunity to network with peers and professors, cost, and location of the university were all cited by a third (35 percent, n = 6) of the people interviewed, prospects and incoming students alike. They indicated that they care about the caliber of
peers in the classroom and that networking with peers and/or faculty was a benefit that could be gained from pursuing an MBA.

*I mean, when you are in the classroom environment you don't just learn from whoever is teaching the course, you learn from the people around you...so that is important to me, just knowing what other people bring. What I can learn from these people. Because at the end of the day, I -- most of us are already working individuals, so to see how their experiences can help me to maybe have a better experience at my job or advance my career.* – Rusty, prospective student

*I completely ruled out doing any kind of internet program. I really don't want to miss out on that face-to-face experience with the professors or the other people in the cohort. That's important to me and from what I have heard, people really enjoy that.* – Cassie, prospective student

*And the other piece is the collaboration. I mean, with your professors, having those kinds of discussions that you get in the classroom setting and the networking opportunities with other students.* – Mike, incoming student

*What kind of business opportunities, what kind of connections, what kind of networking are you really going to be able to do living and going to school in Gainesville? That was a big factor.* – Casey, incoming student

Reputation and rankings mattered to some people. Subjects said that they read online MBA forums (six percent, n = 1), looked at *BusinessWeek* or *U.S. News and World Report* rankings (24 percent, n = 4), or cited the vague term "reputation" (53 percent, n = 9) when determining which university to attend.

*[rankings matter because] it gives me this thinking that the people that I am going to meet and be meeting is better quality...the quality of the program and the quality of the people.* – Ish, incoming student
The decision was if I am going to go back to get my MBA. That was the big decision. And if I am not getting into, you know, a Top 50 school, based on U.S. News and World Reports, I don't necessarily care where I go. It was -- and if I look at schools relative the same as far as their perception in the business world -- I want to go to the one that is easiest and most convenient for me and get my MBA. – Fred, incoming student

Though most subjects indicated that they had considered online options, most implied that online options were considered to be less valuable than face-to-face MBA programs. Only one person expressed interest in earning an MBA online; eleven people (65 percent, n = 11) cited face-to-face instruction as a factor that was important when choosing a university.

A third (35 percent, n = 6) of those interviewed cited the length of the program (duration of the program) as a decision factor.

There were a few surprises in the findings. Just nine people (52 percent) said that program cost was a primary factor in their decision to pursue the degree.

The cost wasn't, it really wasn't that much of a deciding factor. The cost. The network of people was more important to me. That was ultimately why I decided not to get an online degree for Florida or Auburn, Penn State, or something like that, because, yeah, it has name recognition, but what you pay for in a master's program is the people that you meet. Yeah, at least, that's where I put my value. The only way I was going to, you know, take advantage of that was to go to a local university. – Chase, incoming student

You know, the money is, for what it is going to, you know, give me for the rest of my life, it is kind of a drop in the bucket. It's -- no, I can't think about the money. – Woody, incoming student

An interesting observation is six of the nine people who indicated cost was important were prospects. Only three of the people who said cost was a significant factor
were incoming students. One possible explanation for this difference might be justification. Students who have already chosen to take on the expense of the program may be justifying the cost whereas, for those who have not yet decided to pursue the MBA, this is a weightier issue.

In addition, few subjects – incoming students and prospects alike – listed AACSB accreditation when freely naming program elements or features that were important. In nearly half of the interviews (47 percent, n = 8), accreditation was not mentioned by the subject or the interviewer. In cases where the interviewer directly asked, in a follow up question, if accreditation mattered, several people said it mattered but that it was not information that they sought out. Three people said it didn't really matter. One person said, "it's just that there's a blanket level of trust" that the university is accredited. Asked why accreditation was not a key factor in his decision where to study, he summed it up by saying,

...to me it's not relevant. I mean, I am sure that there are others where it might [be relevant]. I trust that the university would take the program seriously and hire very competent professionals to instruct. – John, prospective student

Oh, [accreditation], that really didn't matter. I didn't even know about this. – Jorge, prospective student

It [accreditation] mattered. But [I] just wanted to know it had it. – Cassie, prospective student

This might signal marketers that the AACSB-accreditation seal is something to be featured on advertisements but it should not be one of the key communications messages. Future studies might investigate how often and in what industries such accreditation matters when it comes to hiring managers.
**Just One Answer**

When asked to narrow down all factors to the single-most important factor, 41 percent (n = 7) of the subjects narrowed their answers down to the university's ability to help make them more marketable or advance their career. Other answers included cost, university's reputation (cited twice), convenience, program duration, university's location (cited twice), and the caliber of peers in the classroom (cited twice).

**Market-specific Competition**

USF's competition for MBA students, based on this sample, is largely the University of Florida and The University of Tampa, perhaps indicating that USF’s potential students are place-bound.

*I love where I live in Sarasota and wanted to find a program where I could live in Sarasota at least for the next year and a half.* – Woody, incoming student

*I didn't put all these schools next to each other and say, "oooh, I wonder where I should go." It was sort of like, "I am going to USF."* – Marsha, incoming student

*Ideally I would love to go back to [the University of Florida] just because I went there and am a diehard Gator, but, at the same time, the traveling; it would really be what is going to hold me back, I think.* – Cassie, prospective student

Fifty-three percent (n = 9) of the subjects indicated that they considered the University of Florida; 47 percent (n = 8) cited The University of Tampa. Only four people indicated that they considered universities outside of Florida and, in those cases,
two of them only considered non-Florida colleges because of an online MBA option. Only one person mentioned a for-profit university.

As would be expected, most subjects said their journey to learn more about the MBA programs began with an online search. Seven people attended the info sessions hosted by USF's MBA office. Interestingly, of the brand new students interviewed, only 38 percent (n = 3) had attended an info session but nearly all of the prospects had attended the info session (note: the list for new students included any recently accepted student who had paid a deposit; the list for potential subjects was obtained by pulling people who had RSVP'd for an info session which could explain why the percentage of people who attended is so much higher for prospects than new students).

Only two people had attended an info session for a university other than the University of South Florida. Most of those who attended USF's information sessions found it to be satisfactory, though two of the ten who had attended a session indicated that having current students or recent alumni there would improve the sessions.

"I was a little under-impressed. I kind of felt the same way about orientation...I think a lot about the attitude and the energy and how you want to portray your program. And the info sessions seemed a little too casual. I was expecting it to be more. You know, to have that "fancy business feel." And it didn't. – Casey, incoming student

"It was informative, but, to be honest, I kind of felt like if I read the website I really didn't need to go. I didn't really gain more information. But I was glad that I went. – JoAnn, prospective student

Three-fourths of those interviewed indicated that they sought out information on the program informally through word-of-mouth. Several specifically sought out current students in USF's MBA program to talk about their experiences. Given that the most
frequent suggestion for improving USF's info session was to include current students or young alumni as presenters or panelists, it is clear that prospective MBA students want to hear from people who are traversing the road that the prospect is considering.

**Obstacles**

Prospective students said that they worried about being successful in the program and being able to achieve academically. In addition, while most people expressed a desire to network and get to know the "right" people, or stated that the caliber of peers in the classroom was important, nearly 65 percent (n = 11) of those interviewed indicated that they personally worried about being the “right” people, about their own ability to gain admission into the program.

Half of the people interviewed indicated that they worried about passing the GMAT and all of the prospects interviewed still have the GMAT test ahead of them (including two who took it as undergraduates but are not satisfied with those early scores). Fifty-five percent of those the prospects interviewed (n = 5) have already narrowed their school choices down to just two schools or indicated that they are very likely to choose USF. Of those who have already begun their first semester of coursework, 75 percent (n = 6) had already decided on USF before taking the test. This suggests that purchasing lists of GMAT test takers or registrants in order to send direct mail or email blasts might reassure test takers that their selection of USF as a likely school is a good decision. It is unlikely, however, to sway those who have not yet considered USF as a potential school.
These results are discussed in the next chapter, which also includes some suggestions for practitioners to consider when creating a strategic communications program for USF’s MBA program.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine what mattered to potential MBA students in order to craft strategic communications messages that are used to promote a particular university’s MBA program and to recruit potential students.

Results from this study suggest that, when trying to reach a target audience similar to the one described in this study, several changes could be made in the advertising and communications messages used to promote the University of South Florida MBA. Some tactical suggestions are offered below, as well as some broader information that should be considered when crafting a strategic communications plan.

First, the university’s advertising creative and communications messages should be improved to better reflect what matters most to potential students: how long is it going to take, who am I going to be studying alongside, and can I get in?

In response to suggestions from faculty and university leadership about the importance of world-class faculty and relevant research, advertisements for the USF MBA were tweaked in the last two years to feature several faculty members, from a variety of disciplines, and talked about their research credentials and the relevance of their scholarly inquiries. In addition, the AACSB-seal was added to advertisements and inserts placed in the regional editions of the Wall Street Journal, Forbes, BusinessWeek, and the like.
Promoting the faculty credentials and the college’s AACSB accreditation is not a bad thing, of course, but it runs counter to this study; according to those interviewed, these factors do not appear to be of primary importance to the college’s target market. Ads should, instead, point to the program’s face-to-face learning and networking opportunities and the MBAs ability to help students advance their careers. Communication materials (everything from the website to online ads to social media posts) should point to the caliber of students that prospects would be studying alongside, perhaps using current students and/or recent alumni to talk about the new business partners they met in the MBA program. The challenge, of course, would be to do so without making the admissions requirements and credentials seem unattainable as so many people expressed concern about their own ability to gain admission.

The vehicles used for the communications materials should be reviewed carefully. Prospects revealed that their information seeking began with online searches, so the university’s search engine rankings and search engine optimization strategies should be explored. If direct mail is to be included in the university’s buy plan, this study revealed that purchasing lists of GMAT test registrants and test takers in order to send such revised messages about the caliber of peers in the classroom would likely affirm choices already made (which is a good thing); this is unlikely to be an avenue to sway people who have not already narrowed down their choices. Therefore, the purpose of the direct mail campaign should be clearly defined or the use of other lists should be explored.

Secondly, given that several subjects shared that they sought out information from current students that they work alongside, using current students as informal ambassadors could be a guerilla-marketing tactic that could prove to sway people who are still in the
“always wanted to do it” stage to start investigating MBA programs. This could be accomplished by providing promotional items for all MBA students upon admission to the program. If this were something for the office, the item could be used to spark conversation amongst coworkers. This could be something fairly inexpensive, such as sticky note pads that proudly proclaim the students status as a “Business Bull” or something more expensive, such as photo frames for soon-to-be graduates who are registering for their final semester of classes.

In addition, certain features that might seem bland or fairly common could be highlighted to better reflect the benefits of USF’s program. For instance, USF offers 16-week, 12-week, 8-week, and one week semesters, depending on the course. This feature could be better highlighted to address a benefit that mattered to most of the subjects interviewed, namely “how long is the program going to take me to finish.”

Also, given that the caliber of peers in the classroom and geographic location were two important considerations for those interviewed, messaging should convey USF’s physical location in Tampa and point to its business connections as part of a large metropolitan community.

Given that the website is the first place that prospects said they sought information about the program, messages and content on the MBA website should be edited to convey similar messages. While the current website includes all the specific information about program content and features, it should speak more to the benefits of the program. In addition, more photos and testimonials should be added that could illustrate how current students or recent graduates have been able to advance up the corporate ladder.
Several people, prospects and new students alike, indicated that while all of the content provided at the sessions was accurate and relevant, that the sessions could be, in a sense, “dressed up” to have, as one subject put it “that fancy business feel.” An easy way to tweak information sessions to convey a more formal business feel would be by having students and employees in business attire. In addition, several people who attended the sessions implied that they did not learn anything that they could not have learned via a careful review of the website; including opportunities for attendees to interact with current students or recent graduates would make the sessions more meaningful. It would also serve to illustrate the caliber of students in the classroom as well as reaffirm that the decision to attend USF would be a smart one, in the eyes of these credible third-party (somewhat) peers. This would likely be very easy to accomplish by recruiting a small team of informal ambassadors from the program and providing tchotchkes or special recognition for those who participate in several sessions per semester. Given that it was fairly easy to recruit brand-new students and prospects for this study simply by sending email, recruiting a cache of a dozen or so new students or recent alumni would likely be fairly easy to do.

Limitations

Among the limitations of this research: the sample only included prospective graduate students who had registered to attend an information session at USF or those who were enrolled in first-year MBA classes at this particular university, therefore revealing only what matters to those already interested in USF. It did not reveal information that mattered to those who considered USF but chose to attend another
institution or those who never considered this university. Interviews with those who attended information sessions at other universities would provide additional data that might enhance the findings, as would interviews with those who considered USF but opted to attend a different institution.

Another limitation of this study is its sample size. While 17 interviews are certainly enough to determine themes among the new and prospective students, it falls short of Griffin and Hauser’s (1993) “recommended 20-30 interviews…necessary to get 90-95 percent of the customer needs” (p. 12). One of the tenets of Grounded Theory is that the researcher conducts research, analyzes it, and then continues to conduct additional research until one of the categories that has developed is fully saturated. While 17 exploratory interviews seemed to be enough to saturate some categories, such as reasons to pursue an MBA, more interviews could be conducted in order to fully saturate every category.

Further, while two different graduate students reviewed the researcher’s work to check for coder bias, Griffin and Hauser (1993) suggest that “multiple analysts or team members should read and interpret the raw transcripts” (p. 12). Time and a lack of staffing resources prevented such a review.

As Goulding (2010) pointed out, grounded theorists must acknowledge that there are risk factors associated with this method, which include the lack of an emergent theory or research that is “an eclectic empiricism in which too many categories are combined in an a-theoretical framework whereby causal relations and tendencies…and tendencies…are lost” (p 30). In this study, no concrete theory emerged and the resulting information is simply a narrative
exploration of the factors new students considered when deciding to pursue an MBA at USF.

Recognizing that using this study is limited to one particular site, another limitation is that because of its the sample size, the results of this study are not generalizable or transferrable.

Finally, the author of this thesis is a current graduate student in the mass communications program at the University of South Florida. When contacting subjects to request interviews, she presented herself as such, however, at some of the interviews, during casual banter, many of the subjects asked where the interviewer worked or why she would choose to conduct this particular study. The interviewer and study author revealed that she was as a student in the mass communications program but was also an employee of the USF College of Business. This fact may (or may not) have affected the subjects’ candor.

**Future Studies**

There are many ways that future studies could extend this research. The most obvious: to examine what prospects who opted to attend another university considered when making their decision to pursue an MBA as well as where to obtain the degree. If the samples included USF’s two primary competitors, namely the University of Florida and The University of Tampa, such an additional inquiry might inform marketers of the primary factors that mattered to prospects choosing other universities as well as perceived differences among programs.
Future research might also delve deeper into areas that surfaced later in this particular inquiry, namely the areas of accreditation and the caliber of faculty. In this research, the interviewer did not ask questions related to these areas until after it became apparent that these were not being included in the free response answers about factors that mattered. Future inquiries could include questions about these areas from the onset in order to gather more data as to whether these omissions are due to an assumption about the faculty’s caliber based on the university’s reputation.

Future inquiries could look to see how theories such as the Theory of Reasoned Action, which is used to predict behavioral intent, or the actions people will take based on their attitudes, might apply to this area. Such a study might reveal if it is possible to predict behaviors for prospects, should certain factors, such as endorsements or encouragement from supervisors, be present – or which factors must be present in order to predict certain behaviors.

A quantitative study might extend this research by using a Likert scale to measure the level of weight or importance that could be assigned to the factors cited by the subjects in this study.

Finally, future research might look closely at the information sessions hosted by the university. The prospect group used for this research largely included people who attended an information session. Future inquiries could examine how those who did not attend such a session determined where to study.
References


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APPENDIX 1 - RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

As a fellow graduate student at the University of South Florida, I am emailing to ask for your participation in a research study about factors prospective MBA students consider when deciding whether or not to pursue an MBA, and, in particular, factors considered when you chose to pursue an MBA at the University of South Florida. The purpose of the study is to help create strategic communications messages that are created considering those factors that are most important to future students.

Participation is simple: you would simply be interviewed, in person, by a researcher who would inquire about your decision to pursue an MBA and your selection of this particular program. It would require approximately 45 minutes of your time, to be scheduled at a mutually agreeable time. The interviews would be conducted at a convenient location for you, preferably at USF in the College of Business.

To be eligible for this study, you must be pursuing an MBA and in the first semester of study at USF. You must also be at least 21 years old.

If you are willing to participate, please reply to this email and you will be contacted to schedule an interview.

Name of interviewer/investigator: Lorie Briggs, lbriggs@usf.edu, 813-732-6233. USF IRB number Pro ID: Pro00010367
November 26, 2012

Lorie Briggs
Mass Communication
4202 E. Fowler Ave., BSN3403
Tampa, FL 33620

RE: Exempt Certification for IRB#: Pro00010367
Title: Target Marketing: Factors Prospective Students Consider When Selecting an MBA

Dear Ms. Briggs:

On 11/25/2012, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that your research meets USF requirements and Federal Exemption criteria as outlined in the federal regulations at 45CFR46.101(b):

(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:
(i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

As the principal investigator for this study, it is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted as outlined in your application and consistent with the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report and with USF IRB policies and procedures. Please note that changes to this protocol may disqualify it from exempt status. Please note that you are responsible for notifying the IRB prior to implementing any changes to the currently approved protocol.

The Institutional Review Board will maintain your exemption application for a period of five years from the date of this letter or for three years after a Final Progress Report is received, whichever is longer. If you wish to continue this protocol beyond five years, you will need to submit a new application. When your study is completed you must submit a Final Report to close this study.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

John Schinka, Ph.D.
Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board
APPENDIX 3 - INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent to Participate in Research
Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study
IRB Study # Pro00010367

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. This document is called an informed consent form. Please read this information carefully and take your time making your decision. Ask the researcher or study staff to discuss this consent form with you. Please ask him/her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand. We encourage you to talk with your family and friends before you decide to take part in this research study. The nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and other important information about the study are listed below.

We are asking you to take part in a research study called:

Factors Prospective Students Consider When Selecting an MBA Program

The person who is in charge of this research study is Lorie Briggs. This person is called the Principal Investigator. However, other research staff may be involved and can act on behalf of the person in charge. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Justin Brown.

The research will be conducted at the University of South Florida Tampa campus.

Purpose of the study
The purpose of this study is to:

- Determine the factors that prospective students consider when selecting an MBA program.

It is part of a master’s thesis for a student in the USF School of Mass Communications.

Should you take part in this study?
Before you decide:

- Read this form and find out what the study is about.
- You may have questions this form does not answer. You do not have to guess at things you don’t understand. If you have questions, ask the person in charge of the study or study staff as you go along. Ask them to explain things in a way you can understand.
- Take your time to think about it.

This form tells you about this research study. This form explains:
APPENDIX 3 (CONTINUED)

- Why this study is being done.
- What will happen during this study and what you will need to do.
- Whether there is any chance of benefits from being in this study.
- The risks involved in this study.
- How the information collected about you during this study will be used and with whom it may be shared.

Taking part in this research study is up to you. If you choose to be in the study, then you should sign this informed consent form. If you do not want to take part in this study, you should not sign this form.

Why is this research being done?
The purpose of this study is to find out what factors prospective students consider when looking at an MBA program, and, in particular the factors that were most important to you in your recent decision to pursue an MBA at the University of South Florida.

Why are you being asked to take part?
We are asking you to take part in this study because you are a graduate business student who began coursework toward an MBA within the last year.

What will happen during this study?
You will be asked to spend about one hour in this study. This hour will include a one-on-one interview with the PI to discuss your decision to pursue an MBA.

A study visit is with the person in charge of the study or study staff. You will need to come for one study visit in all. Most study visits will take about one hour. Some study visits may be longer.

The interview will be recorded, with consent, for the purposes of transcription and, once transcribed, subjects will be assigned an alias and the recordings will be destroyed.

Total Number of Participants
About a dozen individuals will take part in this study at USF.

Alternatives
You do not have to participate in this research study.

Benefits
We are unsure if you will receive any benefits by taking part in this research study.
APPENDIX 3 (CONTINUED)

Risks or Discomfort
This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

Compensation
You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

Cost
There is no cost to participate in this study.

Privacy and Confidentiality
We will keep your study records private and confidential. Certain people may need to see your study records. By law, anyone who looks at your records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator, study coordinator, research nurses, and all other research staff
- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety.
- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and its related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, staff in the USF Office of Research and Innovation, USF Division of Research Integrity and Compliance, and other USF offices who oversee this research.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your name. We will not publish anything that would let people know who you are.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal
You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your student status (course grade) or job status.

New information about the study
During the course of this study, we may find more information that could be important to you. This includes information that, once learned, might cause you to change your mind.
APPENDIX 3 (CONTINUED)

about being in the study. We will notify you as soon as possible if such information becomes available.

**What happens if you decide not to take part in this study?**

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel there is any pressure to take part in the study to please research staff. If you decide not to take part in the study you, will not be in trouble or lose any rights you normally have.

**You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints.**

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call Lorie Briggs at 813-974-7280. If you have questions about your rights, general questions, complaints, or issues as a person taking part in this study, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638.

**Consent to Take Part in Research**

It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part in this study. If you want to take part, please read the statements below and sign the form if the statements are true. I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

______________________________________________
Signature of Person Taking Part in Study Date

______________________________________________
Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

**Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent and Research Authorization**

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I hereby certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he/ she understands:

- What the study is about;
- What procedures/interventions/investigational drugs or devices will be used;
- What the potential benefits might be; and
- What the known risks might be.

I can confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in the appropriate language. Additionally, this subject reads well enough to understand this document or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her. This subject does not have a medical/psychological problem that would compromise comprehension and therefore makes it hard to understand what is being explained and can, therefore, give legally effective informed consent. This subject is not under any type of anesthesia or
APPENDIX 3 (CONTINUED)

analgesic that may cloud their judgment or make it hard to understand what is being explained and, therefore, can be considered competent to give informed consent.

___________________________________________  __________________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent   Date

___________________________________________
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent
APPENDIX 4 - INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Where did you attend school? How long ago did you graduate?

2. What did you study as an undergrad?

3. Do you work? Where and how many years of work experience do you have?

**Thinking about when you first began to consider an MBA…**

4. How long ago did you first start thinking about pursuing an MBA degree?

5. Was there a particular incident that led you to consider an MBA, or was there a particular reason you began to think about the degree?

6. What did you think the long-term benefit would be?

7. Did you think there might be some short-term benefits? Headaches?

**Thinking about your process to decision…**

8. How long did you think about it before you began researching programs?

9. Did you think about program first, then university, or university first, then program?

10. When did you take the GMAT…before exploring programs, after exploring programs but before exploring universities, after the decision and location had been determined?

**Deciding on a program…**

11. How did you go about seeking information on the programs?

12. What factors were important to you as you began to research programs? For instance, were you looking at the program content or other factors?

13. How would you rank those factors in terms of importance to you at that time?

**Deciding on a university…**

14. Once you decided to go for the degree, what universities did you consider?

15. How did you find out information about the specific universities? Did you attend in-person information sessions? Get all the information online? Seek word-of-mouth reviews from friends? Ask coworkers about particular institutions?

16. What factors were important as you determined the institution you would attend?

17. How would you rank those items in terms of importance to you at the time?
APPENDIX 4 (CONTINUED)

18. What was the one thing that was most important to you all along this process?

**Once you obtain the degree...**

19. What are your career aspirations, short-term? Long-term?

20. How long do you believe it will take to see a monetary gain as a result of earning the degree?
Casey is a Caucasian female who has applied, been accepted, and paid the deposit to begin the MBA program at USF in the coming semester. She had attended the new student orientation a few days prior to the interview but had not yet begun MBA classes. She has worked for several years since earning an undergraduate degree in Spanish from Northeastern University in Boston, Mass. When contacting Casey to schedule the interview, it was discovered that Casey and her husband are both employees at the University of South Florida, both working in the student services field. There was some initial banter about the university’s gratis tuition program for employees prior to the interview, as this was relevant to the couple’s decision(s) related to graduate education. As her husband is also considering the MBA program, and he is an influencer in her life, she included commentary about his choices throughout the interview.

1 Interviewer: So, first, where did you attend school for your undergrad?
2 Subject: I went to school at Northeastern University in Boston.
3 Interviewer: How long ago did you graduate and what did you study?
4 Subject: I started my undergrad degree in 1996 and studied abroad, and then moved abroad. I didn't go back to finish my undergrad degree until '05. So I actually graduated in '06.
5 Interviewer: Did you graduate from the same school?
6 Subject: Yes, I went back to Northeastern. I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish.
7 Interviewer: Where did you study abroad?
8 Subject: Argentina. And then I had a – my first master's is a master's in education in curriculum instruction with a concentration in college student affairs.
9 Interviewer: Where did you get that degree?
10 Subject: That was from Northeastern, too.
11 Interviewer: And earlier (prior to the interview) you said you were in a linguistics program as well?
12 Subject: I am. It's a master – it's an MA, so a Master of Arts degree. It's a TSOL program, so teaching English as a second language at the college level (unintelligible).
13 Interviewer: So why in the world, with one, er, one and a half degrees behind you, would you consider starting the MBA?
Well, I like to take classes. I feel like it's a . . . it's a benefit . . . it's a very financially worthwhile benefit for us to take classes, so I enjoy school, so I always found something interesting to study. That's kind of why, why school. The MBA, I got started thinking about it, you know, working with students every day, hearing about their job opportunities just [as they are] finishing the business undergrad degree. And seeing the kinds of experiences they're having and all the different directions they're going in, primarily, hearing about their salary, you know, just with their undergrad degree and no work experience [they are] going off and making $60,000-$65,000. And it just, it got me thinking. A little bit about long-term goals. My husband and I are very aggressive savers and want to retire young. We have other income streams besides our job, you and we probably picked the worst field to work in to try and save money. So it started with that. Last year my brother-in-law did a one-year accelerated at [the University of] Florida and so we learned a little bit more about the MBA program, it sort of became demystified in a way. I didn't study . . . I, you know, studied Spanish, and so business concepts are very anecdotal to me, very, very new, unfamiliar. And, so I was intimidated about the idea of the MBA. Now I think, "God, I wish I had done this in '06." But, hearing his (her brother-in-law's) experiences [now] . . . he had a background in theater or something like that . . . talking about the different classmates and the quality of the classmates, you know, it wasn't all cream of the crop, so it started to feel a little bit more like a possibility. I was kind of at a point with the linguistics where it was going to take me a couple of extra semesters because of [the sequence of how] the classes are offered. And so I just kind of started talking with my husband about, "you, what do you think?" . . . see what's it like. Take a couple of classes and see how it goes. And I feel committed to it. But I still have a little bit of fear that I am not going to be able to do it. But, I've felt that way before and gotten though it successfully, so I am kind of like trying to squash that fear (unintelligible).

Interviewer: So are you dropping out of the linguistics program or are you just pushing it aside?

Subject: No, I have very little left to do. It's actually the internship that is like, kind of . . . it's very difficult schedule wise. Because the best time for me to do it is in
the summer, but, you know we are slammed with orientation the summer and it's difficult. Our office is understaffed. So it's like, I can do the internship if it is like, this day and this day . . . between these three hours. So getting it scheduled has just been challenging. And so (unintelligible) have been kind of putting it off. I will finish it; I just have two classes left and the two internships. And the classes are only offered whatever semester, so it is probably going to take me until summer of '14, if I am able to do the internship this summer. And having to pay for [the internship, since it isn't covered under the free tuition plan], is kind of . . . I'm going back and forth about why am I really doing this? Do I really need it? I've taught English before, you don't really need to have the degree. But the thought is that it will be a real benefit later on. I'll retire and I'll have that credential and be able to teach later on (unintelligible). Sorry I rambled on a bit there (both interviewer and subject laugh).

Interviewer: And so, do you work? Yes, you work at USF. How long have you worked at USF?

Subject: Two years.

Interviewer: Did you work before that?

Subject: Yes, I worked at a university in North Carolina, ECU [Eastern Carolina University]. Those are the jobs that I have had since I was 30 (unintelligible) since I got my masters. I have a colorful work experience before that, but . . .

Interviewer: So you talked a little bit about your brother-in-law got the degree at UF, the accelerated degree. Was that when you started thinking about pursuing an MBA? How long have you been thinking about it?

Subject: Yeah. He would have started his MBA in May '11. I would say then is when I started talking about it. He was actually interested in it first. Then I kind of gradually thought that would it really be helpful if we were both making more money. But, again, I kind of saw it as a pipedream at first. But then I started learning more about the classes. I have another friend who is doing a post-bac in accounting. Her experiences in the classes as an older student who already has a master's is very different from what I hear from the undergrad students. The undergrad students constantly talk about how hard it is, how impossible, how this teacher, that teacher . . . hearing it from the perspective of someone who shares a little bit more in common with me was
helpful. My brother-in-law is actually still unemployed, which we were not expecting at all since he graduated in May. Florida has a high placement rate. He actually won the case competition, the (subject struggles to find name)... Interviewer: The Intercollegiate Case Competition? Subject: Yes. The [case subject company] Popeye’s has hired him; they liked the idea so much – I think they just hired him from his team – but they have hired him as a consultant to work on developing that idea, so he is gainfully employed at this time, but he is still waiting for full-time employment. So we were kind of – to get back to that idea – Kevin and I, my husband and I were kind of waiting to see what happened with Brad. Was he going to get a $100,000 offer right away? What was his experience? Because depending on how much money we are really going to be able to make, is it worthwhile? So, those are some of the factors that I was...

Interviewer: So you were looking at return on investment? Subject: It’s one of the big factors, yeah.

Interviewer: Now, Brad, is he your husband or your brother-in-law? Subject: Brad is my brother-in-law.

Interviewer: Kevin, you said he was thinking about an MBA, too? Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: Is he going to get an MBA? Subject: Kevin is going to be applying to the Executive MBA. He has many years of management experience. He doesn’t want to take it slowly; he wants to just do it. So he hasn’t applied to the program just yet, but he has, almost completely I think, decided on the Executive MBA (unintelligible).

Interviewer: So, the next question you have kind of danced around, but was there any particular reason that you started thinking about it? Subject: Yeah, I would say certainly that my brother-in-law going back to school. You know, he did very poorly in his undergrad but had a very successful career in theater development, writing grants and stuff like that. And so when he was considered as an applicant, even though he didn’t have a stellar undergrad degree, and so I thought, “well, if he can do it, I can do it.” And so, hearing about his experience and, knowing that he could get in, that it wasn’t all, like, everyone’s a genius, you know. It wasn’t like that at all. He had a lot of frustrating experiences with classmates, teammates, especially those without much life experience... It
really, like I said, kind of demystified it for me. It made me feel like it was an option.

Interviewer: So by demystifying it . . . was one of your worries, “am I going to be able to get in?”

Subject: No. [It was] am I going to be able to do it? I mean, I have really high grades. I have a good GRE score. But I have always chosen classes that I like and pursued careers that interested me and that I am good at. So I had always avoided . . . math, basically. Math classes of any kind. And so knowing that there’s a lot of economics math, accounting math; there’s going to be a lot of calculation and the fact that I really kind of shied away from classes like that since I was, say, 15 [years old], it made me feel a little apprehensive. So that’s what I mean about demystifying it. Is it the kind of thing that only certain people can do? Do you have to already know this? You know, so I started to see that it really wasn’t that. And I know that I am a really hard worker. Grades are really important to me. Admiration from the professor is really important to me. So, if I don’t get something, I work really hard at it. And so, I think that was what I mean by demystified; that it was not something that I couldn’t do.

Interviewer: So you’ve talked a little bit about what you think the long-term benefits would be. I’m hearing you say salary, personal growth. Are there other things that . . . I mean, is that what I am hearing you say? Are there other things?

Subject: Yeah. It is really about finding a job that pays more money. I am kind of coming from a place where . . . you know, I would consider my field . . . it is a very low-income field unless you can manage to get into a dean’s or key position. And I don’t see myself pursuing a PhD, which is what I would need to do. So what you hear a lot from people in the field is “I am so passionate about this,” or “I love my job,” “I love to get up every day and see the students, it’s worth the sacrifice.” And I just don’t feel that way anymore. And so I said to my husband, “you know, if I just don’t love my job making $37,000, why don’t I not love my job making $100,000?” You know what I mean? It kind of – I mean, he was really trying to dig into, [saying] “why do you really want to do this? Are you going to like this? You keep searching for things that are going to make you happy and they’re not.” And I’m like, “I know, I think I just don’t like to work. I’m willing to work. It’s just that I am
never going to be that person who is like “I love to be at work every day, it’s so much fun, it fulfills me, it’s just that I love what I do.” I don’t know it’s just not a reality; it’s never been a reality for me. And so, having some of the long-term plans that we have it makes a lot more sense to try and get into something that would help us out more [financially] in the long run. And the fact that I can do it, you know, with some financial assistance from the school is, well that’s another big factor. I don’t think that I would be doing an MBA if it wasn’t for the tuition assistance.

Interviewer: And how long do you think it is going to take you?

Subject: I have to do 42 [credit] hours, and so I thinking probably four years if I don’t do any more than two [classes] per semester. Because in the beginning I’ll still have some linguistics classes I have to take here and there. And I think that may change, you know, depending on how it feels once I get started. I have considered taking three classes per semester but I am a little concerned about the load. Paying for it is one thing [since the tuition assistance offer is restricted to two classes per semester]. It’s a thousand dollars. It’s not a fortune but handling the full-time work and three classes is concerning. I get really excited about it, sort of at the end of the semester. And again at the beginning of the next semester, but then halfway through I get .

Interviewer: (laughing) “I can’t believe I am doing this!”

Subject: Yea, well, I haven’t done it yet . . . but I get like, “I can’t even believe I thought about taking three.” So I haven’t . . . so I think it will probably take me four years (both interviewer and subject laugh at the subject’s animated appearance awhile discussing mid-semester panic).

Interviewer: So how long did you think about it before you began researching programs? I think you said about a year? Was that it? Or was it more, or less?

Subject: Yeah, I think it was about a year.

Interviewer: And did you think about program first, and then university, or did you think about university first.

Interviewer: Program first. Once the idea of the MBA sort of emerged. I considered [the University of] Florida only because I will now have two master’s degrees from USF [after finishing the linguistics degree and MBA]. So I thought a little bit the diversity and the value of the diversity. My husband, I think, is going to do the Executive MBA at Florida because he has an undergrad
and grad degree from USF. And they offer a distance option. But, for me [to study at UF], it would mean . . . it would have had to have been . . . he and I getting jobs in Gainesville . . . or working at USF. And looking at Gainesville more than anything else. What kind of business opportunities, what kind of connections, what kind of networking are you really going to be able to do living and going to school in Gainesville? And that, that was a big factor. In our fields, you bounce around schools all the time, so that [moving to Gainesville] wasn’t as unrealistic as it might sound, but, you know, it’s applying to jobs and going to Gainesville. It was a possibility. But it was really the Tampa community and the fact that it was something that we could do [in Tampa] as soon as we decided. It would have been a much longer process to get started up there. And considering his idea of wanting to do . . . At first he was considering . . . so I guess my husband’s choices had a lot to do with it as well . . . he was considering doing the full-time day program that was over here like his brother did. And that was part of the consideration of potentially moving to Gainesville. But he came here [to USF] and the info session here, with me, and got info about the Executive MBA program. And we started to think, “oh, so that’s an option, too.”

Interviewer: But he is not considering USF’s Executive MBA?

Subject: (shaking head no) Well, he’s considering both. I mean, the way he looked at it was (long pause) he perceives UF as a better (subject motions with hands to indicate air quotes) “name.” A more recognizable name, one. It was more expensive but not much more expensive. And it offered, for him it would be . . . another degree from USF with no other degrees from anywhere else. He is a little concerned about that as well.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: So that’s where he . . .

Interviewer: So you have already taken the GMAT?

Subject: I didn’t have to take the GMAT because I am doing the dual masters. Because I am already a USF graduate student and matriculating into the program, I was able to not have to take the GMAT. And because my GRE scores are on file, even though they are expired, they are already scanned into our system. And so, I didn’t have to take the GMAT, I could circumvent (unintelligible). Which helps out a lot.

Interviewer: I know! I’m thinking, “wow” (unintelligible).
Subject: It’s something that... it kind of worked out, you know, with Karen [in the USF MBA office] talked about my options, and things I have pursued, and we kind of talked about that. For some reason, the dual degree seemed reasonable. It was helpful, something I hadn’t thought of.

Interviewer: So how did you go about seeking information on the MBA?

Subject: I read over the website and as soon as we saw an information session available, we came to an info session.

Interviewer: And what did you think of the info session?

Subject: (very long pause) I was a little under-impressed. I kind of felt the same way about the orientation. And because I do things like that, also, I think a lot about the attitude, and the energy, and how you want to portray your program. And the info session seemed a little too casual. I was expecting it to be more. You know, to have that “fancy business feel.” And it didn’t. Do you know what I mean by that?

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Subject: So I was a little surprised by that. It gave me all the information that I needed. A lot of people had questions and every question got answered. And it was really helpful to split up because I wouldn’t necessarily want to sit there and listen to all of those Executive MBA program’s questions, so it was good that they divided it.

Interviewer: So, were there alumni... it sounds like the presentation was fine, it was the presentation of the content?

Subject: (nods head in agreement)

Interviewer: So would you say that if it had been dressed up, for lack of a better term, it...?

Subject: A little bit more. Maybe alumni present.

Interviewer: Would that have made it a better presentation?

Subject: Alumni, if they were, you know, engaging alumni. That would have been great. I didn’t feel it was lacking, but now that you say it, it would have been great. One example is in the presentation there is a video. And the video didn’t play. Which, I know that occasionally happens. And the presenter went, okay, no video, and went on to the next slides. Rather than [telling the audience] what was on the video. [I wondered] what are we missing? I’ve seen such videos, so I know it isn’t any unique content, but I was thinking, “what if I need to know what was on the video?” Whatever, that is just one example. But yeah, it was an informative session
but having alumni at the info session or orientation
session – especially if they were there for one-on-one
questions after – or sharing some of their experiences
about how the MBA benefitted them, that would have
been helpful.

Interviewer: So as you began to research these programs, you
mentioned that you looked at the website and went to
the information session, what kind of information were
you looking for? What kind of program content? What
were the factors that you were trying to find out about?

Subject: I wanted to see what the classes were, what the subjects
were. I was looking for some guidance as to the
sequencing – which I didn’t find – and that really was
not addressed at the orientation session I attended
either. I wanted to see how long it would take. It [the
information I was seeking] was really more related to
the classes and what kind of things would I want to
combine, what kinds of things I wanted to keep separate
(unintelligible) things like I don’t want to take finance
and Stats II together. And so I was really looking at the
subjects (unintelligible) I wanted to see when
accounting would end and economics would begin so I
that I could take it right before finance so that there
wouldn’t be a [gap] between accounting and finance
(unintelligible) because for me those are the classes
where I think I am going to struggle. I am thinking that
if I can sequence them, then . . . but I would imagine
that I might be able to see that information once I can
register, but, anyway, I was looking for order, I was
looking for some of that information and I didn’t find
that on the website, nor at the orientation that I just
attended. Because I did go to the orientation just this
past weekend.

Interviewer: So you mentioned sequencing, subjects, kind of
guidance on those kinds of things . . . what was most
important to you? If you had to rank them sort of “this
was most important to me,” time to degree, or
whatever.

Subject: Time to degree. Just knowing [it]. Not necessarily
because I am looking for something that I can complete
quickly. But just being able to conceptualize it. Sort of,
“how long do I have to stay at USF?” You know, because
(unintelligible), sort of being able to talk about these
things with my husband because he also works at USF.

And kind of forecasting ahead [in terms of schedule].
Interviewer: So it would be time to degree, followed closely by sequencing?
Subject: Yes, ma'am.
Interviewer: Okay. And, once you decided on the degree, what universities did you consider?
Subject: UF, USF. Just those.
Interviewer: Not UT [University of Tampa], no UCF [University of Central Florida]?
Subject: Nope.
Interviewer: And how did you go about finding information about those universities?
Subject: I didn't look up any information about UF. I had sort of the first-hand experiences of the brother-in-law so I didn't go very far into seeking info about UF. I have, however, a friend who used to work in admissions for the College of Business at UF, so I already knew some information about UF (unintelligible).
Interviewer: Did you seek word-of-mouth information from friends?
Subject: Just my family.
Interviewer: Did you ask your coworkers at all about particular institutions?
Subject: I didn't want them to know [that I was thinking about getting MBA] (subject laughs)
Interviewer: So when you were looking at USF vs. UF, what factors were important to you?
Subject: Location, financial constraints. You know, location in terms of having to move but also location in terms of Tampa being such a big area, the likelihood that we would stay in Tampa once we changed careers, so the being able to be here while in school, meeting people, creating contacts, being able to take advantage of opportunities. I didn't see that being possible in Gainesville. So that was a huge benefit [of USF].
Interviewer: And would you say...which one was most important to you? Location, money?
Subject: (long pause) Financial.
Interviewer: What was the one thing, thinking back to when you first had the idea, what was the one thing that was most important to you all along?
Subject: Being able to change fields and make money.
Interviewer: So now, what are your career aspirations, both short- and long-term?
Subject: (long pause) I had forgotten about this, but now that you mention this, what really decided – what really made me fill out the application for the MBA was the info session that I went to about NASA (USF hosted an
info session about careers at NASA). NASA came to
campus a couple of weeks ago and I told with my
husband, “Hey, I want to work at NASA” (both
interviewer and subject chuckle). We joked about it, you
know? And then, my husband said, “it’s an option, you
know. You gotta do what you gotta do.” And so that was
kind of the [impetus], that got me moving. So I really
was impressed with [NASA’s] internships, the job
opportunities. So for short-term after the degree, I
would like to – actually, before the degree is finished – I
would like to do the internship at NASA where you go
over there and work for a year then you come back and
finish the degree. And I really don’t have any
restrictions as far as long-term. I am not committed to
any one community - or industry, I should say - or even
any specific job at this point. I really don’t have enough;
I haven’t researched it enough or really thought about
any long-term opportunities or alternatives. I’m in a “I’ll
take it one semester at a time” kind of mode of thinking
right now, but the idea is to definitely get a new job as
soon as possible, a new line of work. As soon as a good
one comes along, I will consider it. Whether I am done
with the degree or not.

Interviewer: Okay. You’re not place-bound, are you? That’s what I
am hearing you say.

Subject: Well, (said with hesitation) I mean, really, no.

Interviewer: Do you have children?

Subject: No, I don’t have kids. All of my husband’s family are in
this area, Tampa Bay, but we are willing to move
internationally. Or around the country. If (emphasis)
the right opportunity comes along. That’s what it is
really all about. And we’re weather-bound.

Interviewer: (laughs) But it’s not like...

Subject: I mean, I’m from New York...

Interviewer: So it isn’t like you have strong ties to Tampa [as if you
said] “I chose USF because I ...”

Subject: (unintelligible)

Interviewer: And, what kind of headaches do you anticipate will
come along with the MBA?

Subject: Did you say headaches?

Interviewer: (nods head indicating yes)

Subject: One of my biggest concerns was the exposure [that] I
will now have to be with students that I am working
with professionally. I was really interested in the
student organizations that they talked about [at MBA
orientation] and I know that there are undergraduate
members. And so I feel like it is going to be difficult to balance, you know, my relationship with these students – not the MBA students but the undergraduate students – as a professional. But then also to be a student [alongside them] and take part in the opportunities that are available for students. So I am a little apprehensive about that. It was one of the reasons I didn’t want to tell anyone I was thinking about it until I was really sure I was going to do it. Because I am not sure how it is perceived. I am not sure…I don’t see anybody else in the college going after the MBA, definitely not anyone in the advising office. I didn’t ask anyone’s permission or talk about it with anyone really because I … (subject trails off).

Another concern I had was, I was also, and I still am, really nervous about being successful. I didn’t want it to look like, ”well, here’s an employee and she’s failing the classes” (both interviewer and subject chuckle). I didn’t go around telling everybody I did it until I knew I that I was going to go forward. So those are my two kind of biggest concerns. I am little bit worried about some of the courses that I perceive as being more harder than others, but I know deep down in there I can get through things. There will be classes that I struggle with and that’s just the way it is (unintelligible). I think before I have a little bit more first-hand experience with the program, for me, at this point, it is just kind of nebulous. I feel the same way about what my professional goals are as a result of the MBA. I don’t know. We’ll see. I really just don’t know.

Interviewer: And how long do you think it will be to see an ROI (return on this investment)?
Subject: (long pause) Well, I am not putting any money into it, which is a great benefit for me, so I also think that (pause) that I am, that I have a possibility of changing professions in the middle of the program, because I have some experience in banking. You know, I have had a lot of jobs and business experiences (pause) so I think as soon as I change careers is when I will start to see the investment pay off, because I won’t have to make up any losses.

Interviewer: Okay.
Subject: And, I’ve never studied ROI, so I don’t know… (interviewer and subject both chuckle).

Interviewer: Well, you’ve got a time investment…
(laughing) I want to answer that, but I really don’t know what it is (laughing)...

Interviewer: But there is a time investment that you’ve got involved here.

Subject: Yep.

Interviewer: How long will it take for you to think, that you say, “this was worth it?”

Subject: Gotcha. I think probably 18-24 months in a new position. You know I feel like I am in a place where I really belong, to feel like I am in control of it, feeling comfortable and professional, you know? To feel like I am creating goals (unintelligible). I think about 18-24 months after I am in a position to really feel like “this was right, I did it.”

Interviewer: Great. That’s all the formal questions that I have. I will tell you, though, that I didn’t tell anyone I was going to start my master’s until after I accidentally saw Irene (USF’s MBA Program Director) at grad school orientation and she was like, “what are you doing here?” I didn’t wanna…I wasn’t sure I could do it, I didn’t choose the MBA because I was fearful of the finance classes, so I had very similar [angst].

Subject: I know…the same thing, when I was finishing my undergrad, you know, I was 28 and I [initially] had thought I wanted to teach Spanish in high school [but] I did not want to teach Spanish in high school, but I was so close to finishing the degree…. I talked to the [college] Career Center and you know, I kind of batted around the idea of law school – I never thought of the MBA – but even with law school it was the same thing. I never, I mean, I graduated my undergrad degree [program] with like a 3.8, I am a good student, I’m not, I just, I think I just lack confidence. It’s taken me a really long time to see, like (unintelligible) that there are incapable people in every field and they still get through school. So who are you (referring to herself) to think that you can’t do it? And so, looking back, I wish I hadn’t gone to a private school, I wish that I had gone, that I had transferred to a public school, not paid all that tuition, wondering “why did I lack the confidence?” Yeah, why did I shy away [from a business degree]?

Interviewer: Well, I thank you for your time. I think you have given me some great information.

Subject: Great.
Marsha is a 32-year-old Caucasian female who has applied, been accepted, and paid the deposit to begin the MBA program at USF in the coming semester. She is not a United States citizen; she came to America many years ago via an education Visa, coming to America from Estonia. Upon learning that the Marsha was from Estonia, the interviewer noted that she had helped plan an event at USF featuring Estonia’s President Toomas Ilves; it was discovered that Marsha had attended that event at USF a few years ago before to inquiring about the MBA program, but that had been her only prior interaction with USF. At the time of the interview, she had recently attended the new student orientation but had not yet begun MBA classes. She has worked for several years since earning an undergraduate degree, most recently in marketing for a professional association.

Interview Date: December 21, 2012
Interview Location: Fletcher Avenue Starbucks, Tampa
Interview Subject: Marsha, 32 year old female, Incoming #2
Interview Duration: 36 minutes

Interviewer: So, you have been accepted into the MBA program and you start classes soon, correct?
Subject: Yes, in January.
Interviewer: Where did you earn your undergrad [degree]?
Subject: The University of South Dakota.
Interviewer: And how long ago did you graduate?
Interviewer: Okay. And what did you study?
Subject: My degree is a Bachelor of Science in Contemporary Media and Journalism; emphasis is PR (public relations) and a minor in English. The "with emphasis on PR" is interesting because that is actually what is on my diploma. It reads: Bachelor of Science in Contemporary Media and Journalism with Emphasis in Public Relations. Isn't that crazy?
Interviewer: It is, because mine is...
Subject: Really long.
Interviewer: Mine was in advertising; it was in mass comm with an emphasis in advertising, but it just says mass comm on the diploma.
Subject: Yeah.
Interviewer: Okay. So what did you do after you earned the degree?
Subject: Well, from there, I actually, I need a – well, a lot of my career path has been sort of like molded by the fact that I have special requirements being an international person to be able to work in the United States, so I needed to find a company. I didn’t really have a lot of
choice in terms of where I worked. It was almost as if they picked me up then I could, you know, like because they...

Interviewer: They have to sponsor you for a few years?

Subject: (nods head in agreement) They have to sponsor me for a work visa and there is money involved and a lot of process and they have to really take me on as sort of a project. And so I was originally hired in Ames, Iowa, by the American Agricultural Economics Association. And so that's how I sort of got into the association world; which is what, that's the area where I work in now. I work for professional associations. I have a certificate and our credential and I am a Certified Associations Executive. So I have earned that and that was sort of like, I guess, the most commonly known like CPA would be, because you are required to take an exam to certify for it and then you are required to take continuing education hours every year to be able to renew your credential. In the association world, that's one major thing that one would need to be successful in association management, in the higher levels [such as an] executive. So, so that's how I got started. I joined the American Society of Association Executives, which is the association that supports association management professionals and so I was working for AAEA and sort of fell into that field, you know? So my specialty – so the area that I got into was communications.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: So a lot of activities involving that. I originally started out being like hands-on, with desktop publishing and I put out a newsletter and I did the press interviews, and coordinated all the marketing and advertising and the website. This was a relatively small organization, so I was it. It was a one-man show. So I worked there until December of 2005. I was hired on October of 2003 and I worked there until December of 2005 and I happened to have a friend down here in Tampa who had an opening at her company for a coordinator position. So I applied for that because I wanted to leave the place where I was [working]. Because I had been there for two years and I felt like I was sort of, you know...

Interviewer: I'm done.

Subject: Yeah. And so the company down here, BICSI, is who I work for now and that company hired me on as the communications coordinator. Shortly after I came on board, about four months later, they promoted me to
communications manager. So I started managing a department of 11 individuals and they... and all of this again is a professional organization that I work for now, since January of 2006. So I manage a department of 11 in communications. Then we transitioned into marketing. Then in 2009 is when I actually earned my credential, my CAE, and then I was promoted. Two months later I was promoted to director of membership and marketing, which is what I am now. So they gave me two departments, so there’s 15 or so individuals reporting to me now.

So with the whole grad school thing, originally when I graduated college I wanted to go into international trade law actually. I wanted to become an attorney. So, I am not entirely sure why, really. It was always something that I wanted to do and there was a good law school at the University of South Dakota and that was sort of what I was going to do. I actually started to practice for the LSATs, which is the...

Interviewer: The entry exam.

Subject: Yeah.

Subject: I did very well on my practice exams and was ready to go but then I realized that I had $37,000 in school loans because I had to pay international out-of-state tuition, plus all of my living expenses. I took everything out on private loans because, as an international, I don’t qualify for any government assistance. At all. None. So everything I had was a private loan and I had to start paying that back. So that’s quite a bit of money. And I would have had to take out additional loans to go for law school and it is extremely expensive, obviously.

Interviewer: Right.

Subject: (jumping from thought-to-thought during conversation) So I decided that I was going to try to find a job instead, and to work. And I sort of had given up on the whole idea of grad school at that time. I think that I was always wanting it. In fact, there was a girl that worked for me that had graduated. And any time I have hired I really looked to, to really like mentor you know young women who had graduated out of college. You know, so that they can get on their feet. I feel like they, like they are the individuals that can be most likely molded into successful, you know, whatever, that you can have the most impact. So there was this girl who had graduated from USF and -- at this company that I work for now --
but she no longer works for me. She was trying to get 
into grad school and what she was going to go for was 
an MBA. And she was trying to take the GMATs, I think, 
and she didn't do well. She tried several times and so 
she did not do well enough. So I think she gave up on 
the idea. Actually, she ended up not going to grad 
school. But I think that's kind of, sort of, when I started 
to really think about what it is that I wanted to be. Plus 
my, the boss that came on board then actually promoted 
me to director. He is the CEO of the company and is 
extremely – he is my mentor – and he is very, very, he's 
like a high profile individual, he came from, I don't 
know. He has an MBA, he a CAE, and he's the CEO. I sort 
of look to him as . . . for a while there I wanted to go to 
from director to [vice president], from VP to CEO. I 
wanted to become an executive director for an 
association myself and I needed to figure out a way to 
do that. Plus, I had always wanted to go back to grad 
school. Plus, my new boss, as he was promoting me, you 
know he took me out to lunch to talk kind of about the 
promotion, he'd bring it up. That was the first thing that 
he wanted to talk about. You know, “what do you want 
to do with, as far as professional development, where 
do you want to go from here?” He is really big on 
people continuing to educate themselves. Plus, my 
company provides a pretty good educational assistance 
program, where they give me some money to be able to 
go take classes or whatever I want to do. So, at that time 
[over lunchtime conversation], it was kind of like a spur 
of the moment thing, that I just sort of blurted out, “I 
want to go get my MBA!” You know, because I think had 
been thinking about it all along anyway, because he has 
an MBA and (laughing) I wanted to be just like him, you 
know?

Interviewer: It's the credential you needed?
Subject: Yeah. Because I already had the CAE, which is one of 
those. I mean, in reality, there's really only, if you go and 
look at the successful association executives, the ones 
who are executive directors or CEOs, you will see that 
they have the certified association executive credential. 
It's like the one and only credential there is in the 
association management world. And most likely if you 
want to go and have an executive director position 
somewhere, you should technically have that credential. 
The other thing that is really, really common is that 
people have advanced degrees. The one that I see most
commonly is the MBA. There’s other ones, but the MBA is really, you know, you don’t, it doesn’t box you into one specific area, it’s sort of like, it’s just the, it shows… My boss always says this, he says, “what I learned in grad school is that I learned to think.” And that’s sort of what he, you know, “so I am really excited that you are going to go.” So he (pause) so anyways, so he promoted me. And it got really rough at work, so I didn’t even… That was in 2010, March of 2010, so I didn’t… so I ignored what I had said and I didn’t do anything toward getting into grad school at all.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: I was just trying to focus on my new position, trying to, you know what I mean? But I was still saying that I was going to do it. And then I had my review with him six months later…

Interviewer: (laughing)

Subject: And he says, “sooooo, what is it that you want to do?” And I’m saying I don’t know. He says, “No, really, what do you want to do?” I said, “I still want the MBA but it’s really not a good time right now, I just can’t do it.” He’s like, “no problem.” So I get a review every six months right now because I am on whatever he calls a fast-track thing, whatever. So he asks me again the next time. And I was like, I really feel like I’ve got to do something and then I said to him that I wanted to be considered – he had established a new level in the company because previous to this there were only some managers and directors, and directors reported directly to the CEO; well, he established a vice president level. He promoted our CFO to vice president and hired on two vice presidents. So with that happening, I thought, “okay, I’m a director, what’s the next logical step?” Well, I want to be a vice president, so how do I do that? So I talked to him. I said, “You know, I really want to be a vice president.” Right now my only option is to move up in a company that I’m in; I really can’t look externally because I need to stay there for immigration purposes. I really need to stay within my existing company because I am on like temporary green card waiting status. So I really can’t go anywhere else. Which is fine, because I am happy where I am at and I have a really excellent job. It’s awesome; it’s like, a dream. You know, like, I don’t think (pause). I’m very lucky. Just say that. Great benefits, great pay. My life is awesome. Great people, whatever. And this great boss. So I would really just
I love to become a vice president. I asked him whether or not he saw that in my future at that company. He said yes, that the position that I was in was certainly something that could look it. He was like, "you know, you can’t do vice president of [human resources] or vice president of accounting but you could certainly, can be vice president of membership and marketing; that’s something that would be a fine position to create. “ He said, “you already have your credentials, really all you need is to get started on the MBA program. At least start taking some classes and [to gain] a little bit more experience.” So I was like, okay. So I think it was at that time that it sort of clicked like, okay that I really don’t have a choice here. And it wasn’t that I was trying to delay it necessarily because I didn’t want to do it. I think I have always wanted to go to grad school. It’s my dream come true. Like, I am beyond excited.

Interviewer: Good!
Subject: I can’t even tell you. I like flipped out when I found out I was accepted. I think that my primary concern has always been the financial aspect of it. I am completely. I have to completely do this by myself. I’m not even able to take out a loan right now. I paid off my other loans, but, in order for me to take out new loans I have to have a co-signer on my school loans.

Interviewer: Because of your status?
Subject: (nodding head) Because of my status. Because I am not a resident. Even though I work, I pay taxes like a citizen in every other way except for the fact that have this, that I am sort of temporary, that I could be deported at any time. That kind of a thing. And I don’t want to make the people who helped me co-sign my loan the first time, I don’t want to ask them again because that was a big thing, for somebody to trust me. So I needed to figure out a way to do it by myself, but eventually I was kind of like, “you know what, I am just going to take this a semester at a time.” I’ve gotten a lot of pay raises in between from when I first considered it to now, so I am making a lot more money. And my company provides assistance and, you know, I think that I just need to do this. And so I started moving toward the process early last year without considering the financial aspect of it. I thought to myself that I am not going to figure this out right now. I am just going to trust that it will somehow work out and I am going to start applying. Once I get accepted, then I will figure out where I am going to from
there, financially. There’s always a way, you know? There’s got to be.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: So I went, so I started studying for the GMAT. Well, that was really, well, first I had an appointment with an advising, whatever. I was like, “what do I need to do?” And they said to take the GMAT. I was like, okay. So that was my first step. And it was sort of non-committal. I mean, all it is is studying for an exam. It was a few hundred dollars and it doesn’t mean a commitment to a university. It’s just …

Interviewer: A test.

Subject: Yes, it’s just taking a test. So I just ignored the rest of it and just focused on the exam. I didn’t do nearly as well as I wanted to. It was an average score and I was just, I don’t know, okay, well, we’ll see (both interviewer and subject chuckle). Let’s see what happens. So then I put my application together. I was going for the fall semester but what happened was the … even though I don’t need a Visa to go to school they classified me as an international student and they basically said I missed my deadline; even though I met the deadline but the system classified me as something else than what I actually was.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah.

Subject: I was like okay, yeah, well that doesn’t matter. It’s better anyway. It gives me more time, right? So that is what, hence the mid-year start. It would not have been my preference, but I think, well, now I am grateful that that is the way it worked out. So I submitted my application and everything and I had to get recommendation letters and obviously my CEO wrote me one. Must have been good. I don’t know. He’s really been pushing me to get this thing, so …

Interviewer: So it also let him know that you were moving, that you were doing something …

Subject: Yeah, you know. And the other thing was I needed to work with the school to get them to give me in-state tuition, even though they consider me an international student. And that was – that was kind of a lengthy process. I had to provide a lot of paperwork to show that I have been … because I have been in Florida since 2006, but in terms of resident, I am not a Florida resident, I am an international person. So they can’t classify me as a resident anywhere. But, luckily for me –
because an international student tuition per credit
tuition is like $800-whatever dollars.

Interviewer: It’s a lot.

Subject: Yeah, it is like twice as much. So that was basically going
to decide whether or not I was going to be able to even
consider this thing. If they had given me international
out-of-state tuition I would not have been able to go.

But I met with somebody at the MBA office or whatever.

And the woman said, she was like, “no, definitely, I think
you quality for in-state.” You know they determine
resident for tuition purposes is different for what a legal
resident? Luckily. So I did everything I needed to do
and, thank God, they gave me in-state tuition. So I was
like, okay, another hurdle crossed. And then, basically, I
was just waiting to get accepted. And I got accepted. In
fact, I didn’t get my acceptance letter. What I got was,
from the international student office, I got this weird,
cryptic message like “as a student who has been
accepted to USF, you know, we need to also review your
immigration files” or whatever.

Interviewer: You got that before you got your…

Subject: Yeah, congratulations on your acceptance to USF. I was
like, yeah, I guess that means I am accepted! I got all of
that and like five emails from the international office
and nothing from the USF College of Business…

Interviewer: You’re in!

Subject: Yeah, nothing saying your acceptance letter, or
whatever. I got all of that the next day and then the
accepted emails after that. So that was a happy day! I
was really very excited. I didn’t really think that that
would happen. I don’t know why. Just didn’t think my
GMAT was, I mean, I think it was an acceptable score; I
just didn’t think it was excellent.

Interviewer: But they look at the total package, you know. You had
work experience; you had good letters from your
employer…

Subject: Yeah. Ten years of solid executive work experience. Not
just, [experience in] business (emphasis), not just in
anything regular. Not just regular work experience, but
business work experience.

Interviewer: So the portfolio admission clearly helped.

Subject: Yeah. I graduated cum laude from my undergraduate
program, so that probably had something to do with it,
too, a little bit.

Interviewer: Sure.
Subject: Yeah (stumbling over words), but I really didn’t – I don’t know why – I just didn’t think that I would get accepted or whatever but I did, so...

Interviewer: Okay, so you have already answered several of these questions . . . how long ago, you started in 2010; particular incident, it was really career planning (subject indicates agreement) and those, the influence of your boss. What did you think the long-term benefit would be? I think I heard you say it was really that vice president position – or is there something else?

Subject: I think the long-term benefit would be general career advancement. I can’t go any further without an MBA.

Interviewer: And what about short-term benefits?

Subject: Well, first of all, it’s showing my boss that I am moving forward with our plan. I feel like he promoted me on the condition that I would go forward and get an MBA. Because most of the other directors have an MBA and I don’t.

Interviewer: Do you think there were any short-term headaches? Anything you were kind of dreading?

Subject: The financial is number one. Secondly is the time. My job is not a standard 8-to-5. I work all the time, nights, weekends. I have a very crazy schedule to begin with and I assume this is going to add to my workload.

Interviewer: It will (chuckling). So once you decided you were going to do this, how long did – how did you research programs? How did you think about it? Did you go online?

Subject: It is almost as if I didn’t. USF is sort of, right there.

Interviewer: So you thought about the program first, and then the university, not the university first.

Subject: (displays quizzical look)

Interviewer: It was, I want an MBA, not USF, it wasn’t like USF, then I will go for an MBA.

Subject: They were both kind of natural [decisions]. In fact, USF was the only university that I applied to.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Subject: Yeah, I didn’t even apply to anywhere else because USF is down the street from here. It is physically close. It is a respected four-year school. And I wanted a face-to-face program; I didn’t even want to consider anything online. I didn’t consider the University of Tampa because of the expense and I think that USF is the best school all around.

Interviewer: (unintelligible, laughing)

Subject: Yeah, I know!
Interviewer: So you took the GMAT before you even explored the program?

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: No, you explored the program first because they told you that you needed to take the test.

Subject: Honestly, though, I don’t really know what the word explore means here because I didn’t really explore the program at all. Because after I got accepted people were like, “so how many credits do you have to take?” And I don’t know (both interviewer and subject chuckle). "What classes are you going to take?" I don’t know . . . (laughing) I am just going to go and get this MBA, I don’t know.

Interviewer: But you went – you did go to the office? You went in person and talked to people?

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: Did you go to the info session as well or no?

Subject: Well we just had the required MBA orientation [this past weekend]. All day.

Interviewer: Right, but before going in, to get info . . .

Subject: No.

Interviewer: Okay. How did you go about finding any information?

Subject: Did you go online? Did you request brochures?

Interviewer: No, anything that I, really . . . it was all online.

Subject: So did you find everything you needed on a website?

Interviewer: It was a little difficult to navigate, honestly. Like the whole . . .

Subject: How so?

Interviewer: Because I had a lot of different, like specific, things that I had to find. Like the stuff about the tuition classification info. Those things were complicated and in several different places. Like the application. You know when you log in you fill out the [online] application [form].

Subject: Well, it was so rigid it wouldn’t allow for my specific circumstances. So it was just, you know...I had unique circumstances that you couldn’t qualify it in a drop-down. And I had, you know, I had to call them several times to ask them what do you want me to put here? What fits?

Interviewer: So the information seeking was fine, it was the actual navigation [of the grad school application]?

Subject: Just how well the process [of applying] was thought out. I think that there were a lot of . . . plus there’s [a lot of different sites], well think about it. There’s general USF. Then there’s USF Grad School, then MBA school, then College of Business. And each of them have their own
sections of the website and their own requirements. So you sort of have to do a full sweep of each section, especially during the application process because you don't want to miss stuff. You have to think, "well, I have to take care of this, that, and the other thing, so ..." Plus it is a big school, big website.

Interviewer: Yes, it's huge.

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: What was most important to you as you – you kind of told me it was a respected four-year institution, you wanted face-to-face, that you were, partially – I mean not partially – totally, at location.

Subject: It couldn't be a more perfect fit in reality. Because I wanted face-to-face and it has, like, the classes are night classes. And they have that whole semesters divided (referring to 8-week and 12-week classes). The whole thing. The way they have this planned out so that you can work around your work schedule. It's awesome. It's really thought out for working professionals, on like, how to get it. The only thing I am concerned about is the five-year thing. Because I need to make sure I get this done in five years. And I hope it isn't going to take that long but I am concerned. This first semester I am only taking seven credits and that is because of the financial thing.

Interviewer: Well, on a personal level, I have to finish in five years, too, and I am only taking two classes a semester max. And so I was concerned; I thought I would end up getting the degree at 50 [years old] and I will end up getting it at 48.

Subject: Oh, nice.

Interviewer: Once you get in it you realize there are some things that are really cool, like the one-week classes. You have to take vacation, take a week off of work, but you get three credits done.

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: I hear so much good stuff about the LEAN class. I wish I had taken it but I took the improv one.

Subject: I hear it is great.

Interviewer: Even though it will cost you a week of vacation, it will shave a year off.

Subject: I have way too much work vacation saved up because, not because I never take it but because I have been there for such a long time that I have like seven weeks of vacation right now (laughing).

Interviewer: Okay, you can take a week off for a class!
Subject: (unintelligible)

Interviewer: So out of all of these things, which was the most important to you? I heard place, the reputation, face-to-face, night classes, program design, and finance. Was there any one thing for you? Those are all things that I am hearing.

Subject: I don't know. You know, I didn't look at them that way. I just looked at the whole. It wasn't like I had a choice. I didn't put all these schools next to each other and say, "oooh, I wonder where I should go." It was sort of like, I am going to USF.

Interviewer: Did you even consider like a [University of] Phoenix?

Subject: Absolutely not. I would never. And not to sound pompous, but I hire people. And I don't believe in online education. I just don’t. As much.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, I didn’t ask them in order, but you have essentially answered all of these questions. How long do you think it will take for you to get a monetary return on your investment in this degree? How long do you think it will take before it has paid for itself?

Subject: (long pause) No idea. I just feel like, maybe . . . (long pause)

Interviewer: How long do you think it will be until you get promoted?

Subject: A year or two. Probably.

Interviewer: Well is there anything else you'd like to add?

Subject: Oh, no, I talked a lot!

Interviewer: But you know what? You made it easy for me. You essentially answered every question, I didn't have to ask. You went through and answered every one of them. So that’s it.

# # # #
Ish is a 28-year-old Singaporean male who has applied, been accepted, and paid the deposit to begin the MBA program at USF in the coming semester. He is not a United States citizen; he came to America a few years ago via an education Visa, coming to America from Singapore, where he was a student in USF’s program at the Center for American Education. Upon learning that the Ish was from Singapore, the interviewer noted that she had been to the CAE in Singapore twice; it was discovered that the subject had been a student there during one of the two visits. At the time of the interview, Ish had recently attended the new student orientation but had not yet begun MBA classes. While the interviewer was setting up the video recorder, Ish chatted informally about his thoughts on MBA students and the anticipated group projects that will be involved in the program (part of this conversation is captured and is included below, since it provides some insight on one of his highest-ranked factors, namely the caliber of students in the program).

Subject: Usually, MBA students, because of how hard it is to get in, you have to get the recommendations, have a good GMAT score and all that, I think most of them are quite driven. The only thing that I am concerned about is that most of them are working, and they have families, some of them that might make them go astray.

Interviewer: That means you have to do your work at night with them (subject implies agreement). I’ve taken four classes in the MBA program as all of my electives. They’ve been good [but they have] all had group projects. This semester I am taking my last one. It’s the brand class. I don’t know if you are taking that one.

Subject: Brand Management?

Interviewer: Uh-huh. I’m taking that. That will be my final class.

Subject: That’s in marketing, right?

Interviewer: Yes, but every MBA student has to take a certain number of marketing courses. But you’ll be – you’re starting in January?

Subject: I’m starting in January.

Interviewer: So you’ll be taking your foundation courses.

Subject: Yeah, I do. I think I do need . . . I am exempted from some foundation [courses] because I am a business student.

Interviewer: Oh.

Subject: There are some required courses, but foundational ones [are waived].
Interviewer and subject discuss the pronunciation of his name.

Interviewer: So, you studied business as an undergrad, then. Where did you get your degree?

Subject: USF.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Subject: I did marketing.

Interviewer: So I am taking Biswas for marketing. Have you had him yet?

Subject: Who?

Interviewer: For brand, this coming semester.

Subject: (not understanding reference to faculty member) No, I am actually doing MBA.

Interviewer: Did you take Biswas as an undergrad?

Subject: No.

Interviewer: So how long ago did you graduate?

Subject: Actually, I graduated last year, last spring.

Interviewer: So that would be spring 2011.

Subject: No, 2012.

Interviewer: Oh. So like, just this past May.

Subject: Great.

Interviewer: Okay. So, do you currently work?

Subject: No, I’m a full-time student.

Interviewer: Have you ever had a job or work experience?

Subject: Yes, I have four years of work experience. Two years as a firefighter and another two years running my own business back in Singapore.

Interviewer: The only place I have been that is out of the United States is Singapore. I went there twice.

Subject: Oh, really? For vacation?

Interviewer: I loved it there; I would go back in a minute. No, USF has a program in Singapore to get your USF degree in Singapore, and I went over there.

Subject: But you were there, really?

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Subject: I was there. I did my first year over there.

Interviewer: Really, with Mrs. Chan?

Subject: Yeah. Then after that I decided to come here because I wanted to change my major. Over there you can only get business administration [major]. And I wanted to do marketing. So I moved here. And it is also to get a breather from the hustle and bustle of the city. But I didn’t know you were there.

Interviewer: Yeah, I came twice. With Jackie Nelson. I probably have photos of – I went over and took photos for marketing and newsletter purposes.
Subject: Really.
Interviewer: Made a video with Mrs. Chan that they played at graduation. Did you know Erwin?
Subject: When were you there? 2010?
Subject: Probably 2010 and 2011, you probably saw me; we just didn't recognize each other.
Interviewer: There were only about ten students in the class?
Subject: Yeah.
Interviewer: Yeah. Okay. So you worked two years in Singapore and two years in a family business, or your own business?
Subject: Yeah, family business.
Interviewer: What kind of business did ya'll have?
Subject: We have a chain of restaurants in Singapore. We are doing pretty good. So this is the reason why – and before I left I actually handed over my duties and my responsibilities to my family and when I got here, I left behind everything.
Interviewer: Did you ever invite Dr. Stamps over for dinner?
Subject: Yeah. I did.
Interviewer: I have heard of you! She loves you. She …
Subject: (laughing)
Interviewer: You were her favorite student over there.
Subject: Oh, really?
Interviewer: Well, I wouldn’t know it from a name, but she told me stories where she went to a – one of her students his family owned a restaurant and she went to dinner with them. She loved you.
Subject: (laughing) I haven’t met her for so long I think I should when school starts.
Interviewer: She just retired.
Subject: She just retired?
Interviewer: So she is only on campus like one or two days a week.
Subject: Oh really? How do I get in touch with her?
Interviewer: Um, I will send you her contact info. Okay.
Subject: Great.
Interviewer: Everybody from USF loved going to Singapore. We were really disappointed that program didn’t take off more and Mrs. Chan is selling the CAE.
Subject: It’s the laws. The laws are getting tighter and honestly, to me, they did not do good marketing. Not enough marketing to draw the locals. They cannot depend just on international students.
Interviewer: I agree with you. Okay, so how long ago did you think about getting an MBA? When did you first start thinking about it?

Subject: Um, I started to think about doing an MBA when I was about to leave for the United States so 2011, fall.

Interviewer: Okay. And was there something that led you to start thinking about it or was there a particular reason you were thinking, “I might get an MBA?”

Subject: Yeah, I thought that I wanted to get an MBA because, looking around, everybody has a degree and an MBA would give me an edge, really, in terms of contacts. And also the quality of people. Pretty much their full – they have their careers, you know? A lot of experience in hand. I’ll be able to talk to the right people. As compared to undergrads, there is a mixture of kids and, like, working adults and, like you know, it is a massive mix. So you have to really make the right connections. And with an MBA I am hoping to do that.

Interviewer: Okay. So it was the quality of the peers in the classroom that was a big part of it?

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: So what do you think the long-term benefits of getting an MBA will be?

Subject: Opportunity.

Interviewer: Meaning?

Subject: Meaning, like I said before, the connections that I will make, the friends that I will be able to meet and from there, you never know what kind of opportunities I will get. Business deals. Access to different markets. Or, yeah, things like that.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you plan to return – are you from Singapore, are you an international student in Singapore?

Subject: I am from Singapore.

Interviewer: Do you plan to return to Singapore?

Subject: Yes, I plan to return to Singapore.

Interviewer: You plan to stay there?

Subject: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: So what did you think – for the MBA – would be some short-term benefits? You told me long-term.

Subject: Short-term?

Interviewer: Yes.

Subject: Hmmm. I guess it is the education, the educational value of it. Things like finance, marketing, accounting. Those kinds of things would be useful for business later on. A lot of the things you learn in the MBA program I do expect it, that I can apply it into my
business. Because I just recently finished undergrad I
know that there are things like marketing that I can
apply back to my business. So this is what I am hoping
[to gain] from MBA program as well, in the short-term.

Interviewer: Do you think there will be any headaches?
Subject: Headaches?
Interviewer: Yes.
Subject: Such as? Like?
Interviewer: Well, I don't know. Is there anything that you are not
looking forward to?
Subject: I was never really strong in math, so think I might
have problem with finance.
Interviewer: Yeah.
Subject: Yeah, but I did pretty well in finance before. It is just
that when you don't have the interest--
Interviewer: Did you have [USF finance professor] Besley?
Subject: Yeah (laughing). I did not have good experience with
him.
Interviewer: (laughing) I've heard students say that.
Subject: I did pretty well. Yeah, and I also don't see myself
doing finance in the future. Maybe the lack of interest
and also the usability of what I am going to learn is
probably the biggest obstacle I am going to face
moving on.
Interviewer: Okay.
(brief interruption as roommate returns early from soccer game)
Interviewer: So did you think about the MBA and then think about
where you would get it, or did you think about
continuing at USF and then--
Subject: I was, no, I wasn’t thinking of continuing at USF.
Interviewer: Okay.
Subject: When, initially, I went to look at the MBA, I thought
that after I graduated from my undergrad I was going
to go home, work for a few years, and after that I will
start thinking about doing my MBA. But, as I got closer
to my graduation, I realized that I was on a roll. I was
like, student living, student life, my mindset is that
kind of mindset and I don’t want to have to go back to
work and after that and -- you’ve been to Singapore,
you know how busy it is?
Interviewer: Yes.
Subject: And it is so difficult to get away from all that. It took
me a long time; it took me a whole year to just, you
know, disconnect myself from work to come here. And
I have a feeling that if I were to go home and to get my
MBA later on, it would take me very long to
disconnect. It would be very, very difficult because I will have more responsibilities than before. So I thought that maybe I should think about doing my MBA right after my undergrad. So that’s when I started preparing for it. I began studying, looking at schools …

Interviewer: So it fits with your lifestyle now?
Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: And so where did you think about going?
Subject: I was thinking about NU, the National University of Singapore, Singapore Management University, the University of Florida, USF, of course, and the University of Miami.

Interviewer: And so when did you take the GMAT? Before exploring programs? Had you decided on a university before you took the GMAT? Kind of, when did you …
Subject: Yeah, I kind of like decided that those are the universities that I want to attend. I started to do the GMAT right after graduation. Starting preparing for it. And right, right, a few months ago I just finished my GMAT and I enrolled for spring.

Interviewer: Great. And so how did you go about seeking information about the programs?
Subject: What I did was, I, well, I was doing my GMAT with Kaplan. And they gave me a kit with all this information about how to choose business schools. I also looked for online forums reviews to see which schools are best for me and how I could contribute to the program as well as contribute to my personal interests.

Interviewer: So were there, like, MBA forums, or did you just Google to see what kind of forums popped up?
Subject: Google is mainly for the reviews. Forums are mainly for students who are in there and they have personal, they have personal interests that they want to share with other people who are interested in joining them.

Interviewer: So what was important to you as you began to research them, as you were looking at what these students had to say, what was important to you?
Subject: Really the people who [are] in the program. Will I be able to connect with them? Will I be able to, you know, draw out experiences from them, and, yeah, just things like that. And how they teach. Academically, modules.

Interviewer: Program design?
Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: Kind of? Okay.
Subject: Yes.
Interviewer: *(stumbling over words)* Were you looking at program content or other factors? It sounds to me like you were looking at who were your peers going to be, would you fit in with them, the way the program was taught. Was there anything else you were considering?

Subject: Then length of time.

Interviewer: The duration, oh, okay.

Subject: Because I wanted to do it within a year, to finish up within a year. And most of the programs promised that. Sort of. Well, USF didn't promise that. I just assumed that I could finish. I didn't realize the schedule was a rolling schedule.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Subject: So I can't finish it within a year. One year, three months instead. It's not that bad.

Interviewer: Oh, that's not bad.

Subject: Yeah, but . . .

Interviewer: Make sure you take advantage of the one-week courses. They are so worth it.

Subject: One-week courses? They have one-week courses?

Interviewer: Yeah, every spring break . . .

Subject: Oh, for summer.

Interviewer: No, every spring break they offer a one-week course in Lean. It's 8-5 every day for an entire week. It consumes your life, but at the end of that week, you have three credits finished.

Subject: Really?

Interviewer: And the week before fall semester starts they have an improv class. It's managerial improv. Again, same thing, 40 hours. It's consuming, but then at the end of the week it's done.

Subject: Aghhh. Five days?

Interviewer: Five days.

Subject: Oh, my.

Interviewer: Monday through Friday, 8-5. If you could do [classes] in Singapore with the way the finance course was taught, you could do these classes.

Subject: Okay *(laughing).*

Interviewer: *(unintelligible)* Finance is another story.

Subject: Yeah, finance is another story.

Interviewer: So, duration of the program was also important to you. So out of all of those things, which [were] duration, experiences, your peers, teaching style, what was the one thing that was most important to you?

Subject: Peers.
Interviewer: Alright. So you told me which universities you considered. What made you decide on USF?

Subject: Mainly because, like I said before, the length of the program. The duration. And I wanted to finish up as soon as possible. The problem with UF, SMU – no, not SMU, UF in the U.S. and Miami is that they only start every fall. So that means that I would have to wait until the next fall to get in. And I was thinking, “What am I going to do for the next few months?” I mean, I could go back to Singapore and work for a little bit, but that means that I cannot commit to them [his employer]. And that would like, be a problem.

Interviewer: And you are here on a student Visa, I assume.

Subject: Yeah. So I would rather right away get to school, get to finish and then when I go back I am done, finished with school and I can commit 100 percent to my work. Because before [as an undergraduate in Singapore] I was working full-time, studying full-time and it was hectic, yeah.

Interviewer: I would imagine. So how did you go about finding information about all of these universities? Did you go online?

Subject: Their websites. And they have, like, information officers; I emailed them and I gave them a list of questions that I had.

Interviewer: Did you go to info sessions?

Subject: No. No reason.

Interviewer: Does that not appeal to you?

Subject: Well, the universities in Singapore [are] a bit far away. Yeah (chuckling).

Interviewer: UF, I don’t know why, but I didn’t want to travel all the way there and I don’t see why I should travel there when I can email them and get all the, they will give me all of the answers. So, I don’t think I need it.

Interviewer: It was just something unnecessary.

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: So did you seek word-of-mouth recommendations from your friends?

Subject: No. Honestly, I don’t have that many friends that have an MBA. I only have one at that time, so the only person I had to ask was my friend, but he had an MBA from [the University of] North Carolina. He gave me a lot of tips on how to get admitted to schools. Yeah, but in terms of types of schools, not really. He didn’t really give me any input.
Interviewer: Yeah (stumbling over words). The admissions process, how difficult was it? Was it easy for you to navigate?

Subject: Yeah, it was pretty easy. Different schools have different criteria but they list them very clearly. Things like number of essays [applicants] have to make, GMAT score, average GMAT score, those kinds of stats.

Interviewer: Would you say USF’s website is pretty clear and easy to navigate?

Subject: If rating out of five, I would say three and a half stars.

Interviewer: So that would be a C+/B-?

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. So what are your career aspirations long-term and short-term? The next three years, what do you want to do?

Subject: In next three years, what I am planning to do is I want to streamline everything in my company. Make it more organized, very clear. Everything more consistent. Basically lay the foundation to make it stronger so that later on – I am hoping that, either – this is long-term – that I either venture out into new markets for us because the Singapore market is very saturated. There is too many competition, labor laws are getting tighter and tighter. It is very difficult to grow over there. We can maintain, but it is very difficult to grow. So I can, by having a strong foundation and a strong brand, and, of course, good food, branch out into neighboring countries. Indonesia, Malaysia, and, I don't know, if we could go all the way to Australia that would be great. But that's too far ahead. So Malaysia, Indonesia, and then we branch out from there. The labor is pretty cheap, the food is pretty cheap, and it is easier to do business over there. So I hope to be able to do all of that in the next ten years.

Interviewer: This is your family's restaurant or is it your personal restaurant?

Subject: It is our family restaurant.

Interviewer: But you’ll be taking on, it sounds like a leadership role.

Subject: Yes, it is a leadership role. Every time I talk to my mom she is complaining, “I'm tired” and “when are you going to come back?”

Interviewer: (laughing)

Subject: Yeah, complaining. And they are actually getting ready to retire. They are like, you know, the things that they are doing is sort of like they are in retirement mode right now. So I have to go back as soon as possible. That’s why I keep emphasizing the length of time. This
small [amount] of time that I have and I have to finish this by this time.

Interviewer: Good. Well how long do you think it will take to see a monetary gain as a result of the investment you have made in the MBA in terms of both monetary and time investment.

Subject: Maybe three to five years.

Interviewer: Was financing – you really haven't mentioned finance at all. So you really weren't concerned with expense?

Subject: No.

Interviewer: No concern with expense?

Subject: No, well, not really because it is all being paid for by my family, that is why.

Interviewer: Okay. So you weren't...I think UM is considerably more than USF.

Subject: It is. I think UM is like my final choice. My first choice was actually SMU, Singapore Management University.

Interviewer: Why UF over USF?

Subject: They are ranked higher university.

Interviewer: Rankings matter?

Subject: Yeah. It gives me this thinking that the people that I am going to meet and be meeting is better quality.

Interviewer: So it helps measure the quality of the program or the quality of the people in the program?

Subject: The quality of the program and the quality of people. Because, honestly, I was not very impressed by USF's orientation.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Subject: When I found out that during the orientation they had to educate the people there on how to dress as a business person, how to behave like a business person, I didn't realize that they had to educate people that way. Because the people that I am going to be mixing with should know all of that, you know? That's why they come into the business program. These kinds of things are things that are common sense for people who are already working. [I was thinking] “You mean that have to educate people?” It gives me a bad impression. Like, I am thinking, “oh my gosh my peers don't know this?”

Interviewer: (laughing) okay.

Subject. Then I am like, ugh.

Interviewer: Well, let me ask you (stumbling over words). For instance, we have a woman who owns a ballet studio who was enrolled in the MBA program. She's never
done any business work at all. In terms of professional
dress she’s in dance attire all day. And then we have a
woman who runs a chain of beauty salons, and she is
in the program. So there are people who I think that
[the lesson] was targeted toward, but for people with a
background in business or an undergrad in business
like you said, how would you balance that? So that
someone with a background in theatre or
anthropology has the same background?

Subject: Still talking about the orientation, right? Why I was
concerned was that I did see some people wearing t-
shirts and, like, Bermudas. And it was clearly stated
business casual. And the thing about business is that
(unintelligible) you can get something like this and
when it was clearly indicated business casual, what do
they do.

Interviewer: It means slack and a nice golf shirt.

Subject: Yeah. Still a polo tee and slacks is better than
Bermudas and t-shirts and slippers. That’s not
business casual.

Interviewer: No, that’s casual.

Subject: Yeah, so that concerned me a lot. I would assume that
a lot of people that I will interact with they should at
least know all of this. Or they are not doing good
business.

Interviewer: Good point. Okay, I was just curious. I think that that
may be all of the questions that I have.
Woody is a single Caucasian male who is just beginning the MBA program at the University of South Florida. He had just bought his books and was attending his first classes on the same day as the interview. Woody recently changed jobs and moved to the Sarasota area to pursue a new career in the fast-casual restaurant industry.

Interviewer: I have twenty questions, largely related to graduate school, but first, where did you attend school for your undergrad?

Subject: I went to the University of Central Florida.

Interviewer: Okay. And how long ago did you graduate?

Subject: That would be four years ago.

Interviewer: So that would be 2009? Or ’08 with the year change?

Subject: ’08, in December.

Interviewer: And what did you study?

Subject: Economics.

Interviewer: Where is their economics? Is it in business or in the arts over there?

Subject: They’re in business.

Interviewer: At USF, it’s in both places. Kind of confusing.

Subject: Right.

Interviewer: Did you work while going to school? Have you worked since you graduated?

Subject: Yes. And yes.

Interviewer: Okay. Care to elaborate?

Subject: In school, I was a server during school and in summer I worked on fishing boats in Massachusetts. After I graduated, I got a job with Richard’s Foodporium, a chain of health food stores on the west coast of Florida. Grew that from 11 stores to 16 and then just decided that there wasn’t going to be enough opportunity there. I was already the general manager. And I needed, wanted more. So here I am, to get my MBA.

Interviewer: So do you still work for them?

Subject: I do not. I work as a consultant for a restaurant group called Eat Here.

Interviewer: I have not heard of that.

Subject: It’s – have you heard of the Beach Bistro on Anna Maria Island?

Interviewer: Ah-huh.
Subject: The same owner who owns Beach Bistro. We're starting a new chain of restaurants.

Interviewer: Didn't they just remodel the Beach Bistro?

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: I went in there while it was under construction. Just want to make sure it's the one that I am thinking of. Yeah, I've been there. Okay, so how long ago did you first start thinking about getting an MBA?

Subject: Um, I thought about it coming out of my undergrad but I really wanted to enter the workforce first. I had some great opportunities, three different opportunities leaving college.

Interviewer: In 2008?

Subject: In 2008. So I didn't think about it too hard (chuckles).

Interviewer: Given the recession at that time and you had three offers, yeah.

Subject: Yeah. And over, um, over the four years, it wasn't in the first three [because that is] where I thought, "Oh, this company is going to take me where I want to be."

Until the last year, things weren't moving progressively where I wanted to go.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: So I, um, about a year and a half now I've been thinking about it.

Interviewer: Okay. And was there a particular incident that led you to think about pursuing a degree?

Subject: (thoughtful pause) Umm...

Interviewer: Well, you said the company wasn’t where you thought it was going to be?

Subject: Well, I tried to start my own company after leaving Richard's, um, and it just – it didn’t really work out. So I started looking for jobs and things of that nature. And when I talked to a few headhunters for the positions I wanted, they, you know, they said "you should start thinking about getting an MBA, it would really help you." And then I consulted with friends and family and just decided, yeah. It's the right thing to do. And I can afford not to have a career for a year and a half; get it done and go from there.

Interviewer: Okay. And what did you think the long-term benefit would be of having an MBA?

Subject: Workplace marketability. You know, being able to be in larger companies, Fortune 500 companies. My – I've always liked smaller companies and working for a chain with 16 stores grossing $18 million was very good for me. I mean, I managed around 130 people.
But I do understand that there are more opportunities in larger firms and bigger organizations. Having my uncle, who was president of IBM Asia, president of IBM South America, on and on and on, and a lot of other family that work in large Fortune 500 companies as directors and such, it just seemed like, well, I can do that, too. Because it’s just not every day that you walk into being a general manager of a small business. It doesn’t – those opportunities just aren’t there like you could get in a big company, you could climb your way up.

Interviewer: Okay. And did you think about any short-term benefits?

Subject: Well, when I left Richard’s and started my own company – tried to start my own company – I had a purpose. I was going to this. And then I was like, “Nah, this isn’t right.” So I thought about starting the MBA in the spring. And I just started travelling for like three months, and enjoying myself. So the short-term benefit would be to stop “butterflying” around the world (interviewer laughs as subject makes butterfly motions with hands). To get back to having a purpose in life.

Interviewer: Okay. A butterfly...

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: And what – did you think there would be any headaches?

Subject: (pause) Um, you know, I look at my undergrad – at the time I thought it was difficult. I thought an economics degree was difficult to achieve. And then what I was able to achieve in four years in the workplace, working sometimes 80 – 100 hours a week, um, I’m not concerned with the workload. Um, I know there will be a need to study and a need to be focused and committed, but I’m not overly concerned.

Interviewer: Okay. And are you, um, looking at any sort of tuition reimbursement? Scholarships or anything? Are you paying for this out of your own pocket?

Subject: (pause) Um, I am going to seek financial aid. Hopefully mostly pay for it out of my own pocket. Depending on how much I can – this new restaurant group that I am working for is relatively new and the job’s new – I have only been there for a little less than a month, so I am not sure where that is going to pan out or when I can open new stores for them or whatever. Um, hopefully it will work out and I will have a decent
wage and I’ll be able to pay for it on my own. That’s my plan.

Interviewer: I am writing a note to myself to remind me that after this interview that I want to tell you something. Okay, so how long ago did you think about it before you actually began to research programs? So you’ve been toying with this idea back in your undergrad but you weren’t researching programs.

Subject: No. Not at all. I would study for the GMAT by helping friends who were taking the GMAT. I am pretty good at math and I could help them with things for the GMAT. So I’m like, “oh, I can take this test.” And I was thinking about just taking it. But I never did. I never really thought about it that hard because I really did want to be in the workplace. I worked. You know, the two years prior to graduating is the time I spent to get those three jobs lined up and to finally make a decision where I was going to go.

Interviewer: Okay. So how long – so did – so about a year and a half ago is when you said you seriously started to think about it, so then how long ago was it that you really started to research the program?

Subject: Okay. So it had to be a couple of weeks before the deadline is when I started looking in the state of Florida. I really wanted to come to USF. I love where I live in Sarasota and I wanted to find a program where I could live in Sarasota. At least for the next year and a half. I know that after getting an MBA my opportunities may be elsewhere but while I am in school I would like to live where I live now. So two weeks before and then they let me take my GMAT because I was leaving the country – I am a consultant for a company that rents cruise ships – so I was out on a cruise for two weeks and I told them I don’t know how much I am going to be able to study, so I would like to take like a week when I get home and study for the GMAT and then take it, so they gave me until the 15th of whatever month that was, October, November. November 15.

Interviewer: Okay, then so September-ish is when you began to look at it?

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, so did you think about it as deciding on the MBA and then looking a university, or choosing a university and then choosing between an MBA or an MS in Entrepreneurship, and then the degrees?
I wanted an MBA.

Okay. So the program first? And what other universities did you consider?

Well, with quick research learning that all the deadlines were coming up, not many schools accepted MBA students in the spring. It was here and [Florida Atlantic University] that accepted people in the spring. UCF didn’t. UF didn’t.

So you considered UCF, and UF and FAU but because the others deadlines didn’t work for you, you knocked them out [of consideration]?

Right.

Were you looking anywhere else?

Nope.

Basically just the larger schools in the state of Florida?

Right.

How did you go about seeking info on the programs?

I called. I spoke to one of the ladies downstairs, Karen.

A little bit of research online. They [USF’s MBA office] were familiar with the companies that I have worked for in the past and were excited to get my résumé and my application. I figured all I have to do is get a half-way decent test score on the GMAT.

And you did not take the GMAT first, you took it after you had applied.

Yes.

So when you began to research the programs, what I really want to know is what factors were important to you. I am hearing you say location, deadline, what else did you look at?

Um, (pause) obviously I didn’t want like an online, unaccredited MBA program, which, there’s like a dime-a-dozen of those. I wanted a legitimate school. And then there was location. I mean, I live on the beach in Siesta Key and I kind of want to stay there as long as I can.

So would you say out of all of these, location was the most important?

Yeah.

Okay. Once – oh, you already answered that one. Never mind. Did you attend the in-person info session before you applied?

No.

Did you seek word-of-mouth reviews from friends?

No.
Interviewer: Did you ask coworkers about USF’s MBA?

Subject: No.

Interviewer: So I guess you have already answered this one, what factors were important to you as you chose the university – not just the program, but the university. I guess you’ve already mentioned those again, the location being primary.

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: What was the one thing that was most important to you all along?

Subject: (long pause)

Interviewer: Reputation of the university? The education, the location?

Subject: Certainly the education is important. Um, Mainly my goal is to be more marketable in the year ahead.

Interviewer: So the personal development, the marketability.

Subject: Right.

Interviewer: And so – you’ve actually already kind of answered this one, too – what are your career aspirations, short- and long-term?

Subject: Um, short-term, I’m enjoying the restaurant business. Being in retail for four years, I wasn’t fond of retail grocery. I enjoy the restaurant business. I do want to own my own restaurant. Chain. Or a few. Um (pause).

Interviewer: And then long-term, earlier you were talking about meeting the owner of the Beach Bistro and getting involved in these restaurants was kind of a blessing in disguise. Things may go well from here, but it’s still really too early to tell.

Subject: That could be short- and long-term. Short-term, this meeting the owner of the Beach Bistro and getting involved in these restaurants was kind of a blessing in disguise. Things may go well from here, but it’s still really too early to tell.

Interviewer: And then long-term, earlier you were talking about getting into a for-profit, Fortune 500 [firm] kind of moving up the ladder. Is that still something?

Subject: That’s not a goal.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: That’s not a goal. That’s a, maybe a necessity to get where I need to go or it’s something that helps me build a résumé for the future. Uh, if I, if I could stick myself in another company with 150 employees and decent sales, I’d be fine. But if I can’t, I could go out, through my contacts, and my networking ability and find a job at a larger corporation.

Interviewer: And how long do you believe it will be before it will take for you to see a return on your investment of either time or money when it comes to the MBA. How long will it take for you to say, “This was worth it?”
Subject: I think right after I graduate. I think one year and four months.

Interviewer: (puzzled chuckle) Okay.

Subject: I mean, obviously it is going to be a busy year and four months but, you know, my plan – as I graduated with my undergrad was to have a job when I graduate. And I had that lined up. I am sure I am going to have an idea where my future is going to go before I graduate and go travel again. That [the traveling] was only a blip this year that after four years of a lot, a lot, a lot of work, I decided to buzz out and take off.

Interviewer: And if you can do it, yay for you!

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Um, I didn’t hear you mention cost of the program or duration of the program at all. Were these not primary factors for you?

Subject: No. I’d like to get it done as short as possible.

Interviewer: But it wasn’t what made you choose USF over anywhere else.

Subject: I (pause) I had a cousin that just graduated with a master’s in accounting at University of Tampa. And I thought – I thought maybe that would be – I looked a little bit at University of Tampa – but she really wasn’t very happy with her degree program from there. I basically thought it was overpriced for what it was. Not a lot of connections. Not a lot of resources from a smaller university. She thought maybe she made the wrong decision, that she should’ve come here since she lived in Tampa. Um, so when she kind of said that, I went, “okay, it’s a lot of money, obviously, for a private university.” You know, the money is, for what it is going to, you know, give me for the rest of my life, is kind of a drop in the bucket. It’s – no, I can’t think about the money.

Interviewer: Okay, so you are aware of it [cost] but it isn’t a driving force in choosing a university?

Subject: (shaking head no emphatically) No.

Interviewer: Same with duration?

Subject: No (meaning in agreement, as with above).

Interviewer: You mentioned networking opportunities was something you considered. It wasn’t a primary factor, but it was important to you, or no?

Subject: Yeah. Absolutely.

Interviewer: I think that is everything I have. And it took less than half an hour!

Subject: Fair enough.
Interviewer: Anything you want to add? Have you been to orientation?

Subject: Yeah, orientation was fun, sure (sarcastic grin).

Interviewer: (laughing) you had it last Saturday?

Subject: No, it was before Christmas.

Interviewer: Oh, Saturday they had one for the stragglers.
Angie is an Asian female who is just beginning the MBA program at the University of South Florida. She was attending her first class on the same day as the interview. She is a married mother with several years of work experience but she has not recently worked (she has stayed at home for five years to raise her son). She is involved with a local organization for Indian families as she is from India (and still has most of her extended family there). She is classified as an international student at USF but she is a resident of Tampa.

Interviewer: So you are looking at an MBA?
Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: And have you applied and been accepted?
Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: Have you started classes already? You started this week?
Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: And where did you go for your undergraduate degree?
Subject: I did it in India.

Interviewer: Okay. What was the name of the school?
Subject: It’s Mahatma Ghandi University.

Interviewer: And what did you study?
Subject: I studied engineering. A bachelor’s in engineering.

Interviewer: How long ago was that?
Subject: It was in 2002.

Interviewer: And what did you do after that? Did you work?
Subject: I was a software engineer for about five years.

Interviewer: In India, or here?
Subject: In India. Then I worked for the client over here for about six months.

Interviewer: Okay. And so you have five years of work experience total or did you work while going to school.
Subject: No, not while going to studies. After studies, I worked for five years.

Interviewer: And how long ago did you start thinking about getting an MBA?
Subject: From the time I finished engineering (chuckles).

Interviewer: Was there a particular incident? What led you to say, “I think I want to do this?”
Subject: I can’t say there was a particular incident, but after shifting to the U.S., I took a break from my career for
about five years. Now, I am finding it kind of difficult to find a job. So that was it.

Interviewer: So you worked for five years and you have been off for five years?

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: Did you have kids or were you raising a family?

Subject: Yes, that is it.

Interviewer: That means you must have one in that five, six, seven year old range?

Subject: Yes, he’s four now. I never worked after I married.

Interviewer: The four and five and six year old age range are just my absolute favorite ages.

Subject: (laughing and nodding in agreement) Yeah.

Interviewer: They are such interesting little people then. And, of course, they are done with diapers. (Laughing).

Subject: Yes, they are! That’s the best part!

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewer: So, what made you decide to come to the United States?

Subject: To the United States? Because my husband was basically working here.

Interviewer: What made you think about USF for a master’s degree?

Subject: Because the MBA is pretty good. It’s rated high at USF. That’s one reason. And second reason, obviously, because I can’t stay away from my family right now. So my only real option is USF because the other universities [that I would consider] are far. And the third is, like if I go to other private universities, the fees/price, that’s a major difference.

Interviewer: Oh?

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, so, well – I’m going to jump ahead. What other universities did you consider? Was USF really the only one you considered?

Subject: No, I considered Southern Uni – Florida Southern University (likely meant Florida Southern College). University of Central Florida, too, in Orlando, yeah.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. I went to Florida Southern for my undergrad my first two years.

Subject: It’s a nice college, right?

Interviewer: It was. It was just expensive because it is private.

Subject: (laughing) yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, so when you thought about the MBA, what did you think the long-term benefit would be?

Subject: To start my own business. Because my husband is in business field. So I want to do something to start
something of my own, too. So if I have, so to get into
that, so I have to hold [know in] full how to run a
business.

Interviewer: Okay. And do you think there are any short-term
benefits that come with getting an MBA?

Subject: Short-term? Like after the studies, or during the
studies?

Interviewer: Maybe during or immediately after...

Subject: Immediately after, of course, a job, because that’s one
thing that I need. And second thing, it’s like; right now
I am not doing nothing at all so it’s like efficient use of,
effective use of time.

Interviewer: Okay. And do you think there will be any headaches or
hassles involved with getting an MBA?

Subject: (laughing) yes.

Interviewer: (also laughing) Of course!

Subject: Yes, yes, of course.

Interviewer: What might those be?

Subject: Because my family is kind of difficult to manage. The
kid–and the timing, you know – it’s not regular
daytime studies that we are doing most of the classes
are night time. It’s like the family to manage. Kind of
difficult. We don’t have any family here. All of our
family is in India. My family is in India. So it is kind of
going to be difficult to manage the kid, the timings for
him.

Interviewer: Okay, the juggling?

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, so how long did you actually think about getting
an MBA before you started researching programs?

Subject: About six months. I started looking for the programs,
maybe, in June.

Interviewer: So, did you look at the programs first, and then the
university, or did you think USF and then decide the
program, decide which program to pursue?

Subject: I decided first the program.

Interviewer: So you had decided on the MBA over the M.S.
program?

Subject: No, I applied for an MS, too. An MS in electrical
engineering. So, I was like either get a master’s degree
in engin – because I already did engineering, electrical
engineering, so (unintelligible). I wanted to shift from
software engineering field, basically. So that was one
of the main things for me. But then I applied for [an MS
in] electrical engineering then I looked at the job
scenario in Tampa. And I came to know that there are
not many companies which are doing electric engineering or engineerings works, and, you know, other than the lower range works you don’t get into, there are not very many very big companies here. If you get into engineering again you get end up being in software and I didn’t want to do that, so...

Interviewer: Okay, So how did you go about seeking information on the programs and the universities?

Subject: I contacted them first. Um, and I have many friends who have done an MBA from here. Many people. I know about four or five of them. So basically most of my contacts have been through them. Like, I went to them to ask, like, how this is how it works out; most of the info I got is through them.

Interviewer: Okay. And did you visit the websites and so on?

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: (stumbling over words) Did you go to an information session?

Subject: No, no information session.

Interviewer: Okay. And you don’t work, so you didn’t ask co-workers. Umm, when did you take the GMAT? Was it before you even got started on exploring the programs or after you had decided where you want to go?

Subject: After what I decided. After I contacted here, at the graduate studies. After I inquired with them what the – you know I did GRE actually I didn’t do GMAT. So I did GRE and I asked, I inquired with them how much the score should be, and after that.

Interviewer: Okay. So, by the time you have took the test, if someone was to try to persuade you to go to a different university, by the time you’ve taken the test you have already decided where you are going?

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: And, so when looking at the reasons that you’ve said you were thinking an MBA. I’ve heard you say that you were looking at the ratings of the school or reputation (subject is making affirmative ah-huh sounds during this portion), location, cost, changing your industry, and finding a job (subject laughs yes!) and possibly owning your own business.

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: Which one of those would you say is the most important to you?

Subject: Right now, most important would be my immediate goal, which is to get a job.
Interviewer: Okay, and then after that? What would – as you were thinking about the decision whether to do this or not, what was maybe the second most important thing?

Subject: To go higher in the ladder. Because I was already a senior software engineer. So I want to go into management, so engineering was not an option for me.

Interviewer: Okay, great (brief pause). And, oops, I already got that one (referencing a question on the form). I jumped ahead so I am having to take a look and see…actually, you’ve already answered that one, too. The ratings really mattered to you, you said.

Subject: Yes, yes they did.

Interviewer: But you investigated those ratings largely through word of mouth?

Subject: Yes, and also the site, the website. And I did contact a number of universities just to, you know, collect what they offer and I did search on all those business journals, business magazines, and all those sites to see, like, you know…

Interviewer: So you went to see, like BusinessWeek’s rankings?

Subject: Ah-huh. Yes.

Interviewer: And U.S. News rankings and all that kind of stuff?

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: And, so your career aspirations, short-term, are to get a job?

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: And a job that is higher than you were? Is that what I am hearing you say?

Subject: Yes, and also a shift in the field from engineering. I am basically going to select an elective like healthcare. So a shift in the field from, you know, software industry to healthcare provision, basically.

Interviewer: And long-term, what do you want to do? Five, ten years from now?

Subject: I want to own my own business.

Interviewer: You want to own your own?

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: And do you have any idea what kind?

Subject: (laughing) I already have established everything. Like textile industry. Something like taking some good brands from here and as we have big exports in India and here, something from... Normally what people do is take from India and invest it here, right now I am thinking like India is a good market, a developing market, so I am thinking like good brands from here and, you know, doing something there.
Interviewer: Cool. So in retail, or more on wholesale side?

Subject: Retail.

Interviewer: India is an emerging market, that’s for sure.

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: Perfect. So how long do you think it will be, it will take you, how (*stumbling over words*). Back up. How long do you believe it will take for you to see a return on your [MBA] investment, both in terms of time and money? How long will it take for you to say, “This was worth it”?

Subject: Um, I would say six months.

Interviewer: Really?

Subject: About six months to one year I should be…I will know like more tied, like, it’s hard to say (*unintelligible*). As soon as we finish the studies we’ll know, like, what job we’ll get when doing an MBA from here. If I do good, if I do my homework good, then yeah, I think I can line up a good job.

Interviewer: Great. So that would be one of the biggest ways you would measure your success, is that you have a job?

Subject: A job in the desired field. You know, in the desired area.

Interviewer: Well, all along what was the one thing that was most important to you as you decided which university to attend?

Subject: Family. Because I don’t have any option to leave them. If I go, you know, I couldn’t consider any other university. Even if I get a call from Harvard, I can’t go. It’s not that I will get that, it’s just that even if…

Interviewer: Right.

Subject: I don’t have an option to leave, because my son is too young. I can’t just leave. My husband is kind of busy with his work. And we don’t have any family here. So I just can’t leave here and go.

Interviewer: And I heard you [say] cost was important to you, but it wasn’t one of the primary factors.

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: Are you depending on any sort of scholarship or tuition reimbursement or anything like that?

Subject: With my current international student status I am not eligible to apply for any financial aid. But scholarships, I am planning to apply for one or two of them, yes.
Chase is a married Caucasian male with one child (who is six years old). He works full time in the insurance industry and he is in his first semester of MBA classes.

Interviewer: So, we'll start first with the really hard ones. Where did you attend school for your undergraduate degree and what did you study?

Subject: I went to the University of South Florida St. Petersburg campus. I was an accounting major.

Interviewer: How long ago did you graduate?

Subject: '07. '06, actually, December '06.

Interviewer: And did you work while going to school?

Subject: I did. I did. I worked part-time. Not in the field, but I did work.

Interviewer: Have you worked in the field since you graduated?

Subject: I have.

Interviewer: How many years and what do you do?

Subject: About six years. I'm an accountant.

Interviewer: What firm do you work for?

Subject: So, right now I work for a company called Cunningham Lindsay. They, um, we are in the insurance industry, so what we do is loss adjustment on a global scale. We operate in about 44 countries. I'm not sure how familiar you are with loss adjusting, but…

Interviewer: Not very. But I am assuming it is pretty self-explanatory. Adjusting the balance sheets for loss (chuckling).

Subject: So in the insurance industry you have underwriters. And you have a house, right? You have homeowners insurance whatever, so, um, generally somebody like State Farm or, you know, Travelers, somebody like that. So let's say your kitchen catches on fire and you call State Farm and they send someone out to look at your kitchen. That person that comes out is a loss adjuster. So it's not always, but oftentimes, it is a third-party that's hired by the underwriters. So the insurance, the actual insurance company, who is basically holding all the risk, they are underwriting your policy, right? So they would take a loss on the damage to your kitchen. The third party – it's not always a third party, but oftentimes is – this loss…
adjuser comes in. They actually make their money when the transaction happens. So it's an inverse relationship from a revenue standpoint. And, you know, when there is a hurricane that comes through or anything like that, the underwriter, or the insurance company, takes huge losses but that's when we make money. It's putting, basically, putting people who have, you know, gone through the cataclysmic events, you know, back on their feet.

Interviewer: Okay. And you’re not, you’re not a loss adjuster; you’re an accountant, right?

Subject: I'm, yeah, I am in the finance and accounting department.

Interviewer: Okay. So, how long ago did you start – first start – thinking about getting an MBA?

Subject: Um. It was probably always on my radar. As soon as I went to college for an accountant. My first goal was to get my CPA license. So that was first. That, um, I was licensed in January of 2011. So, after my undergrad I had to do additional coursework to satisfy the educational requirements for the CPA. So I got that out of the way and then I took a break because I started my family and stuff. It was always, it was always, I always knew that I would go back and get my MBA.

Interviewer: So do you have a MAcc [Masters of Accountancy] degree?

Subject: I don’t. I just did additional coursework.

Interviewer: To satisfy the require –

Subject: I have enough credits, to, um; I didn’t need enough to, you know, warrant getting a master's degree at the time. So I just did three or four classes. That’s all I needed to sit for the CPA [exam].

Interviewer: So, at this point, why are you thinking about an MBA versus a MAcc?

Subject: Because I would like to be a controller. There’s two, there’s two reasons, basically. So, one, my current career trajectory; I have my eyes on being the controller of an organization at some point, so to get to that point, you know, if I am sitting in a room interviewing for the same position with someone else who has an MBA, then chances are I might lose out, all other things being equal. Okay?

Interviewer: Right. Okay. So, was there a particular incident that led you to think more about it more recently?

Subject: (pause)

Interviewer: Kind of, what sparked where you are now?
It’s just a good point in my career. So, um, so about three years ago I – let me back up a little bit. When I got my undergraduate degree I went to work for OSI Restaurant Partners. I was there for about three years. Um, at that point, I moved on to where I am now, Cunningham Lindsay. So as soon as I hit, you know, hit the ground at Cunningham Lindsay, it was non-stop go. So it is lots of change, lots of –

How many years there?

Three and half, almost four. Constant change, been real busy. Lots of experience and everything, so I wanted to get my MBA but I hadn’t had time. And now, things have slowed down to a point to where it is just a natural point in my career to do this.

And you are in your first semester of classes, right?

Yes.

So when you started thinking about the MBA, what did you think the long-term benefit would be?

So a long-term benefit, obviously, positions me in the workplace, right, for a higher level management role as a controller. On the other hand, I also would, what really attracts me about the, um, the program here, is the entrepreneurship program. So, if, you know, every once in a while I have an idea – “that’s a great idea, you know, I don’t know what to do with it” – you know, and so it’s kind of, I want, I want to have that kind of foundational knowledge or whatever so that I can branch out and have, you know, have a side business or develop it into something more if that opportunity comes along.

And did you think there might be any short-term benefits?

Um, not really. I mean, short-term meaning what?

One, six, twelve months?

One to three years?

Um, I am a senior corporate accountant right now. I have a staff of three reporting to me. The next logical step in my career trajectory would be accounting manager, so this would, this would help with that.

Okay. And what about any headaches? Do you think there will be any headaches associated with this degree?

Just hard work. I don’t know if I would call it a headache or not. Possibly because of time and other resources.
Interviewer: Yep, you’ll use all of those resources. So how long did you think about getting the degree before you actually began to research programs?

Subject: (pause) Uh, well, like I said, when I was in my undergrad, I knew that eventually I was going to get an MBA. So probably in, um, maybe around the beginning of this last year is when I started sensing that, you know, it is probably a good time to start looking, and I started investigating several different programs. So probably about a year ago, I guess.

Interviewer: Okay. So, for you, it sounds like you had already decided on the degree program before you decided on the university.

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: And what, um, well, before I get to that one – did you take the GMAT before exploring programs, once you knew where you were going?

Subject: Um, after.

Interviewer: After you knew where you were going?

Subject: Yeah, pretty much.

Interviewer: Okay. So, what other universities did you consider?

Subject: Um, there was Auburn, Penn State, University of Florida – primarily because of their online programs. Um, I liked them for their name recognition. And the fact that I could do them online. Ultimately, I decided against it. I didn’t look at any other schools in the area, though. I don’t, I really don’t consider University of Tampa and USF on the same level. That’s just personal opinion.

Interviewer: Okay. So how did you go about seeking information on the programs?

Subject: Online.

Interviewer: Did you go to any info sessions?

Subject: No, I found everything I needed online at USF’s websites.

Interviewer: Did you seek any word-of-mouth reputation, reputational kind of reviews from friends? Co-workers?

Subject: No. Not really. I have a friend who went through the MBA program here and he had good things to say about it. You know, having gotten my undergrad at USF, I am comfortable with the quality.

Interviewer: And what about co-workers or bosses or anyone like that? Did you ask any of them?

Subject: For their opinion? On where to go? No.
Interviewer: What factors were important to you as you began to
research the programs? For instance, were you
looking at program content? Or were there other
factors?

Subject: A couple of different things. First of all, the program
content. The entrepreneurship program is kind of
unique. That was a big plus in my mind. The cost
wasn’t, it really wasn’t that much of a deciding factor.
The cost. The network of people was more important
to me. That was ultimately why I decided not to get an
online degree from Florida or Auburn, Penn State, or
something like that, because, yeah, it has name
recognition, but really what you pay for in a master’s
program is the people that you meet. Yeah, at least,
that’s where I would put my value. The only way I was
going to, you know, take advantage of that was to go to
a local university.

Interviewer: Okay. What – how – let me go back here. Once you
decided on the degree – you already told me the
universities you considered – was there anything
about those universities that was really a factor for
you? You mentioned reputation or name. Was there
anything else? Was size, faculty, anything else?

Subject: No, literally, it was for the name. There was nothing
better – from what I have found – there was nothing
better about those programs. You know, when I
compared them to USF’s MBA program.

Interviewer: But you would not put USF and Penn State and Auburn
and the University of Florida all in the same league?

Or would you?

Subject: I don’t know why not.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: The only, the only difference is the name recognition,
really. Right? Because everybody all over the country
knows Penn State and the University of Florida. But
not, you know, not everybody knows USF. But that’s
okay. You know, working in central Florida basically
everyone knows where USF is and, eventually, if I
leave, if I am in Boston or Chicago, or, you know, some
other big city or whatever, what’s going to matter
more? First of all, they are going to want to know that
it is a reputable college, that it’s an accredited college
so it is obviously a reputable university. But more,
more important than that is my work performance. My
work history. The last several years. Way more
important in any kind of hiring decision than where I went to school.

Interviewer: Alright. You’re right. So, of all the things that you have mentioned – I am going to list a whole bunch of them here – the network of people, you know, the caliber of people in the classroom; career trajectory and your position in the workplace; the entrepreneurship option; online options versus face-to-face; the name or reputation of the university; program content; and cost. All of these, it sounds like, were factors that you were considering.

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: What was the ONE most important out of all of them?

Subject: It was the network of people.

Interviewer: Okay. Jumping here…are you on any sort of tuition assistance program, employer tuition assistance?

Subject: Yeah, I am.

Interviewer: Okay. Because I am pleasantly surprised that cost is not – that has not been number one for everybody. It hasn’t been.

Subject: No, not really (unintelligible) but, um, it’s hard for me to say it was the network of people because I haven’t found an entrepreneurship track at any other schools. So that was very attractive to me. That’s a close second, if not first. It’s hard. If it’s not one it is the other.

Interviewer: Make sure you get in Dr. Fountain’s class for something.

Subject: Dr. Fountain?

Interviewer: He’s the guy in charge of all of the entrepreneurship programs.

Subject: I have Professor Lux for my next class that starts on the [February] 4th.

Interviewer: So, um, I jumped around so I am looking back to see if I missed any questions. You didn’t go to any info sessions for any universities?

Subject: No, I didn’t. Yeah, I got some information from the University of Florida via mail but that was all.

Interviewer: So what was – my question is what are your career aspirations short-term and long-term. Long-term, you have really already told me. You told me to be controller of a company.

Subject: Right.

Interviewer: What are your short-term career goals?

Subject: Short-term career goals would be making accounting manager. So, yeah, I’d like to manage managers. Even
now, I have a staff and in some organizations it would
be called an accounting manager anyway. Um, but
what I really want is that next step in, you know, in
being able to, um, manage or lead other managers.

Interviewer: How long do you believe it will take for you to see a
monetary gain as a result of earning this degree.

Subject: Well, you know, it's hard. It's hard to quantify, right?
Because I wouldn't know if I get a promotion unless
they tell me, "it is because of the MBA degree," then I
would not know. Okay, so, I anticipate getting a
promotion within the next year. So, I won't have my
degree by then (chuckles). So I anticipate that --

Interviewer: Would a degree open doors at work for you for a
promotion?

Subject: Of course it would. In, um, two or three years.

Interviewer: Let me ask this a different way then. How long do you
believe it will take for you to say this degree was
worth it?

Subject: Um, I would say three to five years.

Interviewer: You were a very fast interview! You hit all of my
questions. Do you have anything you want to add?
Anything I didn’t ask you, kind of as you thought about
the MBA?

Subject: Um, can you, can you kind of tell me again what the
interview is for?

Interviewer: Um, my – I am going for the master's degree in
strategic communications and so my research
question is “what factors do prospective MBA students
consider when deciding whether or not to go for the
degree and then, once they have made that decision,
which university to attend.

Subject: Sure.

Interviewer: And the reason I want to know this is so that I can
write effective messages.

Subject: Sure.

Interviewer: That do that. For instance, the past five, six ads that I
have put out about our MBA program have all talked
about the quality of our faculty. And how they are
awesome. And that is almost never been even on the
list of what students say. So I am lauding the wrong
thing. I need to talk about our reputation more. I need
to talk about more of the people in the classroom. This
[project] is going to help me better target our
audience. So – the only way to know what people are
thinking about when they are just starting an MBA is
to ask them.
Yeah, that's interesting. I remember coming across, um, I forget the actual ranking, but the ranking of the school on an ad on a national, public school basis. And the MBA program itself. I think it is ranked, so it was, it was, you know, well ranked. In the top 50 of something like

Yeah, I think we are number 34 or something like that. So, Florida has got us beat but, um, Florida is also twice as old as we are.

It is always about the football programs. Has nothing to do with academics or anything.

(laughing).
Interview Date: January 31, 2013
Interview Location: USF College of Business
Interview Subject: Fred, 34 year old male, Incoming #7
Interview Duration: 20 minutes

Fred is a single Caucasian male with no children. He is works full time in the non-profit industry and he is in his first official semester of MBA classes (he took a few classes the semester prior but only recently was formally accepted into the program, which explains how he was on the list of first semester students). Prior to the interview, he noticed that the interviewer had a plaque from Tampa Connection in her office; it was discovered that both of them had been through a leadership development program and had acquaintances in common.

1 Interviewer: So, the easy questions are at the beginning. Where did you go to school for your undergrad degree?
2 Subject: USF.
3 Interviewer: Okay. And how long ago did you graduate?
4 Subject: I graduated in, it’s actually, technically I think it is 2003 but I completed my graduation requirements in 2001.
5 Interviewer: Okay. And what did you study as an undergrad?
6 Subject: Communication.
7 Interviewer: Not mass comm, just communication?
8 Subject: Correct.
9 Interviewer: Did you work while you went to school?
10 Subject: Yeah, I did.
11 Interviewer: In your field or –
12 Subject: No.
13 Interviewer: I was a waitress, so –
14 Subject: I was the same thing, pretty much.
15 Interviewer: Have you worked since you graduated?
16 Subject: Yep.
17 Interviewer: What do you do? What kind of jobs have you done?
18 Subject: My career has primarily been involved with – it started with consulting for non-profits and then got into ad sales. And I was in ad sales for probably eight, nine years.
19 Interviewer: What kind of sales? TV, radio?
20 Subject: It was all sorts of business. Print, online, search engine marketing things, television. For broadcast television I worked for Newschannel 8 and the Tampa Tribune here. So pretty much all media.
21 (Interview interrupted by cell phone call)
22 (Interviewer answers the call briefly)
Interviewer: Okay, so you worked for WFLA and did ad sales and all of that. Is that what you do now? What do you do now?

Subject: No, I left there in December of last year. Started working for an ad agency based out of New York and went overseas, opened their first international office in Dubai and then left there in June of this year. And then started school in August. Full time.

Interviewer: Was there a particular incident that led you think about getting an MBA?

Subject: Um, good question. Um, actually my experience in Dubai was – I thought about an MBA for years, actually. But I just kind of stayed away from it because it is tough to do when you are working full-time. The opportunity cost of stopping making money is tough to swallow. But, um, it was while I was in Dubai, I just learned that there is a lot of stuff that I don’t know about in business. And there are a lot of things that I wanted to know. And coming back and not being employed made it a good, an easy transition for me to come to school full-time.

Interviewer: Okay. How long ago was it that you first started thinking about it? Was it when – you said June – you stopped working for that ad agency?

Subject: Um, I mean, yes and no. I initially started thinking about it immediately after I was done with my first two years of work after I graduated. So I thought about it, but I just didn’t consider it for another eight years. Does that make sense?

Interviewer: Yeah. And you said largely because of the opportunity cost, is that correct?

Subject: Yep.

Interviewer: Was the – what did you think the long-term and short-term benefits of getting an MBA would be?

Subject: Um, the short-term benefits would be (long pause) probably what everyone else would say. It’s a competitive advantage over people who don’t have a master’s degree of some sort. And there are still a large amount of those people out there. So any competitive advantage is going to get you the initial interview and hopefully will help. So that’s short-term, but I also think that would be long-term. Um, (long pause) probably another short-term benefit is that it is kind of like pushing the “reset button on the Nintendo” on life a little bit. You know, I’m 34, I am not 22, I’m not 27, I’m 34 and it’s rare that someone who has had
a career for 10 years can stop what they are doing and go back to school.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: So, that’s nice and it’s, um, it is considered still reputable to the business world to go back to school full-time. It’s not as if I’m couch-surfing and playing video games all – you know what I mean?

Interviewer: M-hmm.

Subject: So by having that gap in my résumé, it may actually be a help instead of a hindrance, in my opinion. Only time will tell.

Interviewer: So, kind of looking at that reset button as doing it while gaining a tool that is going to enhance your résumé, getting something?

Subject: Yeah, and also, I guess when I say – what you said is accurate – but it is more of a reset button on life. I get to, kind of, recalibrate my career.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Subject: It’s tough to do that midstream.

Interviewer: Right. And, actually, of the people I have talked to, quite a few people have used this as an opportunity change careers or redirect or fine-tune their careers. What about the long-term benefits?

Subject: Um, I would say the last stuff that I talked about are more long-term as well. But, um, (pause) long-term benefits, I would say confidence. Confidence and decision-making skills. Being grounded in [a] sound understanding of business fundamentals.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: Of course, that’s the hope, you know. But I am already seeing it.

Interviewer: Are you?

Subject: I am already seeing it, yeah.

Interviewer: And you are in your first semester of classes?

Subject: Second.

Interviewer: Oh, I thought you were in your first.

Subject: I started in…oh, okay, I – this is the first semester that I am taking classes where I have actually been an MBA student. I took them as a non-degree seeking student last year because I said, “I am going to get accepted, I don’t, I mean, they might say no but I don’t care; I’m still going to go.” Because I am going to get my MBA, so –

Interviewer: Oh, okay. And, um, so how long did you think about it before you began researching MBA programs?
Subject: How long did I think about it? I thought about it (pause) –

Interviewer: I mean, seriously. I am not talking about the two years after you graduated.

Subject: I’ve got ya. I thought about it pretty strongly, I would say, for about six months before I started studying for the GMAT.

Interviewer: And did you think – oh, wait, let me back pedal for a minute – speaking of the GMAT, did you take it before you had decided where to go or after?

Subject: Oh, before I decided where to go?

Interviewer: Mhmm. Where were you in your decision-making when you took the test?

Subject: I had made the decision to go back to school. I had not made the decision on which school to go to.

Interviewer: Okay. And then, this actually leads into the next question. Did you decide on the program before you decided on the university? Like, did you decide MBA and then looked at options, or did you decide “I am going to go to USF” and then looked at the options that you had here?

Subject: I was probably 95 percent sure that I wanted the MBA. Before I decided the school or anywhere.

Interviewer: What other universities did you look at?

Subject: Um, Harvard, University of Florida, UT.

Interviewer: You mean Tampa, not Texas or Tennessee?

Subject: Tennessee, yes.

Interviewer: Tennessee?

Subject: (chuckles) No, no, no! Yes, Tampa.

Interviewer: (chuckles) Okay.

Subject: When you say UT I think Tennessee, because that is where I am from, (unintelligible).

Interviewer: And I said Texas! Okay. So that was it?

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: Alright. How did you go about seeking information on these programs?

Subject: Mostly it was talking to friends who had gone there. I did go to an information session at UT. Didn’t pursue UF and my GMAT score was nowhere near getting into Harvard.

Interviewer: Did you go to an info session at USF?

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you recall those info sessions? Could you tell me a little bit about them? How were they?

Subject: Yeah, um, I remember it being pretty friendly. Small.

Interviewer: At UT or at USF?
Subject: Which are you asking about?
Interviewer: Well, actually, both.
Subject: Okay.
Interviewer: So let's talk about UT first.
Subject: Okay, back up then, because I was talking about USF earlier.
Interviewer: Okay.
Subject: At UT's, there were probably 20-25 people there. Three different presenters. I want to say it lasted maybe two hours.
Interviewer: Two hours?
Subject: Yeah. I mean this was more than a year ago, so probably a little fuzzy but somewhere around there. Does that sound long or short?
Interviewer: I don't really know. I, I've never went to one, so –
Subject: Oh, okay.
Interviewer: I don't know, but, to me, I am thinking that is a lot of time.
Subject: It may, it may have been, yeah, it might have been a bit shorter than that. And that's really all I remember from it. They had a question and answer. Talked a little bit about their accreditation and stuff.
Interviewer: And what do you remember about USF's? Other than friendly and small.
Subject: Yeah, it was a smaller group. Smaller group, larger room. Good question and answers. It was generally a positive experience.
Interviewer: Do you know why you chose USF over UT?
Subject: Cost. (long pause) And my general feeling that it was more challenging to be in the MBA program here. They seemed to be more flexible with the GMAT there. I mean, I know there is flexibility with the GMAT here –
Interviewer: So, that flexibility you want, but are you saying it lends itself to reputation?
Subject: Probably.
Interviewer: Okay. So is it who is in the classroom with you?
Subject: Yeah. I guess I would look at it as a program that has higher criteria, has higher acceptance standards, yeah, typically is more of a little bit better school. Now, whether there is a correlation there, I really don't know whether there is any truth there. I don't know, but –
Interviewer: That's your perception?
Subject: Yeah?
Interviewer: The harder it is to get into; it must be a better program.
Subject: Yep.
Interviewer: Okay. Let me back-up here. I went off on a tangent for a little bit. You said you found reviews from friends, co-workers – did you ask co-workers about institutions or were you working when you were seriously thinking about it?
Subject: Um, I did ask a co-worker. And she was the one who encouraged me to go to UT. Actually, from Tampa Connection, I had a friend who went here.
Interviewer: Well, what factors were you looking at when you began to research the program? Obviously, you looked at, you mentioned, admissions criteria.
Subject: M-hmm.
Interviewer: What else were you looking at?
Subject: (long pause)
Interviewer: You said cost?
Subject: Yeah. Cost. Um (long pause) I think, it was, it was just people's perception of the program. It really, to me it wasn’t, the decision wasn’t where am I going to go. The decision was if I am going to go back to get my MBA. That was the big decision. And if I am not getting into, you know, a Top 50 school, based on *U.S. News and World Reports*, I don’t necessarily care what school I go to. It was – and if I look at schools relatively the same as far as their perception in the business world, I want to go to the one that is easiest and most convenient for me and get my MBA. If going for the MBA is not a good decision then I am just not going to do it all.
Interviewer: Okay.
Subject: So the school wasn’t as important.
Interviewer: Great. That's what I am trying to figure out with this thesis.
Subject: Right.
Interviewer: Um, so, as you went through the whole process, some of the things that I have heard you mention as factors you considered were admissions criteria, cost, some people's perception or reputation of it, the rankings, the opportunity to, um, kind of create a competitive advantage for you, the chance to enhance your résumé, possibly change careers, or confidence. What, out of all of those things, was probably the primary driver for you, the most important factor?
(very long pause) Let me think about this. It’s probably, it’s a close race, but it is probably first to advance my career. And then second in line would be just, um, to give me confidence. Confidence in, you know, my business acumen. It’s really close.

Great. Um, what are your long-term and short-term career aspirations now that you have this degree or are working toward this degree?

Um, since I have the advertising background marketing is a good fit. And so I think an option would be a marketing director or marketing VP for any brand, that would be good, a good at least mid-term career ambition, a near-term career ambition. Beyond that, maybe leveraging that position into other managerial positions. Healthcare is another area that I am looking to go into, healthcare administration. I haven’t really gotten into the classes yet but I am surrounded by friends employed in the industry.

A marketing background and healthcare administration would be a nice complement.

Yeah.

How long do you think it will take for you to see a monetary gain as a result of earning this degree?

Um, I am certainly – let me tell you what I think and then what I am hoping.

Okay.

Um, I think that, within a year of graduating, I will be above the level where I was prior. I think that is feasible.

Are on any sort of tuition assistance or tuition reimbursement? You’re paying full -- rate, I guess. I am not sure what you’d call it.

Yeah, I am paying out of pocket.

So how long will it take – because you are obviously going to have some expenses you’ve got to recoup – how long will it take – or what will it take – for you to say, “this was worth it”?

That’s a good question. (long pause) I mean, the easy way to look at it is do a pay-back period calculation and figure what the difference in salary is going to be and divide that by, divide that into the investment, so I don’t have those numbers in front of me. And I am not sure that is what you are looking for. But that’s an easy way to –

Well, some people say, “for me, it is worth it when I have paid off the student loans and I am making more
than I did before.” Other people have said, “I’ll say it is worth it when I change fields.” Other people have said, “I’ll say it is worth it the day I walk across the stage.”

Subject: Yeah.
Interviewer: What would it take for you to be satisfied that you made a good choice in going to do this?
Subject: Okay. I can answer that pretty easily then. I think making, um, making the money that I was making before within a year in an industry that I want to be in.

Interviewer: Okay.
Subject: So, I don’t want to be necessarily – I don’t necessarily need to see a monetary immediate return but I want to live at the same – early on – at the same level that I was before but to be doing something that I am enjoying.

Interviewer: Gotcha.
Subject: You know what I mean?
Interviewer: M-hmm. I like the idea of what you said, kind of a re-set button; you get to change careers before you are entrenched into a career and stuck in a job that you don’t enjoy.

Subject: M-hmm.
Interviewer: Okay, so I think that is all I have. Let me look here because I did skip a whole bunch.

Interviewer: Okay.
Subject: I think that is it. Great. Thank you!
Interviewer: Hope that it helped you.
Interview Date: February 4, 2013
Interview Location: USF College of Business
Interview Subject: Mike, 31 year old male, Incoming #8
Interview Duration: 19 minutes

Mike is a married Caucasian male with one child, a three-year-old daughter. He works full time as a marketing manager at AAA Automobile Club and is in his first few weeks of classes in the MBA program. He was scheduled several times for an in-person interview but had to reschedule due to travel constraints. Therefore his interview was conducted via telephone.

Interviewer: So, the easy questions are at the beginning. Where did you go to school for your undergrad degree and how long ago did you graduate?
Subject: I started at Drexel University, back in ‘99.
Interviewer: Okay.
Subject: And then I transferred down to USF undergrad in ’01.
Interviewer: Okay.
Subject: And then graduated in ’08.
Interviewer: Okay. What did you study?
Subject: Marketing.
Interviewer: Out of curiosity, why did you transfer? Drexel's got a pretty good name.
Subject: Yeah, it was, um, interesting. Parents were living in Baltimore so it was a quick train ride back and forth from Philadelphia. Um, then in 2000 they moved down to Florida. I stayed up there another year. And (sigh) with the Drexel system, you go to school for six months and you intern for six months. When the economy came down in the 2000-2001 timeframe, the internships dried up. So the benefit of the school is, you know, losing value. It was cheaper to go in-state [tuition] down in Florida and my family was there. So I made the move.
Interviewer: Okay. Did you work while going to school?
Subject: I did.
Interviewer: In your field or was it more waiting tables, kind of paying the bills kind of work?
Subject: Started bartending for the first couple of years and then moved over to my family's business. And they were in the wholesale industry.
Interviewer: Okay.
Subject: I started there driving trucks, warehouse manager, those sorts of work and then, about a year before I graduated, I moved into a sales and marketing management role.
Interviewer: So it was related to your degree.

Subject: It was.

Interviewer: Is that what you do now? What have you been doing since you graduated?

Subject: I am currently a marketing manager over at AAA.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: I focus on product marketing.

Interviewer: Alright. So when did you first start thinking about getting an MBA?

Subject: Um, right when I graduated with my undergrad.

Interviewer: So you thought about for four years? Or you thought about it and then decided against it? Or – kind of, why the gap?

Subject: Um, I thought about it, and then was waiting for timing. I got married in ’07. You know, my parents' business, we ended up going out of business in 2010 and, obviously, you know, all through ’09 we were on the brink of surviving.

Interviewer: M-hmm.

Subject: So the timing wasn’t right then. And I was working 70-80 hours a week at that point.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: And then my wife got pregnant. So, about a year ago, my wife and I sat down and really had a conversation as far as “does this really make sense?” and how do the finances align, because I didn't want to take out a loan for it. So, the stars all aligned and that is when I started the application process.

Interviewer: So would it be fair to say that you had been toying with the idea since graduation but really only a year ago did you start seriously thinking about it?

Subject: That would be correct.

Interviewer: Okay. Was there a particular incident that led you and your wife to sit down and have that conversation?

Subject: Ummm....

Interviewer: Or a reason?

Subject: No. I was doing a lot of, I guess, informal learning. Reading every book I could get my hands on. Probably went through about 30 of them over the course of a year and a half. All business and marketing related. Um, and then that was kind of the catalyst as I found myself more and more interested in it. And then looking at the landscape and wanting to be competitive in the career, you know, it was kind of a culmination. And then, then finances started to align.

Subject: So we sat down probably, maybe, July of 2012 and had,
you know, started having the conversation of how do we make this work.

Interviewer: Okay. And what did you think the long-term benefit of getting an MBA would be?

Subject: I think it is maybe two-fold. One, it gives you a bunch of different facets that you can go into so you are not going to be niched into a marketing role. You have a general business background and a high business acumen, so if you needed to go into a finance role or if you needed to go into an operations role you have that background and gives you a lot of flexibility.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: I think the other piece is that it, maybe, gives you opportunities that you wouldn’t have without it.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: And so different job opportunities, a faster career progression, more or less. So those were the two big things that I thought I could take out of it.

Interviewer: So kinds of opens some doors for you that are closed otherwise?

Subject: Correct.

Interviewer: Okay. So do you think there are any short-term benefits to getting an MBA?

Subject: I think you, ah – at least in my first month of classes – I have gotten some good takeaways from it. Um, that I can apply and it makes me a better worker. Makes me more effective. So I think the short-term benefits are what you can apply to your current field. Um, I don’t think there is any financial gain out of it, right out of the gate, but I think, you know, the information that I have gotten so far has been very applicable which I have been able to transfer into my current role.

Interviewer: Great. What about any headaches? Were you worried about any headaches that might be involved in getting an MBA?

Subject: (chuckles) yeah, yeah. There’s, uh, the work-life balance. You got a three year old, you got a marriage you like, you got a house, you got a full-time job, you know, 50 hours a week or so, um, yeah, you tack on to that 8-10 hours of classes, 10 -15 hours of homework, um, so yeah, the time-stress is a little bit of a headache.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: As far as the pain point. It’s um, I am pretty familiar with the information. I wasn’t stressed about being overwhelmed with the concepts. It was just the
workload and getting my – getting back into the routine of being in school.

Interviewer: Okay, yeah, because it would have been three or four years since you had done that.

Subject: Correct.

Interviewer: And when you were in school previously you weren’t married and weren’t a father.

Subject: Right (chuckles).

Interviewer: (chuckling) Um, so how long ago – how long did you think about it before you began researching the programs?

Subject: I first started researching, you know, informally, in that March 2012 timeframe. And, like I said, I have been toying with it ever since. I was, in ’07-’08, that was the next move that I wanted to make. Um, started looking at different programs, weighing the cost, going out to U.S. News and World Report. I work with a couple of MBAs so I had some coffee with them and asked them what they thought about it. You know, what the pay-off was and do they think it was worth it. So I kind of had those informal discussions in research right around that March-April timeframe.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Then, did you think of – were you – let me back up. It sounds like you were already sold on the idea of the MBA, so it wasn’t graduate school and then choosing the degree; it was choosing the degree and then figuring out where you were going to get it?

Subject: Correct.

Interviewer: Okay. Did you take the GMAT before you started exploring the programs or after you had already decided, “I want to go to USF?”

Subject: I took it after I did my initial analysis and, you know, weighed the cost-benefit stuff, I said USF. USF was the only school that I applied to.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: So I took the GMAT, um, end of September.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: And that kind of solidified my acceptance into USF. My GPA in undergrad wasn’t as strong as I would have liked it to be.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Subject: But the GMAT basically, identi – solidified that. I toyed with [University of Tampa] and University of Florida but the cost didn’t – the cost outweighed the benefits on that program, on those programs.
Interviewer: But USF was the only one where you actually put in an application?

Subject: Correct.

Interviewer: So, when you were looking and doing this informal and then a little bit more formal information seeking, how did you go about finding that info?

Subject: I basically Googled.

Interviewer: Okay (laughing).

Subject: I, you know, checked out Forbes and, you know, Inc., and a couple of those little pieces of information and publications out there. And after I had four or five different conversations with other MBA, people with their MBA.

Interviewer: And when, when you were looking at those, what kind of factors were you considering as you had those conversations or as you looked at those magazines? What were you, what kind of information were you trying to find out?

Subject: I was trying to look at, you know, basically, information to fill the cost-benefit analysis. Um, so if I am out-of-pocket, you know, so many thousands of dollars, and I am putting in all this work, what is the net payout of it all? So I was kind of looking at a ranking versus a tuition cost.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: Once I decided that I was going to go get one, and I think UF is in that $46k-$52k range, you know, UT is kind of in that same range, USF – at least the part-time MBA program which I was interested in – you know, I am going to get out the door with probably $15 grand out-of-pocket.

Interviewer: Okay. And would you consider USF to be on, um, the same level as UT and at UF?

Subject: I think it is probably a little better than the program at UT. Um, I think UF might have a better name recognition.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: But I don’t think that the recognition that UF brings is worth $20 grand. Or $30 grand.

Interviewer: Gotcha.

Subject: So, you know, it’s a “you pay for what you get” circumstance and I think getting my undergrad at USF played a lot into it.

Interviewer: Right.
Subject: I mean, the quality of professors that I had in my undergrad marketing, my upper-level undergrad marketing business classes.

Interviewer: Right.

Subject: They kind of playing into, too. And proximity. You know, I live in Riverview, so hiking up to Gainesville, you know, once or twice in a month, wasn't very feasible.

Interviewer: Great. So, um, the factors that I am hearing you mention along the way are, um, the financial cost of it, the learning opportunities that it would provide, kind of career opportunities it would open up for you, your work-life balance, rankings versus tuition, kind of the ROI or cost-benefit, as you put it, the program's reputation, and, actually, the geographic, physical location are all things that you considered.

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: Out of all these things, what was the most important thing to you?

Subject: Um, probably the balance between, um, reputation and the quality of the program versus the cost of tuition.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: So whatever that, that ratio I did in my head, or analysis that one that outweighed. So it was a decision of, "do I go get one from USF or do I not get -- you know, I toyed with online a little bit and that, it didn't seem like you got value out of it, so I erased that one pretty quickly.

Interviewer: Now, a number of people have made that similar statement. What is it about -- what is missing for you to say that online doesn't have quite the same value?

Subject: I think it is a combination of things. One, I learn better in a classroom. So that setting, you're going back to gain as much knowledge as possible, so I wanted to make sure that I was putting myself in a position to get that knowledge as effectively as possible. And then I don't think the online programs have the credibility or the reputation that an actual brick-and-mortar institution does.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: And the other piece is the collaboration. I mean, with your professors, having those kind of discussions that you get in the classroom setting and the networking opportunities with the other students.

Interviewer: So those are all things that, in a sense, are factors that you definitely considered along the way?
Correct.

Okay. Um, when you were, um – once you decided, “yes, I am going to go for it” -- did you – you said you only applied to USF; you considered UT and UF – did you go to any information sessions?

Just the USF info session.

Okay.

Once I researched tuitions and, um, the programs, I mean, I was kind of then set upon USF being the only option.

Okay. What did you – I know it has been a little while – but, what were your thoughts on that info session?

Um, I thought it was pretty informative.

Okay.

Um, you know, it gave you the basic gist of the program and laid everything out from the curricula to what you would be learning to what you would be paying, which is what I was trying to get out of it.

Okay, so it answered all of your basic questions?

Correct.

Alright. And, um, did you seek any word-of-mouth reviews from friends or ask co-workers about particular institutions?

Uh, yeah, I had a, uh, a friend who graduated with a USF MBA, um, so I talked to her a little bit. And then I had someone who talked – who went to the University of Miami Executive MBA program – and I tried to kind of get the differences between the two. And that played a little bit of a factor, but not as much.

Alright. So, what was the one thing – I think I already know the answer to this – the one thing that was most important consideration to you all along as you decided, one, to go for the degree and then, two, where to get it from?

Um, I guess the value of the program. Um, and that’s, you know, the cost outweighing the benefits you get out of it.

Well let’s talk about that. What is, um, the ROI? What is it going to take for you to say this was worth it?

(sigh) Well, if you do straight dollars and cents, I have to make $15,000 more dollars than I would without it over the course of a 30-, 35-year career. So, it would seem like a relatively a no brainer for that. And then it was sitting down with my wife and saying what we could afford, um, because I didn’t want to take out a
loan and be stuck with, you know, with that for 10, 15, 20 years.

Interviewer: Right. So how long do you think it will take before you see a monetary gain as a result of this degree?

Subject: Um, probably – I don’t know if it comes down to just the degree as being the primary factor as to how it changes your income and your career progression. I have worked with several MBAs [who] didn’t know their – a rock from, you know, they didn’t know their elbow from whatever it is.

Interviewer: (laughing)

Subject: They are just clueless. Um, very book smart but didn’t have the business execution or the discipline that you would expect out of them.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: So I think it is a combination of the person and the knowledge. Like I said, I think the MBA gives you opportunities but it is up to the person to do the work and, you know, make the most of those opportunities.

Interviewer: Okay. So what will it take for you to say this was worth it in terms of the – not only the cost-benefit analysis, but the time that you spend in doing it. What would it take for you to be talking with your wife and say, “yeah, I am really glad I did this.”

Subject: If I got a job that required an MBA that paid me a lot more than what I am making now.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: That I wouldn’t be qualified for without the, without the three letters.

Interviewer: Okay. Last two questions here. What are your, um, short-term career aspirations?

Subject: Um, by the next two to three years I want to get into a management role of some sort. Right now I am an individual contributor. So I would like to get into some kind of leadership role in the next two to three years.

Interviewer: Okay. And long-term?

Subject: Long-term, I want to be in the executive suite.

Interviewer: Okay. In the same industry that you are in now or in a different industry.

Subject: I want to get into a – probably more of a category of brand management. As opposed to a marketing communications role. So I would like to stay where, kind of the industry I am in, product marketing. But probably move over into a CPG or a retail kind of an industry as opposed to a service industry.
Interviewer: And it sounds like more in the strategy area instead of the tactical implementation area.

Subject: Correct.

Interviewer: Okay. Great. Is there anything you’d like to add? Anything I forgot about?

Subject: No, I think the interview covered it pretty well.
Jorge is a Hispanic male who is considering an MBA program but has not yet applied to a particular university. He has worked for two years since earning an undergraduate degree in accounting from the University of Tampa. He was accompanied by his girlfriend, Gertrude, a current USF student who thought he might need occasional assistance with the interview since English is not his first language (he is a native of Honduras). Shortly after introductions and some opening banter, however, it was apparent she was not needed. She did not remain present for the majority of the interview; she returned near the conclusion.

1 Interviewer: Where did you attend school for your undergraduate degree?
2 Subject: I went to the University of Tampa. I graduated in May 2010.
3 Interviewer: What did you study?
4 Subject: I studied accounting.
5 Interviewer: And what did you do with that degree? Are you working now?
6 Subject: So far, I’ve only . . . me and my father opened an automobile repair shop and I do the bookkeeping there. I’m trying to find a job with a firm . . . I’m going to start looking in January, actually.
7 Interviewer: What do you want to do?
8 Subject: To tell you the truth, I’m not sure.
9 Interviewer: Do you want to work for a Big Four firm or do you want to work for a smaller shop?
10 Subject: Yep, Big Four, but I don’t know if I’m going to do auditing or tax accounting or financial statement accounting; I don’t know.
11 Interviewer: Yeah. So you currently have work experience . . .
12 Subject: Yes.
13 Interviewer: How long have you worked at the repair shop with your dad?
14 Subject: Two years.
15 Interviewer: Did you work before that?
16 Subject: No.
17 Interviewer: So yes, you work now. Do you like it?
18 Subject: Yes (unconvincing tone).
19 Interviewer: Do you? It’s so different from what I do . . .
20 Subject: It’s not bad. It’s just . . . when it is slow, it’s depressing being at work and not having people come in the door.
But when it is busy, I like it. I like to be on top of things, you know, constantly doing something.

Interviewer: So, Gertrude says you are thinking about an MBA and are choosing between USF and UT? How long ago did you start thinking about the MBA degree?

Subject: Well, since I graduated it was an option, but I... well, I started working with my dad and I kept putting it off and putting it off... you know... I think it is time. Two years have gone by since I graduated, so...

Interviewer: Out of curiosity, why are you looking at an MBA instead of a MAcc [Master's of Accountancy]?

Subject: The master's in accounting, well... 'cause I asked teachers around and they're like, if you want to focus solely on accounting, do accounting, do the master's in accounting, but the MBA will give you a more broad perspective on business and I feel like that's what I... well, in the end, I'll have my own business, or that's what I hope... I figure if I am going to do a master's in accounting I am just going to stick to accounting my whole life and I don't know if that is what I really want...

Interviewer: Okay. So, was there a particular incident or incidents that led you consider an MBA? What made you say, "now is the time?"

Subject: Just because, well, the ultimate goal for an accountant is to get a CPA and in order to get a CPA, you have to have certain credits beyond your undergrad, so... pretty much the only reason I'm going to do a master's is to get a CPA.

Interviewer: Okay. So that is one of the long-term benefits; it will open up the door for the CPA. What other long-term benefits might there be?

Subject: For the master's? Well...[long pause]... being better prepared, I suppose... better prepared for... (subject shrugs).

Interviewer: But you want to open your own business one day?

Subject: Yes, but it could even be a CPA firm, you know, a small CPA firm.

Interviewer: Do you think there might be some short-term benefits of the MBA?

Subject: What do you mean, short-term benefits? Like, what does that mean?

Interviewer: Well, I don't want to ask a leading question, but obviously this, the CPA is a little bit further down the road (subject agrees), so a little closer, in the next year
or two, what benefits might you receive by getting the MBA?

[pause] I don’t know, maybe I will learn something that I have never applied to... to my life... at the moment.

Okay. Do you think there will be any headaches?

Oh, definitely. Yes. Accounting is not. that. fun. It’s fun, but it’s very detailed.

(laughing) What kind of headaches do you think will come with the MBA?

The hassle of... not being in school for two years, working and going back to school, and having to readjust my life, you know?

Alright, so... how long did you think about an MBA before looking at USF or UT?

Really, since before my graduation, all of my accounting professors pretty much suggested that if you’re going to graduate, get an undergraduate degree in accounting, you might as well go for your MBA so you can be a CPA. All of them really suggested it.

So, at UT they are obviously pushing for you to get a grad degree... (subject nods head in agreement) but they are implying that the MBA is more valuable than the MAcc?

No, no, no, no. They, my accounting professors suggest you get the MAcc. I think it is called the... it’s not even called the MAcc, it’s called the master’s... MSA, that’s what it is called there. But yeah, they highly suggest that for after graduation.

So, are USF and UT the only two schools that you’ve thought about?

Yeah. I like Tampa, so that’s the reason why, the location.

There are a fair number of MBA programs in Tampa, have you ever even looked at the other ones?

Not really.

Do you have any idea why?

No, I just, well, to tell you the truth when I got into college, I only applied to two schools.

Those schools...?

UT and Elon University. I got into UT. I didn’t get into Elon.

Okay, so, it sounds to me like I already know the answer to this, but did you think about the program first and then the university, or the university first, and then the program?
Subject: Honestly, I’ve always liked UT, so . . . I thought about, my first choice was UT, and then . . .
Interviewer: But you thought about, “I’m going for the degree before you decided where you wanted to go instead of “I want to go back to grad school at UT?”
Subject: Yes.
Interviewer: Have you taken the GMAT?
Subject: Yes (uncomfortable pause).
Interviewer: And you did obviously before exploring programs?
Subject: Yes.
Interviewer: Some people wait until after they’ve decided to go take it. Did you take it right after college?
Subject: No, I waited like a year (uncomfortable pause) . . .
Interviewer: So you had not made a decision yet or where to go yet?
Subject: No, well, after graduation, I was an illegal resident (subject shrugs and laughs). But now I am . . . I was undergoing an immigration process that didn’t let me work, so it was like six months after graduation that I couldn’t do anything. My education visa expired . . .
Interviewer: Okay. So, how did you seek information on these MBA programs? Did you go to the website, did you seek brochures, did you call?
Subject: I actually went to the graduate admissions office at UT and I spoke with them about it. They gave me a brochure. Then Gertrude told me about USF. I knew about it because I was in Beta Alpha Psi, but Gertrude told me it was a better program.
Guest: Well, our Beta Alpha Psi program has won national honors something like 37 years a row?
Interviewer: What factors were important to you as you began to research programs? For instance, what made you say you would even look at USF and UT?
Subject: To tell you the truth I don’t know much about their program, I just know to get my CPA I need to do this. I don’t even know what the program has in it.
Interviewer: Okay. So you were not looking at things like the caliber of faculty or where the classes were held, offered day or night . . .
Subject: No, no, no. I didn’t. I don’t even know what courses are in the program. I just know that I’ve got to get it done.
Interviewer: It’s a requirement, a hurdle you have to jump in order to get . . .
Subject: Yes. Exactly.

Interviewer: So that leads me back to my earlier question, why would you not consider a St. Leo [University] or another program, a [University of] Phoenix?

Subject: I guess the name of the school and the, what do you call it?

Interviewer: The reputation?

Guest: The reputation? This is one of those words that doesn’t translate well.

Subject: Yeah, the reputation.

Interviewer: So you really don’t have any factors to rank, just reputation?

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: Did accreditation matter?

Subject: (subject gives quizzical look to guest) Accreditation?

Guest: Accreditation, like SACS, IAC, AACSB, the quality signal.

Subject: Oh, no, that really didn’t matter. I didn’t even know about this.

Interviewer: Okay. Once you decided to go for the degree, what universities did you consider . . . you’ve already told me that . . . how did you find out about USF once Gertrude told you about it? Did she bring home a brochure, did you go online?

Subject: No, honestly, I still don’t know. I still haven’t seen anything about USF.

Interviewer: (laughing) you need to take home a brochure to give to him!

Subject: Yeah, you do!

Guest: You saw the commercials.

Subject: Yeah, I did (unintelligible between subject and guest).

Interviewer: So did you attend any in-person info sessions?

Subject: I did at UT. I went to graduate degree seeking student info session.

Interviewer: Not just for the MBA?

Subject: No, for all programs. They let you know about where they pay for you and all that . . . what’s that called?

Guest: An assistantship?

Subject: Yes, that’s it. Assistantships, there you go.

Interviewer: Did you get any info online.

Subject: Yeah, I read some on the UT website.

Interviewer: Did you seek word-of-mouth info? Did you ever talk with co-workers about it? Well, I guess your co-worker situation is a little bit different if it is you and your dad.
Subject: Yeah, they're all much older than me, mechanics. They're not really much into school. They are looking for certifications in auto repair.

Interviewer: So, what are you going to consider when making your decision between USF and UT? What is going to sway you one way or the other?

Subject: To tell you the truth... [pause]. I just don't think it is that important to me. It doesn't really matter. The one that takes me in, you know. Because I've been to UT already, I would prefer to go there.

Guest: That's it, I am familiar with it. I am familiar with the faculty, I am sure some of my old teachers teach the graduate courses as well. It is a smaller school. I like small.

Interviewer: If they both accepted you, what would you consider?

Subject: Probably the one with the better accounting program.

Interviewer: And how would you determine which one has a better accounting program?

Subject: Well, I guess reputation, one, and then course load and how... how they schedule courses.

Interviewer: Are you talking about the flexibility in the order of classes, or how the courses are scheduled in terms of duration, how long it takes you to get through it?

Subject: How long it takes to get through it. I figure it is going to take two or three years.

Interviewer: You can do it in 18 months if you take full course loads and...

Subject: Well, if I am planning on working, I probably can't.

Interviewer: Okay, well, that's all my questions.

Subject: Anything else?

Interviewer: No, anything you want to tell me? When do you think you'll make a decision?

Subject: I am hoping, well, I have been putting it off for a year or two now but I am hoping next August. I can pass my GMAT. I took it twice, actually, and I didn't do good. But I didn't really take the time to study much for it (unintelligible). And I took the GRE.

Interviewer: English is not your first language, correct?

Subject: No, it's not (unintelligible).

Interviewer: If you knew you could start before you got the GMAT score you wanted, would you have started already?

Subject: Oh, yeah. I tried to waive it. I went to UT and tried to waive it, but they wouldn't let me.

Interviewer: If USF offered, would you start classes in January?
Subject: Yeah, but don’t they waive it for a period of time and then you still have to take it?
Interviewer: Well, there is a new certificate program where you come in and you get started on your core courses before you take it; at some point you still have to take it, but you can get started. If you knew about that would you have started already?
Subject: (unintelligible)
Interviewer: So, if you didn’t have to take the GMAT, you would have started already?
Subject: Oh yes, definitely.
Interviewer: And you are unaware of the certificate option?
Subject: Yes.
Interviewer: So that was my follow-up question: you said you have been putting it off and putting it off, why?
Subject: Because of my GMAT scores, and the fact that I work and don’t have time to study. I have a full-time job Monday through Saturday. And I took a GRE course, but it was two months before the test, and in between, I was focused on work and didn’t keep practicing.
Interviewer: So, to summarize, it you didn’t have to take the test, or had that hurdle to jump through, you would have already started. And the only reason you are thinking about the advanced degree is because it is required to advance to take the CPA exam?
Subject: Right.
Interviewer: Thank you so much!

# # #
JoAnn is a Caucasian female who is considering an MBA program and has applied to USF and is considering several other universities. She has not yet decided where she will pursue the degree. She has worked for two years since earning an undergraduate degree in international studies from the University of South Florida. When contacting JoAnn to schedule the interview, it was discovered that the interviewer used to work with JoAnn’s mother at a prior job (about seven years prior); there was some initial banter about that coincidence prior to the interview.

Interviewer: How are you doing? I understand you have been studying for the GMAT?
Subject: Yes, I take it in two weeks.
Interviewer: Have you been studying?
Subject: Yeah, I am just ready for it to be over (laughs).
Interviewer: Where did you attend to earn your undergrad [degree]? I think you went here to USF, didn’t you? I remember your mom being real proud that you were admitted to the Honors College . . . which is something to be proud of . . .
Subject: (subject laughs) Yes, I went there, to the University of South Florida.
Interviewer: And what did you study?
Subject: I studied international studies.
Interviewer: What is the difference between international studies and international business?
Subject: It’s more focused on the social science aspects of trade, and, like international relationships. It is more focused on the theory of international relationships as opposed to the business side of it. It is more like . . . I called it, like, the softer side, softer version of it because it wasn’t as much hard facts, it was more social sciences. It’s closer to political science [than business].
Interviewer: Okay. And when did you graduate?
Subject: I graduated in 2009.
Interviewer: That’s right; you told me you now work. Where do you work?
Subject: New Jerusalem Christian Academy. It’s like a school in Seffner.
Interviewer: How long have you worked there?
Subject: Two years.
Interviewer: What do you do?
Subject: I am a teacher (said with a bit of resignation)
Interviewer: Did you expect to be a teacher?
Subject: No . . . (said wistfully; subject and interviewer both laugh)
Interviewer: What made you choose teaching?
Subject: I guess when I was finishing my major, I was looking at some of the options, and, because I graduated in 2009 and that was the slump of the economy; it was a [time when] a lot of people weren't getting jobs and I think I was a bit fearful that I wasn't going to find a job. And so I did an AmeriCorps program, which was focused on education. And, I was more interested in the service part of it. At the time, I wasn't making a lot of money but it was more like the experience kind of thing. But it was focused on education, which I didn't know before I participated in it. But then once I was there, I like, "you know, this is really cool, I am making a difference for kids," kind of thing. I thought, "what if went back to for teaching?" And I actually started grad school for teaching. And I got into it [the graduate program in education], and then I was like, uh, maybe not. (both subject and interviewer laugh).
Interviewer: Okay.
Subject: So it was just kind of like a flow of events. My first job out of college kind of led me to being interested in education.
Interviewer: Okay, but you deciding that a master's degree in education was not what you wanted for you. What made you think that?
Subject: That wasn't right?
Interviewer: Yes.
Subject: I think . . . I started the master's program and then I started teaching. So I think the actual experience of teaching led me away from finishing, to thinking, "this is not what I want to do."
Interviewer: And, so (unintelligible) how long ago did you first start thinking about the MBA degree?
Subject: Well, really not 2-3 months ago.
Interviewer: And was there a particular incident that led you to start thinking about it, or a particular reason you started thinking about the degree?
Subject: I wouldn't say a particular incident, but the reason was just knowing my strengths and knowing that they were not being brought out in the classroom, and knowing, basically, that I wanted to switch careers,
and knowing that without getting formal training it would be difficult to get into a new position; and, knowing my personality, I like to be prepared and so I figured that this is the best step in order to bridge the gap, basically.

Interviewer: And so . . . what did you think about the long-term benefits, I mean, you’ve already told me a bit about that now, that, one is that it will prepare you for your career (subject nods and sounds in agreement), but what long-term . . . how do you think long-term this will help you?

Subject: (slight pause) I think . . . I am looking at long-term, not necess- . . . just being able to work my way up . . . because, just because, well, teaching it like, this is the beginning and this is the end (subjects uses hand motions to indicate a stalled career path). I like to move up. I think the MBA does that. I mean, I think the bachelor’s degree does that as well, but . . . well, I haven’t seen that work, yet, and so I am really stuck in a place where I can’t move up. So that’s why.

Interviewer: So, really, if I were to summarize – these are my words, not yours – but you saw it as an opportunity for a career trajectory?

Subject: Yes. Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. And did you think there would be some short-term benefits?

Subject: Uh-huh. That I wouldn’t have to teach (said in light-hearted manner with a laugh).

Interviewer: (laughs with subject) Are you thinking that you would be a full-time student, or part-time?

Subject: Yes, probably full-time. I think the short-term opportunities are just the benefits would just be the benefits that I mean, that being in a college atmosphere provide. I mean, just networking with professors and other students, or job opportunities, or internships.

Interviewer: Any headaches you think that are going to come along with this?

Subject: (long pause) I mean . . . I think . . . I don’t want to under-, well, I don’t want to equate an undergraduate degree to a graduate degree, but I think that the workload will probably be more than what I was accustomed to, so I am going to have to readjust from being a working professional to being on the schedule of being a student again.
Interviewer: Okay. So how long did you think about it – it being to
    go for the degree or not – before you began
    researching programs?
Subject: Maybe, like, three hours. No, I mean, like maybe a day.
Interviewer: (laughs)
Subject: I am a fast worker. I like .
Interviewer: Did you think about MBA first, and then think, “Okay,
    where am I going to get it?” Or did you think, “I’m
    going back to one of these universities and this is the
    degree I am going to get there?”
Subject: (short pause) I was definitely thinking MBA. And I was
    thinking about the options I would have in terms of
    where to go. And USF was definitely the first school
    that popped into my head, because I have gone here, I
    live close to here. But there are other schools, too, that
    I have researched and looked online at.
Interviewer: What other schools are you looking at?
Subject: UNF [University of North Florida] in Jacksonville and I
    have also thought about FSU [Florida State University]
    and UF [University of Florida], just because they’re
    equal to USF. UNF is, you know, kind of the fall back
    position.
Interviewer/Subject: (sidebar chatter about interviewer’s daughter’s
    consideration of UNF for undergraduate degree).
Interviewer: So you thought about the program first, and then the
    university. And you have not yet taken the GMAT?
Subject: No.
Interviewer: (unintelligible) So, when it came time to look at
    universities, how did you go about finding information
    about the programs that you wanted?
Subject: The Internet was definitely my first avenue for
    research, but then I signed up for the information
    session here, because it was advertised on the website.
    So I signed up for that and really those are the two
    avenues that I have been exploring.
Interviewer: Have you gone to any other info sessions?
Subject: No.
Interviewer: And how was USF’s info session?
Subject: It was informative, but, to be honest, I kind of felt like
    if I read the website I really didn’t need to go. I didn’t
    really gain more information. But I was glad I went.
Interviewer: Okay. So what factors were important to you as you
    began to look at the programs?
Subject: (looks at interviewer questioningly)
Interviewer: I don’t want to give you . . . I don’t want to lead your
    answers. Where there certain things that you said, “I
want to look at this, I want to look at this... what was important to you?

Subject: Just in comparing schools, I would first look at course selection, like times, because I wanted to know if it was geared toward being a full-time student or geared toward the working professional getting the MBA. So that was the first thing I looked at. I also looked at \textit{(long pause)}... I also looked at... you know how there is always like this section on the website about people who have graduated from this program or this is the market that they went into upon graduation; the percentage of people who got jobs. The stats that show what the end result that there has been for other graduates.

Interviewer: So the testimonials, they ring true to you on the website? They don’t...

Subject: Yes \textit{(nods to indicate testimonials ring true)}.

Interviewer: Were you looking at program content, I mean, did you look down as far as “I am interested in X and they have a lot of courses in X”; did you look at, “I’d have to take these specific courses?”

Subject: I was looking more at... well, generally all of the core courses are the same, so I was looking at the specific concentrations that the schools offer, and just seeing what courses were required for that, or how you could, like, for example, USF has the MBA in Sport and Entertainment Management program as a separate program, whereas, at UNF, it’s a concentration. I’m an athletic director at my school, so that was one of the things that caught my attention was that, here I would have to do it as a separate program and there I would have to do it as a concentration. And so, I guess I was looking at how each program was structured and where its content fell, if that makes sense.

Interviewer: It does. So what I heard you say was that you looked at course selection and times, you looked at testimonials and kind of percentages of grads, and you looked at kind of the core versus specializations.

Subject: Uh-huh \textit{(subject nods head in agreement)}.

Interviewer: If you had to rank those as far as which one was most important to you as you were looking at them, which one was most important?

Subject: I think the most important was the statistics of employment.
I n t e r v i e w e r :  Okay. And, once you decided to go for the degree, which universities did you consider? You told me UNF, FSU, UF. Did you look at UT?

S u b j e c t : No, I didn’t.

I n t e r v i e w e r : How did you find out information about the specific universities? You told me basically on the web, seeking information online. Did you seek any word-of-mouth reviews from friends?

S u b j e c t : No. I really don’t know many people who have gone for their MBA or really have a business degree. I mean, I have all education majors around me and all that, so I really didn’t.

I n t e r v i e w e r : So it is the reputation of the university that you considered more than the reputation of USF’s MBA program?

S u b j e c t : Yes.

I n t e r v i e w e r : And were there any other factors that were important to you that helped you determine – well, you haven’t determined yet – which institution you are going to attend?

S u b j e c t : Well, I do know what will help me decide is the scholarship availability and financial aid just because grad school is more expensive, so, you know, there are assistantships and scholarships available at different universities; that’s something that is very important to me.

I n t e r v i e w e r : And did you see a lot of information on those online?

S u b j e c t : For USF, no, but I think that is just because there . . . when I went to the info session that was cleared up a little bit more but it wasn’t advertised because it wasn’t, there really isn’t that much scholarship [money] available. Most of it is more specified to specific people and it is more on an invitation basis, so it’s not really like you can apply for that. But on other [competing university] websites I found information that they have more general scholarships.

I n t e r v i e w e r : What was the one thing, as you looked at all of this, that you thought that was most important?

S u b j e c t : For deciding which program or for deciding . . .

I n t e r v i e w e r : Which program.

S u b j e c t : I feel like still that the statistical evidence that says, “60 percent of our graduates get a job” versus “90 percent of our graduates get a job or work in the field of their preference” is most important.

I n t e r v i e w e r : So basically evidence of success?

S u b j e c t : Right.
Interviewer: Alright, so once you obtain the degree, what are your short-term career aspirations?
Subject: Short-term, so like upon graduation?
Interviewer: Yes.
Subject: Rule number one would be to be employed (laughs).
Interviewer: (laughs) Good one.
Subject: But I think ... (long pause) I think being well trained for the job that I am going to enter into, so I guess, just feeling equipped, feeling ready to enter into whatever position I do acquire, which after two years of grad school that's what I would obtain.
Interviewer: But you don't have it narrowed down to, “after school I want to work in healthcare, or to be a marketer, or to be ...”
Subject: No. I am looking more at international business and finance, just because I was an international studies major and finance is just really interesting to me. Those are the two areas I would say I was hoping to be working in, but I am not, you know, “this is the only area I see myself in.”
Interviewer: Okay. What about long-term career goals?
Subject: I would hope that [not just] lateral moves up the corporate ladder. I don't have a goal of owning my own business or anything, but I do have a goal to ... (frustrated pause) to contribute to a company in a way that would benefit it, whether it was finance or international business. Not just staying status quo, you know? That’s one thing that frustrates me. And I think that is part of the reason why I am going back to school, or, rather, hopefully going back to school.
Interviewer: Okay.
Subject: So, really, these are more general goals but main one is to help build up the company that I end up working for.
Interviewer: How long do you think it will take for you to see a monetary gain, kind of a return on the investment of the MBA?
Subject: Well, I think this is kind of subjective, because I am a teacher (both interviewer and subject laugh) but I would say immediately. My first job would ... I expect to make more money than I do now. That alone would make the investment in the education worth it.
Interviewer: Well, that didn’t take anywhere near as long as I thought it would. Do you have any thoughts or ideas to share with me? Any feedback on USF as you looked at
it, information that you maybe saw as missing, or [where you] said, “I really liked this?”

Subject: The only thing that I would say is that the information session, it was (pause) . . . it was very . . . general, I guess. It was just what I read and what I researched. I mean, I really liked the fact that they offered the live info session but, um, I went because I was thinking this would be better. But other than that, I really don’t think . . . I guess because since I am not in the program yet, I am just going one step at a time, so I really don’t have . . . I haven’t met with an advisor yet, so I really don’t have . . . as a prospective student, I don’t feel as prepared. Once I get all my stuff in, my paperwork [I might have more to say].

Interviewer: And how has that been? The application, the actual chores of applying, getting your transcript in. Has it been easy?

Subject: Yes, it’s been very easy.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you
Cassie is a Caucasian female who is considering an MBA program but has not yet made the commitment to begin (though she has made a commitment to pursue the degree at some point). She has not yet decided where she will pursue the degree. She has worked for four years since earning an undergraduate degree in event management and hospitality from the University of Florida. When contacting Cassie to schedule the interview, it was discovered that the interviewer and the subject have a mutual friend who recently asked the subject to contact the interviewer about a potential sponsorship for an Emerge event with the Tampa Chamber of Commerce. There was some initial banter about that coincidence prior to the interview. There was also some banter about the degree program the interviewer is finishing.

Subject: So, are you going for the MBA?
Interviewer: No (laughing) I think I should have gone for the MBA but I am going for the MS in Strategic Communications. Because I was afraid of all the finance courses [in the MBA program].
Subject: That's what my biggest fear is (laughing). But I know that is why I need to go back. Because I need that, I need that experience.
Interviewer: That's exactly where I am. I went for the MS in Mass Communications (sidebar conversation with interviewer's son, who was seated nearby during the interview). So I went for that degree instead. If I had gone for the MBA, I wouldn't be doing this thesis. An MBA doesn't require a thesis.
Subject: Yeah. I didn't think so. That's okay; you'll have your degree soon!
Interviewer: So the purpose of my thesis is really just to talk to people about what they are thinking about when they are considering the MBA. People are at different stages. Some have decided to do it, some have decided not to do it, some have decided to do it and are starting in January. So where are you in that process?
Subject: I would like to start my MBA in the fall next year. So I have been to info sessions for USF. I am also considering the University of Tampa. And I am also considering [the University of] Florida. I went to Florida for my undergrad, so...
Interviewer: Okay, so when did you graduate there?
Subject: I graduated from my undergrad in 2008, August 2008. Ideally, I would love to go back there just because I went there and am a diehard Gator, but, at the same time, the traveling; it would really be what is going to hold me back, I think. I’d rather – I live and work in South Tampa. I work for my family’s company, so I am just really, really connected to the South Tampa community. I would prefer not to be traveling. It’s not necessarily every weekend, the program that I am looking at; it’s only one weekend a month up there. But that’s still, you know, a lot of driving plus hotel expenses, which I would not have to worry about with USF or UT.

Interviewer: And USF has the weekend program, too.

Subject: Right.

Interviewer: So what did you study at UF?

Subject: Hospitality management.

Interviewer: I didn’t know they had a hospitality management program there.

Subject: They do. It is in the College of Health and Human Performance. It falls under the hospitality, tourism, operations umbrella. It’s actually becoming quite popular, believe it or not. The University of Central Florida has a great hospitality and tourism program, too, so...

Interviewer: Yeah. So obviously you work now; I heard you say for your family’s company, um...

Subject: I do.

Interviewer: Is that the only job you have had since you graduated?

Subject: Actually, yes. My dad owns a title insurance company. When I graduated in ’08, it was 2008 and it was a terrible time to graduate [due to the economy]. It was a terrible time to get into event planning. So, fortunately, I started to work for that company. It was not what I wanted to do nor was it what I intended to do. But it actually turned out to be a blessing. And now I am really getting involved in the company and that’s why I am getting my MBA. I plan to take it over one day and I need the experience, so...

Interviewer: Oh, okay. Wow. So how long have you worked for your family’s company now, I guess four years?

Subject: Honestly, since we opened in 2006, on and off during break and whatnot while in college, but, full-time, 2009.

Interviewer: So how long ago did you first start thinking about getting an MBA?
I would say probably about six months ago.

And was there something that prompted you to think about it or something that made you say, “Now is the time?”

Um, well now is the time, I think, because I am young enough. I am 26. And I know before I get too – get too far ahead in the company – that I really do [need] like you were saying, the financial aspect of things. I really do need to get that experience. I do intend to take over the company. I kind of have a five-year plan. My dad won’t necessarily be out in five years, but, as I start moving up I know there’s only so much that I can learn from him and learn in the office, that – I should have gotten a business degree at Florida but, um, so, I think that is the strongest reason that I am going back. I know I am going to need that, that education, that experience that I haven’t gotten previously, so...

Okay, and so, for you, you said you— the question is “what do you think the long-term benefit would be,” for you. It sounds like you have a plan.

Yes, for the knowledge and for the experience. I would say within the next five to ten years. Five years for getting my license for title insurance, which is actually going to happen within the next six months, really. Um, I would say within the next three years, starting and completing my MBA. And just kind of working different roles throughout the company. Really learning the ins and outs of everything that relates to title insurance and the financial industry as well. So, um, within the next ten years (unintelligible with camera movement) within the ten-year frame, push my dad out and I can take over and feel comfortable. For me right now, I really am fearful that I do not have that knowledge and that experience. And I’d hate to be in that position where I am like “I don’t know what I am doing.” You know, and to have people not be able to rely on me because I don’t have that experience or I don’t know what I am doing; I don’t like not knowing what I am talking about, so...

Okay. Do you think that there are going to be some short-term benefits to getting an MBA?

Um, just the networking. Building relationships with other people, I think, in the cohort and in the community, which I think would eventually be long-term as well, also.
Interviewer: Have you thought about what Tampa’s networking opportunities would provide for you versus Gainesville’s?

Subject: (pause) Um...

Interviewer: Gainesville obviously has some – I don’t know who your customers are in a title insurance company. Are they mostly Tampa people?

Subject: We are able to close transactions nationwide but obviously the majority of our deals are in Florida, more locally, in Hillsborough, Pasco, Pinellas counties. So I think, locally, I am really very involved with, as I was telling you, with the Chamber [of Commerce] and a lot of different groups and organizations in Tampa, so I think that would just help strengthen those relationships and my involvement in the community. As far as [the University of] Florida is concerned, I don’t know if there’s – I think there might be more benefit going to school somewhere locally. Florida’s got a great network and a great alumni network as well, but I think that I would meet more local people here than I would going to Gainesville.

Interviewer: Okay. So do you think there are going to be any headaches involved with getting an MBA?


Interviewer: Oh yeah.

Subject: Studying for the GRE and the GMAT alone is going to be a headache!

Interviewer: Well, that actually – I am going to jump ahead here – that is one question: have you taken the test yet?

Subject: No. I have not. I actually, well, I actually did take the GRE just to kind of try it out, probably back in 2007 or ’08. I couldn’t even tell you how I did. I don’t remember. I think it was probably pretty bad as well. Because I just didn’t study for it. Um, but no, I have not taken it yet.

Interviewer: Scores are valid for five years.

Subject: Yeah, I don’t think I want to use those scores.

Interviewer: The time is probably pretty close anyway.

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, so obviously you started thinking about the program and you told me three schools that you are looking at,

Subject: Ah-huh.
Interviewer: How long after you started thinking about an MBA did you go online or go seek info or visit?

Subject: Pretty quickly, actually. I would say – what are we now – I would say summer time is when I thought I really need to get serious about this. I had talked to my dad with a couple of other people, a couple of other mentors of mine. And then I just started to sign up for the info sessions. I went to Florida’s info session, then I went to USF’s info session. And then UT. So I have gone to all of them and feel like I have all of the information. Truthfully, now it is just starting to apply. And, like I said, studying and taking the exams.

Interviewer: Okay. And, I’m going to jump ahead.

Subject: Sure.

Interviewer: I want to talk about info sessions. What were your impressions of USF’s info session versus Florida and some of the others?

Subject: Um, let’s see. I am trying to remember. USF’s was, I think, at the hotel over on Cypress. I think they were having some technical issues that night. Which really – it wasn’t a big deal, but, um, the women that did it were knowledgeable. I had a couple of questions and they were able to answer them. I liked it because I already know what the MBA program should look like, um, I just have a few specific questions and they got us in and out of there pretty quickly. Florida’s was good. It was very, very detailed. Very planned out... Which was nice, but, I was like, okay. UT’s, truthfully, was a little long-winded. They talked about a whole lot of options and I just wanted to hear about the MBA. And that was it. The MBA for working professionals, that’s what I was there for. And they talked about ten other degrees that night that I didn’t care about. So that was a little bit lengthy.

Interviewer: So would it be better if they just mentioned these are the degrees that we have?

Subject: Right, exactly. And have specific info sessions for those. I didn’t want to sit through everybody else’s session! (laughing). I wanted to hear about mine, which is selfish, I guess. But if you are talking about that many different degrees, you should probably break it up, not do it all in one shot. Um, but I think they [USF] said, “Is anybody here for the Executive MBA program?” And nobody was, and they said, “Okay, we won’t even talk about that then!” They
moved on instead of wasting everybody's time, so, it was good. I got what I needed.

Interviewer: And, so how did you go about seeking information on the programs? Obviously you went to info sessions.

Subject: I went online. I went online as well. Um, my – I know quite a few people that have gotten their MBA at Florida so I spoke to a couple of them. My best friend actually works in the admissions department at the University of Tampa and she is starting her MBA so she has been able to give me a lot of information. And as far as USF, it just is the other, you know, big university in the area, so I just went online.

Interviewer: And you said you also talked about it a little bit with some mentors in your life?

Subject: Ah-huh.

Interviewer: So what factors were important to you as you began to research these programs? What is it that you were saying, “ooh, that’s good for that one,” or, “that’s not good for that one?”

Subject: Right. Okay, I want to say obviously the location. That’s probably going to be pretty important in the long run. I completely ruled out doing any kind of internet program. I really don’t want to miss out on any of that face-to-face experience with the professors or the other people in the cohort. That’s important to me and from what I have heard, people really enjoy that. So I don’t want to miss out on that. I don’t want to miss that opportunity. I know a couple of the programs talked about the opportunity to study abroad, too. I don’t know if I will have the means or even the time to be able to do that but just having the option, I think, is important. Ah, I am trying to think of the different programs and different info sessions. But I know that none of them really talked about, though I know all three of them do, that you can pick some of these different electives to choose from as well. So you’ve got your main courses that you have to take but then you can kind of mix and match to...

Interviewer: To customize it.

Subject: Exactly, to customize it and tailor it to what your needs are. Which is important. Because there are certainly classes that I am going to love to take and then there are classes that I know I should take. So I will be like, ugh...
Subject: These all sound so great but I really need to take these!

So...I think cost. Cost is, obviously, the big factor. I don’t think there is too much of a variance between the three universities but I haven’t sat down and compared them dollar to dollar yet. So, I figure I am going to be paying a lot of money regardless of where I go (chuckling).

Interviewer: Do you have tuition assistance through the company?

Subject: I mean, it’s family, so...

Interviewer: So what – wait, I already asked you that – actually, you’ve already answered that one, too – um...

Subject: Well, I know that all three of those are accredited by the what’s it, the AA...

Interviewer: AACSB.

Subject: AACSB, so it didn’t really seem like one was really, um....

Interviewer: So accreditation mattered to you but...

Subject: It mattered.

Interviewer: But you just wanted to know it had it.

Interviewer: Did you look at schools such as [the University of] Phoenix or some of them like that? Why not?

Subject: Um, I wanted a university. A strong university. I thought Phoenix was an online program as well. I could be wrong. And I didn’t want, if that is the case I didn’t want an online program.

Interviewer: I think they are a hybrid.

Subject: Oh, um, well....

Interviewer: But they are not accredited.

Subject: Right. Truthfully, I had somebody, I had a mentor tell me you need to go to Duke or somewhere like that.

And I thought, I am not getting a degree because I am in a corporate setting where I am going to need that degree to move up the ladder and impress somebody with what, you know, with what school the diploma has on it. I need this because I need the experience.

And I don’t want to get it from a Webster or a Phoenix or something like that. But I was fine with considering
Florida and the two local universities around here because I know that they are great schools. They are great organizations. So I didn’t worry about that qualification, the professors or the academics at all. I knew it was going to be strong at any of those three universities.

Interviewer: Because of reputation?

Subject: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Um, What are your career aspirations. You already told me, long-term, it’s to take over the company. And short-term, what are you looking to do?

Subject: Um, short-term, I think I, like I was saying earlier, I really do want to kind of bolster my confidence a little bit, as far as my knowledge of different aspects of running a business and operating a business and financials are concerned. Um, again, it is important to me to build those relationships with people that I know will ultimately, you know, we can give business back and forth to each other. I think that’s great and I have heard a lot of success stories from people who have come out of those programs and stay in touch and still stay in touch with people in their cohort. Um, short-term, I just need to get that degree. I need to get that knowledge. I need that experience. So I know it is going to be a lot of work and I probably won’t see the light of day for the next two, two and a half years, but I am sure it will be worth it.

Interviewer: If I can do it with a 13-year-old and an 18-year-old who is just starting her freshman year of college, you can do it.

Subject: (laughing) That’s good. That’s good to know.

Interviewer: How long do you think it will take to see a monetary return, a monetary gain as a result of both your time investment and your financial investment?

Subject: (long pause) Hmm... when you say monetary gain, I am not in a...I am not going to be talking about a raise.

Interviewer: Some people – how long do you think it will take before you see some sort of return on this investment? Because you are investing time and you’re investing money.

Subject: I would think that would be evident within the first couple of semesters, honestly. I think ultimately after the whole program I would hope to feel well-rounded enough. But I would imagine that starting in the courses I would start to see the return. And talking about those relationships and the people that you are
going to be meeting, so I don’t think it will be too long
before you start to see.

Interviewer: Okay. I think, actually, that is all of my questions. I
know I skipped around a bit. Oh, wait, I did...here’s
one. Did you think about the program first, and then
the university, or the university or then the program?

Subject: The university.

Interviewer: You thought of the university before the program?

Subject: Oh, you mean the MBA as the program? Oh, yeah, I
thought about the MBA program first.

Interviewer: Okay. And you have not yet taken the GMAT?

Subject: No.

Interviewer: I think that’s everything.

Subject: Great.

Interviewer: Thanks
Cory is a Caucasian female who is considering an Executive MBA program but has not yet made the commitment to the degree program or to a university. She is a single mother whose grown son is now a single parent; she is essentially raising her granddaughter. She has enjoyed a long career in the healthcare industry, working while pursuing an undergraduate degree in business. After she earned her degree, she advanced at her company and eventually changed jobs to move up the ladder at another corporation. She was recently laid off by that company and will be returning to the job she formerly held (a move she perceives as a necessity, but as a step backward).

Interview Date: January 9, 2013
Interview Location: Burger King on Florida Avenue, Tampa
Interview Subject: Cory, 44 year old female, Prospect #4
Interview Duration: 19 minutes

1 Interviewer: So my topic is what people think about when deciding whether or not to go for an MBA and then what they look at when considering universities. So I need people who have already made that decision. I need people who are still thinking about it and I need people who are in process.
2 Subject: Okay. (Brief review of IRB permission form)
3 Interviewer: So you are thinking about getting an MBA. Where did you get your undergrad?
4 Subject: I have my bachelor’s degree from USF, the University of South Florida.
5 Interviewer: And what did you study?
6 Subject: Business administration.
7 Interviewer: How long ago did you graduate?
8 Subject: I graduated December 2006.
9 Interviewer: So did you – what did you study in terms of business?
10 Subject: Management and marketing.
11 Interviewer: Did you work while going to school?
12 Subject: Yes, I’m – I have been a single parent so I worked while going to school.
13 Interviewer: What did you do?
14 Subject: I actually was an executive assistant to the president of St. Joseph’s Hospital and to the Board of Trustees for 11 years. And that is with Baycare Health Systems.
15 Interviewer: That’s a lot of stuff to do. So what have you done since you got your undergraduate degree?
16 Subject: With my degree I was able to move into a management position. I was actually manager of donor relations for
Baycare Health System which is, again, St. Joseph’s hospitals. I handled all of our major donors and board members that give to the hospital.

Interviewer: So basically in development. So is that what you do now?

Subject: No. I moved into training in our billing and insurance departments, so I basically went to our business office for Baycare, which, again, is St. Joe’s and 11 hospitals total in their system. Business office does all of the billing and the insurance piece for all 11 hospitals. So, I learned...

Interviewer: That’s quite a transition from development.

Subject: Yeah, I learned the systems, the IT system. I trained registrars who came in through the system, 500 registrars across Baycare. I did training on our IT applications and on-the-job training and audits, that kind of thing.

Interviewer: So was there a particular reason you started thinking about getting an MBA? How long ago did you first start thinking about it?

Subject: I started thinking about getting my MBA once I realized that you cannot move into a director-level position within Baycare without an MBA.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: Not all hospital systems are, and not all businesses require an MBA for a director level, um, but Baycare does.

Interviewer: And so how long ago was it that you first started thinking about it? Two years ago, five years ago?

Subject: It’s been about 2-3 years. But I am paying student loans, like everyone else so I kind of put it off for a little bit. I then got – another health system, Iasis Healthcare, which is Town ’N Country Hospital, they actually inquired. They contacted me at Baycare and recruited me into a director-level position at their hospital, which only required a bachelor’s degree.

Interviewer: So you are now at Town ’N Country?

Subject: Um, I was just laid off.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Subject: So, um, I became a director of patient registration and billing and insurance at Town ’N Country Hospital and was there for one year and was then laid off.

Interviewer: So do you think you want go back to Baycare?

Subject: Yeah. They actually, I am supposed to start on Monday.

Interviewer: Congratulations. What are you going to be doing?
Subject: I am going to be back in training and development again. So, eventually I will be pursuing my degree – my master’s degree – because it is mandatory if you want to move up in the system into like senior-level management. But right now, I am kind of putting it off because of the economy and until I am back working.

Interviewer: Okay, so what do you think is the long-term benefit of getting an MBA?

Subject: The long-term benefit of an MBA would allow you to move into senior-level management positions, such as, like a [chief operating officer] of the hospital, a vice president of a company, that type of position. If you look online, most positions that are director level and above require an MBA.

Interviewer: And did you think there would be any short-term benefit?

Subject: (long pause) um, I have always gone to school part-time, so it has never been a short-term of anything (laughing). I have had to work while going to school so, no, none that I can think of at the time.

Interviewer: And did you think there would be any headaches?

Subject: Yeah. Maybe the short-term benefit would be, you know, your head focused on school and be able to, you know, contain the information, the education that you have already learned because I know the older you get that you have a lapse in memory (laughing). So that would be my short-term benefit.

Interviewer: So did you think there would be any headaches involved in going back to get the MBA?

Subject: Yeah, I think the biggest headache that I am finding right now is the cost. It's anywhere from $40,000-50,000 a year to go back to school for an MBA and also, um, the time away from work. At USF, you have to do every other Friday and one Saturday a month.

Interviewer: If you were to do the Executive MBA.

Subject: So that means your employer would have to approve you being out of work on a Friday a couple of times a month.

Interviewer: No, one time a month (unintelligible).

Subject: So it would basically be your probably paid time off day that you get.

Interviewer: So you are considering the Executive MBA not the traditional MBA?

Subject: Right. Because I have management experience. And that kind of lets you take the fast-track, the executive program.
Interviewer: It’s an awesome program.

Subject: Yeah. I did go to the open house and was seriously considering it. But I think I have to get my GMAT done and decide whether I am going to – want to invest $40,000 more in student loans. Because I – that’s a lot of money.

Interviewer: Yeah. It is. So how long did you think about the MBA before you actually began to research the programs?

Subject: I have just started researching it in the last six months.

Interviewer: Did you look at the degree first, and then the university? Or did you say, “I’m going to USF” and then explored the MBA, Executive MBA, the MS in Marketing, stuff like that?

Subject: Well, I knew I wanted to get a degree in business administration. My second option would be a master’s in healthcare administration. But I was leaning more toward the business one because you can use it at pretty much any type of industry, rather than just healthcare. Um, what was the question?

Interviewer: Well, you actually answered it. Were you looking at MBA and then choosing the university or were you looking at the university and then choosing the degree? You had the degree already in mind.

Subject: Right. And USF was actually my first choice, but my other reason for being kind of hesitant is that I would prefer online classes. So I looked at USF. I looked at University of Florida in Gainesville. They do have an online class but there’s limited seating that they allow in that. I have also looked at South University and the University of Phoenix. But I am kind of leery of those universities. Because I am finding out here that even like an RN, if they haven’t gotten their degree from a regionally accredited school then it’s not always accepted. So I am looking for something that – those two schools are –

Interviewer: I know they’re not AACSB accredited. I am not sure about regional accreditation. I don’t think they are, but I don’t know that. So how did you – well you haven’t taken the GMAT yet, right?

Subject: No.

Interviewer: How did you go about seeking information on the programs? You said you went to USF’s info session. Did you go to other info sessions? Did you go online?

Did you call?
Subject: Well, I went online. Um, I signed up for the open house that was about a month ago for the University of Tampa and for USF.

Interviewer: Okay. So you went to their websites as well?

Subject: Right.

Interviewer: What were your thoughts on the info sessions?

Subject: Um, well the one at USF, um, it gave an overview of the MBA program and then it broke it down into the two different groups, whether you were looking at the traditional MBA or the Executive MBA. I think it was informational, but I think it would be better if they had someone who could do one-on-one and sit down with prospective students to see if – to see what the concerns are.

Interviewer: So if they have that, it was not clear to you from the website that that was an option?

Subject: Well, I think it would probably, well, I could make an appointment with an advisor, but what I am saying is that at the info session it would be good if they had that available. I think that would have – because I think I – that’s your time that you’re – and I live far – so just to get to USF is kind of hard.

Interviewer: So at the info session? Okay.

Subject: Right.

Interviewer: So the degrees – rather, the universities that you have considered have been USF, UT, South, and the University of Phoenix. Any others?

Subject: I have had some universities call me, like Indiana Wesleyan and Eckerd but they kind of fall in the same category of Phoenix with the accreditation problem.

Interviewer: Okay. And did you seek any word-of-mouth reviews from friends? Ask any coworkers?

Subject: Well I did ask my boss whether I should pursue the master’s degree. My old boss, who now is again my current boss – he’s a VP of financial services for Baycare – he suggested that I not [pursue the degree] at this time, because, with the economy and how difficult it is to get into a job, adding the additional $40,000-$50,000 in student loans at my age, um, he didn’t recommend it at this time. But with the job market, if it gets better and when more positions open, it is probably something that I would think about.

Interviewer: Okay, so when looking at all of these things, I am hearing the fact that – well, actually, let me go back. I don’t want to go there yet. What factors were important to you as you began to research the
programs? Were you looking at program content? Were you looking at other factors? Well, obviously you – I have heard you say cost and time.

Subject: Cost. Content. Time. The accreditation. Because I know that with employers it's not always accepted, you know, whether it is regionally or whatever it is?

Interviewer: AACSB is the business school accrediting body.

Subject: And my age (laughing).

Interviewer: So of these, I've heard you say cost, the time away from work, the option for online, the program content, accreditation, your age... what was the most important factor to you as you are looking at whether or not you are going to do this?

Subject: The cost.

Interviewer: And does Baycare offer any sort of tuition assistance, reimbursement?

Subject: They do, um, they do for an undergraduate degree. It's minimal but for master's, they don't. I think they may be adding that into their program, but it's minimal. It's like $1,500 a year. It's something that is not very helpful.

Interviewer: (unintelligible) the one thing that has been most important to you all along?

Subject: The ability to move up the career ladder. And it's been a little bit difficult because I started late going to school. And so where some students have just graduated and they may be in a position similar to mine, I am 44 [years old], you know, so it is a little bit difficult as far as, um, the career ladder piece.

Interviewer: Yeah, I am 48 and I am almost always the oldest in the class. Every once in a while there is someone older than me, but not often. So you already told me about your career aspirations, how long do you think it will take before you, um, make a decision to go forward with this, in terms of both the time and the money?

Subject: Well, I think the program lasts two years, so I think there [would] probably be a $30,000 - $40,000 a year increase in my income, so probably 2-3 years.

Interviewer: Okay. Anything you want to add?

Subject: I think it is important for students who are young to be able to work and get the work experience at the same time as getting their master's rather than going straight into a master's program because, without the experience, the master's really doesn't help you. All employers want work experience, even the – I have a
huge amount of experience at my age but they still want more. So I think a master's program is important but I would recommend that students go ahead and pursue their career ladder after their bachelor's degree, or even before. And then consider the MBA once they get their foot in the door with an employer and they have gained the experience.

Interviewer: Personally, I agree with you. That's why USF implemented a two-year work requirement for the traditional MBA and for the Executive MBA they want seven years work experience.
Interview Date: January 10, 2013
Interview Location: Premier Parking on Florida Avenue, Tampa
Interview Subject: Tina, 32 year old female, Prospect #5
Interview Duration: 15 minutes

Tina is a married Indian female, a working mother who is considering an Executive MBA program but has not yet made the commitment to the degree program or to a university. She works full-time in her family’s downtown parking business, a move she made just a year or two ago, moving to Tampa after working in banking in Atlanta for a few years. When setting up the interview, she said she was interested in the Executive MBA program at USF but she was unsure if she wanted to go to China (an international experience is a requirement of the program and the last few years the group has travelled to China). She also mentioned that she is only interested in weekend classes.

Interviewer: Well I have 20 questions for you. As mentioned, they are relatively painless. There is no earth-shaking information that I am going to get here, but, um, it’s thinking about graduate school, and, in particular, the MBA.

Subject: Okay.

Interviewer: So have you started grad school? Have you applied? Where are you?

Subject: I been interested in USF and I was interested in the University of Tampa. And I just went over there to the, um, thing over there.

Interviewer: At USF? Or UT?

Subject: Yeah, at USF. And I am interested in the Executive MBA program.

Interviewer: Okay, great. I don’t have anyone [to be interviewed] from the Executive MBA program yet. Yay! It’s a great program, too. Holy cow.

Subject: I know. It’s wonderful.

Interviewer: So where did you attend school for your bachelor’s degree?

Subject: University of Florida.

Interviewer: What did you study?

Subject: Business. Management.

Interviewer: And how long ago did you graduate?

Subject: I graduated in 2002.

Interviewer: Okay. So did you work while going to school?

Subject: No.

Interviewer: And what have you done since you graduated?

Subject: I have been doing all managerial things.
Subject: I was at Wells Fargo in Atlanta. And then I have been with my brother pretty much ever since.

Interviewer: So this is a family business here?

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. How long were you in Atlanta?

Subject: A couple of years?

Interviewer: Do you like Tampa better?

Subject: Well, now I am married and have two kids. Yeah.

Interviewer: How old are your kids?

Subject: Three and seven months.

Interviewer: Ahhh. Isn't that a great age? And a great age to do the MBA program.

Subject: Oh, yes.

Interviewer: Mine are 18 and 13.

Subject: Really.

Interviewer: It would have been better to do this when they were little. They go to bed. They don't need driving anywhere.

Subject: (laughs) Yeah.

Interviewer: So what do you do here?

Subject: Here, I am a property manager. So my main role is to collect rent. And then there are other things. Like today we had a fire inspection. Stuff like that.

Interviewer: Okay. So how long ago did you first think about getting an MBA?

Subject: Probably when I first graduated from college?

Interviewer: Why was that?

Subject: Because a lot of my friends went into law and they did it at University of Florida. But I moved to Atlanta. And then I came here. And I actually, one of my – a couple people I know went to USF. One is Rupesh Shaw. He was at Wellcare. And my second cousin, his name is Durpan. He was there.

Interviewer: Okay. So you have heard about USF, a little bit of word-of-mouth from family.

Subject: Yes. And my uncle, Dr. Kiran Patel.

Interviewer: Oh, I had no idea that was your uncle.

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: He’s quite familiar with USF.

Subject: That’s the main reason (chuckling).

Interviewer: Okay. Great. So was there a particular incident that led you to think about getting an MBA? You mentioned friends going to law school, was there something at Wells Fargo?

Subject: I think I just need more money.

Interviewer: Okay.
Subject: Yeah.
Interviewer: And what did you think the long-term benefit would be from getting an MBA?
Subject: Long-term, really my salary. And that’s pretty much it.
Interviewer: And did you think about any short-term benefits?
Subject: Yes. Really, for, like, my responsibilities at work.
Interviewer: How so?
Subject: Well, I think it would help the company more. If there were somebody that had – if I got my MBA, the company would be better.
Interviewer: And did you think there would be any headaches?
Subject: Yes (laughing). There are always headaches.
Interviewer: What kind of headaches?
Subject: Well, just balancing work life and family life.
Interviewer: Okay. So have you actually – it sounds like you have done some researching of programs. How long did you actually think about it before you began researching programs? I am guessing ten years. Nine, ten years?
Subject: (laughing) that’s a long time. I know. It’s been on my mind. You’re right.
Interviewer: But how long have you seriously been thinking about it?
Subject: Couple of years.
Interviewer: And so have you decided – you haven’t decided yet if you want to do it, I suppose, but did you think about MBA first, and then where would I get it? Or did you think, “I want a graduate degree at USF, which one do I want to go for?”
Subject: Well, now I am really thinking about public/private. And I think the University of Tampa is private. And I think that I am better off doing public, because I went to public school, so that is why I am thinking this is better. For me.
Interviewer: But you have already decided on a degree? You are not deciding between an MBA...
Subject: Oh, yeah.
Interviewer: Or an MS in Management or an MS in Marketing...
Subject: No.
Interviewer: Okay, so program first. Okay. Have you taken the GMAT?
Subject: No.
Interviewer: So, how did you go about seeking information on the programs?
Subject: Just online. I like the brochure. I was reading the brochure.
Interviewer: So you downloaded the brochure?
Subject: Ah-huh.

Interviewer: Did you find all the information you needed in it?

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: What kind of information, specifically, were you looking for?

Subject: Hours.

Interviewer: Hours meaning time of day hours?

Subject: Class hours.

Interviewer: Hours they were offered or duration of the program?

Subject: Duration.

Interviewer: So, meaning, it's going to take me two years, or because the classes are offered at night?

Subject: Two years.

Interviewer: Okay. What other kind of information were you looking for?

Subject: Well, you know I went over there [to the info session] and they were talking about going to China. And my main concern is whether I want to spend $40,000. You know, is it worth it? But, I really do want to do it.

Interviewer: And were you looking at program content? You know the kind of classes that you were going to study? Or were there other things that you were looking at?

Subject: Well, yeah. I mean, finance is really important.

Interviewer: So, I heard you mention a number of things. One was the return on investment.

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: One was the international trip. Program content. The duration of the program. A public versus a private. How are you going to balance this in your life? And is this going to help you make more money. Out of all of those things, which would you say was the very most important to you in making this decision?

Subject: Hmmm. Most important decision I want to make with this is if you know, if I do get this job that I do make a better salary. That's the main importance. So that, that it's worth going.

Interviewer: So, again, it goes back to that return on investment.

Subject: Yes. Exactly.

Interviewer: Okay. Um, so once you decided – or as you decide – on the degree, what universities did you consider? I heard USF and UT. Have you looked at any others?

Subject: No.

Interviewer: And is that all you plan to look at?

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: Alright. What stuck out about these two for you?
169  Subject:  Well, USF, now, because it's public, that's why I am considering that way. Plus, some of my friends have taken it, too. A couple of my friends.
170  Interviewer:  In the Executive program or the traditional?
171  Subject:  I think it is called COBA. And they have some classes over here, in downtown. Yeah.
172  Interviewer:  Soon they may be offering a class or two at CAMLS (USF Health’s downtown facility). For MBA or entrepreneurship students, I think, one or two classes there.
173  Subject:  Wow.
174  Interviewer:  Not for the Executive MBA.
175  Subject:  Uh-huh. In there?
176  Interviewer:  But for the traditional MBA at the College of Business.
177  Subject:  Wow. That's really good.
178  Interviewer:  I am not sure when that's going to start (unintelligible).
179  Subject:  That's really good. Because I have been here, they've built that whole thing.
180  Interviewer:  Um, okay, so you did attend the information session. How was it?
181  Subject:  Good. Very good.
182  Interviewer:  Why do you say that?
183  Subject:  Well, I really like the fact that it's new. It is nice, it's really nice; they have done, like, some renovation over there.
184  Interviewer:  You mean the facility.
185  Subject:  Yeah. It's very nice.
186  Interviewer:  Okay. And what else?
187  Subject:  Well, you know, just. It's time. I think it is time. It's time.
188  Interviewer:  So, when looking at the factors that were important to you as you determined which institution you would attend, you've mentioned location – being Tampa, not downtown versus other. Location, the facility, was there anything else that was important to you as you determined the university?
189  Subject:  (uneasy pause)
190  Interviewer:  Did you consider a Phoenix or a Southeastern or…
191  Subject:  No.
192  Interviewer:  Why not.
193  Subject:  Just because that's not – if I can get into USF I would be happy there.
194  Interviewer:  Did accreditation matter?
195  Subject:  Yes.
196  Interviewer:  The way you were nodding your head...
197  Subject:  (laughing)
Interviewer: ...led me to believe that you didn’t think much of those. Of the Phoenix. Or the South Univ...

Subject: No.

Interviewer: Because of accreditation?

Subject: Yeah (chuckling).

Interviewer: Um, so, out of location, facility, accreditation, or reputation, which was most important to you?

Subject: I would go with reputation.

Interviewer: Okay, so what are your career goals? Short-term and long-term.

Subject: I want to be able to focus more on my responsibilities here. And long-term, I want to be, like, the CEO.

Interviewer: What kind of company? I mean, this company?

Subject: Another company?

Interviewer: I would really like to stay here. That’s why I am in limbo. Because I am – now I am doing well. So I need to decide, so I want to go on Sa – I mean, I don’t mind going on Saturdays, it’s just all about, well, investment.

Interviewer: Well, that’s actually my last question here. It’s how long do you think it will take before you see a return on your investment in terms of time or money? How long do you think it would take?

Subject: I think three years.

Interviewer: Three years before you think it was worth it?

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: And why do you say that?

Subject: Well, I think because the first couple of years you are still, you know, in that class mode. And then you start really using all of that work.

Interviewer: So do you mean three years after graduation, or three years including the time it takes to do it?

Subject: I would say after.

Interviewer: After. Okay.

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: So when do you think you might start? Because the Executive [MBA] only starts once a year.

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: So you would have to be taking that test pretty soon.

Subject: The GMAT?

Interviewer: Ah-huh. Because if it starts in August, I think the applications are due in June, maybe July. So you’ll need to take the GMAT before June.

Subject: Before June?

Interviewer: I think. I am not in admissions, but I think that is it.

Subject: Yeah, that sounds right.
Admissions aren’t my responsibility at all, I’m just looking at this, but knowing they start – the Executive MBA only starts in August.

Yeah.

Great. Anything else you’d like to add?

No. I just really think USF is really the way things are going. I have just done a lot of research and I think that is a very good school.

Good.
Interview Date: January 10, 2013
Interview Location: Via telephone
Interview Subject: Lenny, 35 year old male, Prospect #6
Interview Duration: 24 minutes

Lenny is a married male who is considering an MBA program but has not yet made the commitment to the degree program or to a university. His ethnicity/race and marital status were not revealed during the interview, which was conducted via phone as the planned Skype interview was unable to be conducted due to technical difficulties. Lenny indicated that he had recently decided to take a course via USF’s continuing education program, one that allows him to “test the water” and take classes for a business certificate program, courses that could potentially be applied toward MBA work. He works full-time in management and in the IT arena for a telecom company.

1 Interviewer: I just have twenty questions for you. It should take about twenty minutes or less, sometimes a little longer. Starting here with the hard one. How old are you?
2 Subject: Oh, no, no, that’s not hard. I am 85 (interviewer laughs). No, no, I am just kidding. I am 35.
3 Interviewer: Okay. And, um, where did you attend school for your undergraduate degree?
4 Subject: In the Dominican Republic. That’s in the Caribbean. Yes, I attended the Pontifico Catholic University.
5 Interviewer: How long ago did you graduate?
6 Subject: What?
7 Interviewer: How long ago did you graduate?
8 Subject: Oh, that was ten years ago.
9 Interviewer: Okay. And what did you study while you were there?
10 Subject: I studied a Bachelor’s of Science in electrical engineering. Over there it is called telematics engineering. My major was in telecommunications.
11 Interviewer: Did you work while going to school? Or have you worked since you graduated? Or both?
12 Subject: Repeat that, please?
13 Interviewer: Did you work while going to school?
14 Subject: I worked only for one year.
15 Interviewer: Okay.
16 Subject: One year and a half. Something around there. One year, one year and a half. But then I quit the job and went full-time.
17 Interviewer: Okay. And what have you done as a career since you graduated?
Um, I would say a mix of telecom and information technology.

Okay.

I work completely now in IT, but within the telecom company, still.

Like a Verizon or something like that?

Yes, correct. I work in Verizon.

Oh, that is your company (laughing)? I was guessing.

Yes, yes. I thought maybe you saw it in a signature, in an email signature or something like that.

Okay. And are you a U.S. citizen?

Yes. I was born in Brooklyn, New York.

Okay. What made you choose to go to school in the Dominican Republic?

Oh, I didn’t have a choice. My mom sent me over there. Well, the thing is, my mom, she had a business, a supermarket in the Dominican Republic and she wanted to be present there for her business to succeed. And, you know, being her son, you know, I – mom takes you wherever she wants.

Yep!

So that’s why I ended up in the Dominican Republic. I lived there for about, ah, almost twenty years.

Okay. But you’re, you – where do you live right now?

I live here, in Tampa.

Okay. Alright. So, how long ago did you first start thinking about getting an MBA?

How long ago, um (long pause)...I would say...maybe uh, like somewhat like six or eight months ago. Nine months ago. Yeah.

Okay. Was there something that happened, or a particular incident, that led you to start to think about the MBA? Or was there a particular reason you began to think about it?

Yes. I wanted to diversify. You know, looking at myself as basically a product. I asked myself, you know, what I have to offer, you know, if, let’s say, worst case scenario, if I am laid off. Or if, another scenario, maybe I decide that, you know, I want to take another direction or change jobs or be somewhat resilient. So that I am not depending on just one skill set. And, basically my job, for the last five years, has been – my skill sets are very narrow and focused in technology. And, even though that technology is broad, but I want to have – to diversify myself and to have – and to also learn something or acquire skills that can help me
become independent. So that one day maybe I'll start
my own business or maybe one day, you know, make
some savvy business decisions that financially help out
myself and my family.

Interviewer: And, what did you – you danced around this answer
already – but what did you think the long-term benefit
of getting an MBA.

Subject: Just to clarify, before I answer that question, I am not,
in a strict sense, in the MBA program. I am in the
graduate business foundations certificate degree. You
know, I, um, so I don't know how you got me in your
system that – it might appear that I am an MBA
student but I am not.

Interviewer: Right.

Subject: I enrolled in the graduate certificate.

Interviewer: Right, yeah, I know that. Because I am looking for
people who are not yet MBAs but have thought about
it as well as people who are in it.

Subject: Oh, okay. Okay, I just wanted to clarify. You kept
referring to the MBA student, you know, I don't want
to give you, you know, the wrong impression.

Interviewer: Yeah. You're not there yet, you are thinking about it.

Subject: Exactly, yeah. I wanted to test the waters and see if I
really end up liking it. But going back to your question
– your question was again, I’m sorry.

Interviewer: What did you think the long-term benefit would be if
you were to go for the MBA?

Subject: Oh, um, well, I looked at it from a personal perspective
of that I would acquire some business skills and
complement the technical skills that I have. And let's
say if I decide to stay within corporate America at least
I will have more mobility in the company. Going
upwards in high management positions and/or maybe
changing fields, going into more business, a more
business-like job. But if I don't decide to stay
(unintelligible) working in the company then at least I
will have the tools to start my own business. At least,
that's what I hope to learn from the MBA and the
certificate.

Interviewer: Okay. Did you think there would be any short-term
benefits?

Subject: Yes, I would start looking at things from, you know,
from the perspective of a business person, you know.
Not so strictly in the technical sense. And that was also
one of the reasons that inherently made me want to
choose something that would complement my
technical skills, in this case, business. Because I was in a situation – well, I partly was in a situation where a then-critical situation was going on in outage and – in service outage – and, the – even though in my department we knew what to fix in a technical sense, to make things work again, the decision was made to go ahead and do it by a business person, by an executive. So that kind of gave me the sense that, you know, I am here, working, you know, fixing and maintaining and guiding the network but at the end of the day it boils down to an executive making the decision, a business person who doesn’t know exactly how to fix it but he’s the one that calls the shots. So I am not really then basically anything. I am just a monkey here. The one that does, you know, the one that pushes the button that needs to be pushed. Can I push it? And he says yes or no. So I am not really linking it to this.

Interviewer: Okay. So do you think there will be any headaches involved with getting a graduate business degree?

Subject: Oh yes, I’m sure. Yeah, yeah. (laughing)

Interviewer: (laughing)

Subject: Any degree can be, you know, categorized as more easy than another. It might have less, um, you know, less “stressful situation,” you know, and that I’ve known because I have some friends that have studied medicine, went to medical school. They tell me stories that they are in situations where they are trying to come up with a diagnostic on saving lives. I know that’s going to be more stressful than me fixing a service for somebody that can’t watch TV. I know they aren’t going to die if they can’t watch CNN or Matlock.

Interviewer: (chuckling) They might think they can!

Subject: Yeah (chuckling). So there, it’s, you know – it’s not either less or more easier. All of them come with some level of difficulty.

Interviewer: Okay. So, you’ve been – you started thinking about this six or eight months ago, how long before you began researching programs?

Subject: Well, um, researching programs – I would say... (long pause) as soon as I thought about it I started, you know, researching programs. But I – it was – I narrowed down my choices pretty fast for me because I didn’t want to do an online program, which there I would have more of a broader spectrum of choices. Here I just said, “Well, I would like to go to a
traditional brick and mortar university, you know, be
present there. So I narrowed it down to USF or UT .
That’s it.

Interviewer: That’s it, no other? Okay. And, um, how did you find
out information about USF and UT and their programs.

Subject: Online. Checking their websites, and then, um, I have a
few friends and I checked with them. Checked with
people who went through a UT MBA and then, um,
unfortunately, I didn’t find anybody with an MBA from
USF, but I did find some people that did a bachelor’s in
management information systems. You know, they
told that they did a little bit of business courses there,
so that’s how I kind of, um, narrowed it down.

Interviewer: So before you started researching, you didn’t know
about the certificate program, I’m assuming.

Subject: No, no, I, um, I knew about the, um, that USF had some
certificate programs but I didn’t know specifically that
they had one for business. Yeah, I – at that time, when I
went in I was just wandering around the certificate
page – I mean USF’s certificate webpage – and looking
at an engineering certificate since I have a background
in engineering. My bachelor’s was in engineering so I
was just looking around, seeing how difficult it was
and then, that’s when I bumped into business.

Interviewer: Okay. And so, the things I have heard you say that
were important factors to you as you considered this
program were the opportunity to strengthen your
skillsets and make yourself more marketable, financial
benefit or job security for your family, the opportunity
to change fields, maybe even become an entrepreneur,
and then, that’s when I bumped into business.

Interviewer: Okay, and when you were looking at the particular
websites and pages to look at, what kind of
information were you looking for?
Subject: The curriculum, like what courses I would have to take and hopefully find some description of the courses. And, um, and also information about the schedule, potential schedule, you know, something that would draw me a picture, a big picture of how life would be if I was to decide to go for it.

Interviewer: Okay. Okay. Hang on, I’m trying to write this down. So, the – did you attend UT’s information session?

Subject: No, no. I didn’t even – I kind of, um, discarded UT also because of – it is not going to be as close as USF, one. Second, it’s more expensive. Third, I um, um, I saw a – I’m trying to remember. If I remember correctly, I saw their curriculum and... I don’t know right now. I remember it was something about the curriculum that I didn’t kind of like much. Um, you know so (pause) I don’t have – it kind of gave me the feeling that it was going to be an uphill battle to get into their MBA. Yeah, I don’t know. I kind of find that with USF, with the graduate certificate I got the perception – I hope I am not wrong once I go through with that – that USF was offering a path, a thoughtful path, to get you to obtain an MBA. You know, by offering you a foundational course for those that don’t have the business background or the business degree.

Interviewer: Right.

Subject: I kind of thought that by having the business, the graduate business foundation it was more of like a strategic way to get you to obtain an MBA if you decide to go for it. I do see UT as more of like an uphill journey.

Interviewer: That’s my understanding of it as well. I mean, I am not involved in that but that is the way that I understand it. Is that it is kind of the pathway, kind of once you successfully do that, as long as you make certain grades, then you – other than taking the GMAT – are ready to go in.

Subject: (unintelligible)

Interviewer: So then, how would you rate – oh, never mind, I already asked you that question. So how long do you think it will take for you to see a monetary gain or a return on your investment when it comes to this degree?

Subject: (pause) Wow. That’s a hard one. That’s a hard question I am not going to be able to answer. I am not sure there.
What would it take for you to be able to say, "This was worth it?"

If I, if I see that, um, let's say, if it opens a door for, to get into a job that I see that needs some business skills.

Or if I find myself in a situation at work where those business skills I saw that help me arrive at a decision or help to resolve something. That's all I can think of right now.

So you how long after you get your degree do you think it would take for that to happen?

I am sorry, what did you say?

How long do - do you think that would happen immediately as you got your degree program, or maybe after the degree? When do you think you would be able to apply what you have learned?

Well, um, that's a difficult question. Specifically in the job that I am at right now, I don't foresee that would happen any time soon. Maybe after I am almost done with the certificate but I don't see that happening with the job that I am at right now.

Okay. I think that's all the questions I have. Do you have anything you want to add?

No, no, that's basically it, yeah. Well, now after we finish this, I would like to ask you personally, um, a couple of questions, but not related to the survey in itself.
Dani is a single Caucasian female who is considering an MBA program but has not yet made the commitment to the degree program or to a university. She indicated that she had recently attended an information session for graduate business programs but that is as far as she has carried her inquiries. During the course of the interview, it was discovered that Dani currently holds a job that the interviewer previously held for many years in a local non-profit agency. There was a fair amount of banter about this coincidence and the mutual acquaintances as a result. During the interview the recorder malfunctioned, so only the latter portion of the conversation was captured. However, since this was noted before Dani left the premises, the interviewer summarized the conversation based on her notes and Dani agreed that the essence of the conversation had been captured.

1 Interviewer: So you definitely thought about program first?
2 Subject: Yeah, mm-hmm. Yep, program first.
3 Interviewer: So have you taken the GMAT?
4 Subject: Not yet. No. Or the GRE.
5 Interviewer: How did you go about seeking information on the programs?
6 Subject: I went online. I did look online to see what programs you guys have, et cetera. The basic information.
7 Interviewer: What kind of information were you seeking?
8 Subject: Um, basically, what do you guys offer, do you have an MBA, do you have just a regular MBA, do you have EMBA? I mean, what options are available. And then, of course, the costs involved as well. Which is a huge question mark for everybody.
9 Interviewer: And are you looking at the MBA or the Executive MBA, or you haven’t decided?
10 Subject: That’s what – I guess that’s what I, I am a little bit torn on right now, because I feel like the EMBA fits into my schedule but I don’t know, I just am still a little torn on that one.
11 Interviewer: Okay. So what factors were important to you as you began to research the programs? For instance, were you looking at program content or other factors?
12 Subject: Um, Yeah, content. And as far as reputation, I mean, obviously you want to go to a school that has a reputation for having people that are successful after they achieve their MBA. So things like that were – are – important to me.
Interviewer: Okay. So, as you’ve talked here, I’ve heard you mention career progression, learning business information or lingo, kind of the usefulness of the degree, face-to-face contact, cost, program content, and reputation. Out of all of those things, which would you say was the most important thing that you’ve considered?

Subject: Hmmm. Probably career progression to me is one of the big things.

Interviewer: Great. Was there anything else you considered that I haven’t given you a chance to tell me?

Subject: Hmmm. I don’t think so. I think that pretty much is a good synopsis of everything.

Interviewer: Okay. Once you decided – well, you haven’t yet decided to go for the degree . . .

Subject: Right.

Interviewer: What universities are you considering? You’ve already mentioned USF, UT, maybe St. Leo?

Subject: I haven’t looked into theirs, but I know they do offer one, so . . .

Interviewer: Okay. How did you go about seeking information on the specific universities? You already said you went to an information session. Did you seek word-of-mouth reviews from friends?

Subject: Um… I haven’t done that yet. Actually, that is a good option so (laughing) thanks for the suggestion!

Interviewer: Did you ask co-workers, kind of, about institutions?

Subject: I did, actually. I did talk to one of my co-workers that did the MBA here, I believe. At USF, so . . .

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: I talked with her about that.

Interviewer: Great. And what factors were important to you as you think about USF vs. UT? Or whatever.

Subject: I think that for me it’s just maybe the, um, probably, like the reputation and just the experience overall. Because, as I said, you know, I had the big school experience. So I am kind of torn. Do I want to try another “I’m in a huge institution” experience or do I want to go for something small and private.

Interviewer: And so, all along, what is the one thing that is most important. What do you want to get out of this?

Subject: What’s – what’s, you mentioned the program experience, but what’s most important to you all along?

Interviewer: I think still the career, I mean, as far as like, career progression, yes, definitely. Really how can I apply it to
my everyday life, how can I be even more successful with the information that I will get from the MBA?

Interviewer: So, the next two questions you have already really mentioned. What are your career aspirations, short-term and long-term? Long-term I am hearing you say possibly the E.D. (executive director) or CEO of a non-profit.

Subject: Absolutely.

Interviewer: So you definitely want to stay in non-profit?

Subject: I think so, yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. And what about your short-term career goals?

Subject: Short-term? Um, pssh (laughing and pause). I’ve been, like, thinking about the long-term! I haven’t thought that much about the short-term! I guess for me it’s just always a chance to grow, to learn. I mean, those are my everyday goals. You’ll learn something every day. Try to grow personally and professionally every day and, um, have fun, too. You can’t leave out the fun, so… (laughing).

Interviewer: So, how long do you think it will take before you would be able to see a monetary gain as a result of earning this degree?

Subject: I don’t know. You know, I really don’t. That’s, um, maybe one of the questions I am still, you know, that I have a question mark on, because we kind of went through the earning potentials but, honestly, to me, it didn’t seem like that much of a jump. You know, with the MBA. That is part of the reason, like, that I haven’t, you know, gone forward with the idea.

Interviewer: So if you were to get the degree and you didn’t see a huge monetary jump, but it opened a door for you, would that then make you say it …

Subject: That would still, be impressive. Yeah, that would still be worth it. It would. And again, you’ve still got the personal growth and everything that you would achieve. I mean, everybody – I do know people that have gotten their MBA and they do say, like, “Hey, it is definitely, it changes your life.” You know, it is something that, um, you are always happy that you did.

Interviewer: Perfect. Um, I want to go back and check and make sure that was recording!

Subject: (laughing)

Interviewer: Before I go and do that, do you have anything else you want to add?

Subject: No, not really.
Interviewer: I didn’t ask, do you have kids?
Subject: No, I don’t.
Interviewer: And you live in Tampa, right? For demographic purposes.
Subject: Yeah.
Interviewer: So, let’s check this recording device (discovers first portion of interview did not record properly). Okay, so the first eight questions that I asked you, um, you attended USF for your undergraduate degree.
Subject: Yes, I did.
Interviewer: You graduated in 2001 with a degree in microbiology.
Subject: Yes.
Interviewer: You were planning to always go back to grad school but you didn’t necessarily know exactly what degree, yes.
Interviewer: You are currently not using your degree.
Subject: No.
Interviewer: You are working at Big Brothers Big Sisters; you do training and match activities.
Subject: Yep.
Interviewer: You first began thinking about the MBA six months to a year ago, and the particular incident that led you to see that was that you started to see kind of like a void in the non-profit world in terms of business acumen or knowledge. And because you eventually would like to be promoted.
Subject: Exactly.
Interviewer: Possibly become a CEO.
Subject: Yes.
Interviewer: The long-term benefit for you would be the opportunity to be in charge of an agency, as a CEO or an executive director. The short-term goal for you would be that you like to learn. And you want to gain that business knowledge.
Subject: Yes.
Interviewer: And, in terms of headaches, you (both interviewer and subject laugh) acknowledge that, um, yeah, there is a bit of work. Um, that you might have no social life. And that sometimes grad school can cause a strain on relationships.
Subject: They are all very true.
Interviewer: Is that all accurate? I got it?
Subject: Those are all accurate, yes.
Interviewer: Okay. And you’re 35 years old and your name is “Dani,” for this purpose.
Subject: Yes.
Interview Date: January 24, 2013
Interview Location: USF College of Business
Interview Subject: John, 34 year old male, Prospect #8
Interview Duration: 18 minutes

John is a divorced Caucasian male with no children, but he has a girlfriend who has two children and is expecting his child. He is considering an MBA program. Retired from the military, John still works at MacDill AFB, doing so as a civilian employee (Department of Defense) at Special Operations Command.

Interviewer: So, obviously you have a bachelor's degree. Where did you attend school and when did you graduate?
Subject: USF, August 2005.
Interviewer: What did you study here?
Subject: International Relations. International studies.
Interviewer: So not a business student?
Subject: No.
Interviewer: That’s in humanities? What is . . . ?
Subject: It's in the College of Arts and Sciences.
Interviewer: Arts and Sciences? I had somebody else that I interviewed that had the degree and background. So what did you, when you were graduating, did you think you would be doing with that degree?
Subject: Well, I already worked for the government. In the intelligence community, so I wasn’t – sometimes you need that bachelor's degree to check a block, so to speak. And I was active duty military when I was here. And I graduated, so I was stationed at MacDill. So you can see that it kind of lined up just to come here and take the evening and weekend classes, online classes. Get the degree that way. So I did.
Interviewer: Are you still active duty?
Subject: No.
Interviewer: Okay. And so then you worked, obviously, while going to school?
Subject: Yes.
Interviewer: And do you, have you, stayed in the same job? I am thinking obviously not.
Subject: Same career field. Definitely yes.
Interviewer: Okay. What do you do now?
Subject: I am an intelligence analyst.
Interviewer: What company?
Subject: I am a government employee. So you can put Department of Defense. Defense intelligence agency, U.S. SOCOM.
Interviewer: Oh. But you are a civilian employee at SOCOM.
Subject: That is correct.

Interviewer: Okay. And how many years of work experience do you have?

Subject: (pause) Probably close to 14, 15.

Interviewer: Really? Well how long ago did you first starting thinking about pursuing an MBA?

Subject: Probably about four months ago. Three or four months ago.

Interviewer: Oh, relatively quickly.

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: Was there a particular incident that led you to do that?

Subject: No. Just trying to increase my marketability for future scenarios.

Interviewer: Were you passed over for anything or did you think about applying for something?

Subject: Well, I am always passed over for everything, but… (Slightly sarcastic tone)

Interviewer: (chuckles)

Subject: Nothing in particular. But if I had a business degree. No, nothing like that.

Interviewer: So you are just forward thinking.

Subject: Right. Trying to be, yeah.

Interviewer: Alright. What did you think the long-term benefit – you just told me – of having an MBA would be?

Subject: Eventually to leave government service and get a job in corporate America. Or, at a minimum, enhance my career progression in the government.

Interviewer: And did you think about any short-term benefits?

Subject: (pause) Um, not really. No.

Interviewer: Do you think there will be any headaches involved. . .

Subject: A little.

Interviewer: …in getting an MBA?

Subject: Several. Sure, I mean, if it were easy everybody would have one. So...

Interviewer: True. What kind of headaches to you think might be involved?

Subject: Mainly family issues. My girlfriend has two kids and we have one on the way. So it is going to be an automatic job. (Interrupted by interviewer sneezing and resulting “bless you’s.”) If I go back to Afghanistan, that’s always a possibility, so that might take me out of the game for a semester, maybe two. So there are always work-related and family-related issues.

Interviewer: Okay. So – you’ve actually already answered this one sort of, too – how long did you think about it before you began researching programs?
Subject: I came to the – I don't know how I thought about it – I just looked it up online and it was – there was an information seminar the next week. That was like, November or something. October, November timeframe.

Interviewer: So you didn’t see an ad that led you to that, you just thought, “I should explore getting an MBA and...”

Subject: Right.

Interviewer: So had you decided you wanted to come back to USF and then thought about the degree, or had you thought, were you thinking “I want an MBA and USF may be one of the choices.”

 Subject: The latter. I was thinking about the MBA and USF is on my way home, so ... and I had been here before.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: I love the school. I just – I have a master's degree from Troy University that I got in residence at their campus on Kennedy Boulevard – and as useful as that is, it's somewhat useful – again, it's not meeting my desire to diversify myself and make myself more marketable for future opportunities.

Interviewer: What other universities might you consider?

Subject: (pause) I would have to look, probably. I am not a fan of online schools. I took a couple of classes online both for my master's and bachelor's and it wasn't really enamored with it. It would have to be USF. I can't imagine going to UT or anything like that (unintelligible).

Interviewer: Great. So have you taken the GMAT yet?

Subject: No I have not.

Interviewer: Or the GRE? Any entry test?

Subject: No.

Interviewer: How did you go about seeking information on the programs? You mentioned online.

Subject: I went to the on-site information seminar and I came in, probably in the middle of December, to speak with the coordinator for the certificate program. Unfortunately the timeline that they needed was a little too accelerated for me to catch up for this spring semester. Even though classes start, you know, first week of March, I needed to have everything in by the first week of January, which, to me, defeats the purpose of rolling admissions, but, you know, here I am. Ready to start but if I start it will have to be the fall.

Interviewer: So you are looking at a fall start?
Subject: If anything. If I do start, yeah.

Interviewer: Right. And what factors were you looking at as you began to research the programs? What kind of information were you looking at pertaining to the program?

Subject: Of course, was always looking at entrance requirements. Looking for a program that catered to the working professional. Evening, maybe weekend classes like with my other master's. So those were the kind of, the two primary things. And then I talked to someone – her name escapes me – that talked with me about how quickly I could get it done. The certificate program didn't appear all that challenging as far as time. Length.

Interviewer: And the certificate program is simply an entryway into the MBA?

Subject: Right, exactly. And it serves two purposes for me. One, it would give me something and, two, it would set me up for future [classes]. It is the perfect scenario for me.

Interviewer: Did you know about that before you started exploring this option?

Subject: No. No, not until I went to the information seminar.

Interviewer: So that's where you learned about it, at the info session?

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: That does appeal to you, then?

Subject: Absolutely, yes. It does.

Interviewer: So the factors that I have heard you mention are marketability and the ability to diversify your skills, the opportunity to enhance your career progression, you wanted face-to-face, no online classes . . .

Subject: Preferably.

Interviewer: . . . can you get in/the entry requirements, the [program that is tailored toward] the working professional, the duration/how long it is going to take you to complete. Out of all of those, which would you say is the most important?

Subject: I would say the diversification. You know, marketability. Same thing.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: I have two liberal arts degrees and it is not always the most marketable in these economic times. So, it’s great in government now, but before I move on I need something different.
Interviewer: What is your long-term career goal? Do you want to stay – it sounds like you don’t want to stay in, kind of, D.O.D….

Subject: It’s not that I don’t want to stay, it’s just that I don’t see the – it’s a changing world. Missions change. Government policies change. I mean, I am sure you are familiar with the, um, potential furloughed employees coming up in March. I mean, there’s a lot of, a lot of negative – I don’t want to say negative – different challenges.

Interviewer: Challenges?

Subject: Challenges, that’s a good way to put it.

Interviewer: Okay. So you’re thinking ahead. Kind of, if those challenges impact you.

Subject: Right.

Interviewer: Well, I am going to just jump ahead here. So that’s kind of your long-term career goals. What are your short-term career goals?

Subject: Well, I mean (stumbling over words) as far as having a job, I’m pretty safe. However, [my chances to] advance, those chances are dwindling, it seems. So, I mean, I could either stay where I am at and be comfortable, or I can venture out and… I have a friend who just got a job at Citigroup and he has no business background whatsoever. I think he has a bachelor’s in business, but I mean, beyond that -- or a bachelor’s in management or something like that – there are opportunities out there that I think my skillset already have. Add my MBA or a certificate to that and it would be something – you know a lot better than just having a business background. I have cultural…

Interviewer: The analysis factor.

Subject: Right.

Interviewer: Citigroup is actually hiring quite a few business majors for business intelligence and business data analysis and so forth. So, I’m going to go back up. So, once – well you haven’t decided on the degree yet at this point, you’re still in limbo. When do you think you might make a decision?

Subject: After I see if the timeline for fall admissions might work. And look backwards. As terrible as it might be, we all procrastinate and put things off, so…

Interviewer: So, in a sense, you need a reminder, “hey, fall admissions are around the corner…”

Subject: Yeah. Remember, I am having a child in May or June, so that might affect the timeline as well.
191

Interviewer: True. So, you did attend the in-person information session.

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: Just USF’s? You didn’t go to any others.

Subject: Right.

Interviewer: What did you think of it?

Subject: It encouraged me enough to seek out the requirements and schedule a meeting, a follow-up meeting to look and the timeline was just too rushed for me to really complete before Christmas. I came here and they kept referencing to get all these things done and I just couldn’t see it happening. Which is too bad? Because classes haven’t even started yet.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Subject: So that’s my one criticism so far of this program, I would say.

Interviewer: It’s the lead time required to get in?

Subject: If it’s open enrollment, rolling enrollment, then why not, well, if I am accepted into the program and get everything done in the next week, then why can’t I just start classes the week after, if there are some starting then?

Interviewer: Okay (long pause). I’m writing this down. I mean, I have it on tape. From John Elway (the subject’s preferred alias). So, what factors are important to you as you think about which universities to attend? You already mentioned your comfort with USF.

Subject: Right. I already have a degree from here. My ex-wife went here. I am a season ticket holder for football, so I get another free ticket, perhaps, if I, you know, become a…

Interviewer: It’s in the student section, you know (laughing). So what is it – you mentioned, “I don’t see myself attending UT.” What is it that makes you say that?

Subject: I think familiarity is the key. Location. I live in Land O’ Lakes and work at MacDill. It’s a commute, but it is almost on the way.

Interviewer: Right.

Subject: I’d rather avoid traffic if I can.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: (unintelligible) I am a USF fan. I try to keep active, at least through sports. Basketball and football, especially.
Interviewer: And so you’ve mentioned, basically, it is the comfort of USF and USF’s location. Are either one of those more important than the other?

Subject: Not really. It’s just the comfort. I’ve been here before and it is convenient.

Interviewer: Now, there are three things that I have not heard you mention at all. I am curious if they are things that you thought about or if they matter. One is the caliber of the faculty. Two is accreditation. And three is cost. Are these not things that you have considered?

Subject: The first two, no. I mean, to me it’s not relevant. I mean, I am sure there are others where it might. I trust that the university would take the program seriously and hire very competent professionals to instruct and would do whatever the university can to ensure that its programs are accredited.

Interviewer: So you really, it’s not that you don’t care, it’s not something that you went out seeking as “what kind of faculty I am going to have?”

Subject: Right.

Interviewer: It’s that there’s a blanket level of trust that ---

Subject: Right. There’s no one professor that I am looking at or one, you know, criteria that I am focused on.

Interviewer: And you didn’t mention cost. Is that because you have military benefits?

Subject: I have GI bill benefits to help. Which expire in a couple of years. So if I transfer to a job I better get that done. That’s part of the timeline.

Interviewer: Better get started. With a newborn, take one class.

Subject: Yeah.

Interviewer: One class. Get one out of the way.

Subject: I would like to have been taking one or two classes now but the timing screwed that up.

Interviewer: Get started. I started with one. Let me just see if I can do one.

Subject: That was the idea. The schedule seemed really attractive. Eight weeks. The durations were flexible and varied to the point that if you really want to ...

Interviewer: If you push yourself you could get through quickly. But if you are afraid or if your job load doesn’t let you do that, you can go at a much slower pace.

Subject: Right.

Interviewer: Last couple of questions here. They are related to ROI. How long do you think it would take for you to see a monetary gain as a result of earning the degree?
Subject: That depends on if I stay with the government or if I jump to the corporate world.

Interviewer: So if you stay with the government, will you get any kind of bump?

Subject: No. Not directly.

Interviewer: But if you move to corporate...

Subject: I would expect to. Some sort of benefit, whether it be job satisfaction, financial, travel, or something.

Interviewer: Well that leads to the second part of this question. It’s what would it take – and how long do you think it would take – for you to say this is worth it? If you do this, you are going to have some headaches.

Subject: I’m sure.

Interviewer: What would it take for you to say it is worth it.

Subject: I’ll probably go start looking for, you know, jobs. Not now, certainly, when I am closing in on any certificate. So, once again, I may not need to pursue the MBA but I am going to try to hit the ground running to try to see what’s out there. Or at least say, “Hey,” and get any confirmation from corporate America that “hey, you need to go back and get your MBA,” so I can be, like, “Okay, thank you.”

Interviewer: While you are a student there is a lot of activity here that can help you in that job search. There’s actually something going on in the atrium right now.

Subject: Yeah, I was wondering what that was.

Interviewer: They are having resume review sessions.

Subject: Should have brought mine.

Interviewer: Do you have it online? I’ll pull it up for you and you can walk down there.

Subject: (unintelligible).

Interviewer: (laughing) well, that’s all the questions I have. It didn’t take long at all. Great. Anything you want to add? What’s driving your decision here? The hesitancy sounds like it is baby and procrastination.

Subject: Well, I mean, yeah, the spring kind of, if I had made that inquiry probably a month sooner I would probably be enrolled some time. But it is going to be a lot of paperwork, which is boring, but uh (unintelligible). Yeah, but I see myself here in the fall, if all things go well. I had a 3.6, 3.7 as an undergrad and got a 4.0 in my master’s so I don’t see the process as being limiting, just being time consuming.

Interviewer: Okay.
Interview Date: January 24, 2013
Interview Location: USF College of Business
Interview Subject: Rusty, 23 year old male, Prospect #9
Interview Duration: 20 minutes

Rusty is a single Black male who is considering an MBA program but has not yet made the commitment to the degree program or to a university. Rusty indicated that he had recently attended an information session for graduate business programs, but that is as far as he has moved forward in this decision. He works full-time in sales for an international Fortune 500 company.

1 Interviewer: I just have twenty questions for you, pretty easy, and, like I said, it is going to take about twenty, twenty-five minutes. Not bad.
2 Subject: Okay.
3 Interviewer: So, obviously, you have an undergraduate degree.
4 Subject: Yes.
5 Interviewer: And I am thinking it is not in business from USF.
6 Subject: It is in business, but just not from USF.
7 Interviewer: Okay. Where did you go to school?
8 Subject: I went to Morehouse College.
9 Interviewer: Oh! I was just at Spellman last week. Or two weeks ago.
10 Subject: Oh really?
11 Interviewer: It made me wish my daughter went to that school. It's M-o-o-r-e, right?
12 Subject: It's M-o-r-e-house.
13 Interviewer: How long ago did you graduate?
14 Subject: A year and a half ago.
15 Interviewer: So that would be... 
16 Subject: 2011.
17 Interviewer: And you studied business.
18 Subject: Yes.
19 Interviewer: Did you work while you were going to school?
20 Subject: No. Only internships during the summer and one during my senior [year] fall semester.
21 Interviewer: And have you worked since you graduated?
22 Subject: Yes. Been working ever since.
23 Interviewer: What do you do?
24 Subject: I am an account manager for Coca-Cola.
25 Interviewer: On the sales side, or are you over here in finance operations?
26 Subject: Yes. Sales. On the sales side. I have been looking into the finance operations. I want to get some exposure to that, but, not yet.
Interviewer: Okay. So was your background in general business? Or marketing...

Subject: Yes. Business. Marketing. Yep, that’s it; (laughing) you’re on it!

Interviewer: Great. So, what – um – let me back up. How long ago did you first start thinking about getting an MBA degree?

Subject: While I was an undergrad. But the thing I found is that most schools prefer their candidates to have work experience. And that was something that, obviously, I didn’t have coming straight out of undergrad, so that’s the main reason why I didn’t go straight in. I would prefer to work first.

Interviewer: It’s – at least that is the case at USF – we prefer it, too. Every once in a while, somebody worked while going to school, but...

Subject: Yes.

Interviewer: So you thought about it as an undergrad, but how long have you really been thinking about it recently?

Subject: Very seriously? I would say, I guess, hmm, for about the past four or five months or so. After I got that first year under my belt.

Interviewer: Was there a particular incident that led you think about it more seriously, or recently?

Subject: Just, um, looking at career opportunities and seeing what – a lot of these career opportunities, they want. I guess, those people that are interested to have more than one degree. To have, you know a higher degree than just an undergrad. And so, beyond that, just realizing that it is becoming more and more competitive. An undergrad is becoming more and more common, I guess, for lack of a better word, so it’s better to differentiate myself, a little bit better, I thought, to have an MBA. So just thinking about things like that just made me sit down and decide that this is something that I need to do for myself.

Interviewer: Mmm-hmm.

Subject: I’m trying to slow down. I keep forgetting that you have to go back and...

Interviewer: I’ve got a pause button, don’t worry about it now!

Subject: Alright.

Interviewer: So what did you think the long-term benefit would be?

Subject: Long-term benefit, more career opportunities, I guess. Obviously more money. More success. And really, I guess, just – maybe I will be happier because I will have more opportunities, you know? A small fish in a
big pond as opposed to a small fish in a little pond. You know?

Interviewer: Okay. Did you think there might be some short-term benefits?

Subject: Short-term benefits? I mean, yes. Just having the degree under my belt. Um, obviously higher pay raises. Maybe a better position within my company. Faster growth.

Interviewer: Meaning personal growth or corporate/career growth.

Subject: Both, both, both. Corporate growth. Corporate ladder and personal.

Interviewer: Okay. Anything else?

Subject: That's it off the top of my head.

Interviewer: Did you think there would be any headaches involved with, uh, getting it?

Subject: Yes. Yes. Only because – well for a couple of different reasons. Obviously, you know, it's getting – well, I'll start from A and go to B. Since I have been out of school for a little while, obviously first and foremost will be getting back in that rhythm of being in school, being a student. And then secondly, being a student and, in the MBA program that's more, I guess, rigorous while at the same time maintaining a full-time job, um…

Interviewer: Balancing.

Subject: That's right. The balancing, managing my time. Um, while still, you know – I guess just while still having time for myself. Doing everything well. Not sacrificing one at the expense of the other.

Interviewer: Okay. How long did you think about it before you actually began researching programs?

Subject: (sigh and pause) Probably for a while. So I would probably say over a year, um. Mostly because I started entertaining the idea when I was in undergrad. And then once I got out and started working, I was really focused on working. And then once that time passed where I felt like I had a decent amount of experience [that] is when I really started thinking about the program. That's when I really started to focus on it and sit down and really put my attention toward it.

Interviewer: Okay. So you have decided on MBA, and not necces – if you go forward – you've decided degree. You're looking at the degree before you are looking at university.

Subject: Yes. I knew I wanted to get the MBA. It was really just a matter of I guess – not really circumstances, but I am
not really sure where I would possibly be pursuing my
degree. For example, when I started thinking about it,
I was in – I was going to school in Atlanta. So I started
looking at colleges there. But I didn’t necessarily know
if I was going to be there after I graduated. And I
wasn’t. I came down here to Tampa. That’s where I got
a job. So now I am looking at schools in this area.

Interviewer: Okay. What schools are you looking at?
Subject: I, um, the University of South Florida and the
University of Florida.

Interviewer: No others?
Subject: Nah. There was one – I think it was a UCF, I think it
was UCF but that was for an online program. These are
for – because I am close these are for me to go and
actually, you know, do in-person and attend classes.

Interviewer: You prefer face-to-face?
Subject: I do. I like that, you know, the interaction.

Interviewer: Great. And have you taken the GMAT yet?
Subject: Not yet. That’s coming up. That’s, that’s another
obstacle. I hear --

Interviewer: Yup.
Subject: I hear a lot of things about that test.

Interviewer: I was afraid of the test. I stalled on it. And finally just
did it. And it wasn’t as – it wasn’t easy – but it wasn’t
as bad as I –

Subject: Really?

Interviewer: -- thought it would be. But, um, I am a lot older than
you. A lot older.

Subject: (chuckles) Was it a lot of studying?

Interviewer: Well, remember, I took it at 46 years old.

Subject: Okay.

Interviewer: And it had been a long time since I used algebra. So I
had to brush up on it (laughing).

Subject: Right. Gotcha.

Interviewer: Some skills. Um, I would encourage you to go ahead
and take it now.

Subject: Alright.

Interviewer: Scores are good for five years.

Subject: Okay.

Interviewer: Take it while this stuff is relatively fresh.

Subject: Right.

Interviewer: How did you go about seeking information on the
programs?

Subject: Seeking information on the programs. I went to each
school’s website. And I actually saw a commercial for
the MBA program for this school on television and it
was for an open house. So I went to the open house and it was a lot of great feedback. A lot of great um, I guess it was more like a panel discussion. It was a presentation of information and a question-and-answer session afterward. So I was able to ask specific questions, things that might not be readily available on the website. Those things that's not really general knowledge. I guess more of the intricacies. That's when I was able to really inquire about. So that was mainly the – so I guess the main thing was just websites and the open house.

**Interviewer:** But the commercial is what spurred your attendance at the info session?

**Subject:** Yes. Right. So it works! (chuckles)

**Interviewer:** Good! You don't happen to recall where you saw it... (laughing).

**Subject:** (laughing) I don't remember the channel no... I saw it a couple of different times, though, and I was like, you know, this is a sign. Because it was the only one I had seen for, um, an MBA program for a college, so I was like, you know what, this is one of my options. I could go, let me just go check it out. And then I got this email (requesting the interview) and I was like, you know what? All these signs are just pointing me in this direction!

**Interviewer:** You know what, go apply! (laughing)

**Subject:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** So what factors were important to you as you began to research the program? What were you looking for when you were looking at these websites? Or when you came to the info session? What kind of information were you looking for?

**Subject:** Um, one of the things is, um, the type of program. I guess what people had said about it. I guess really, I say that to [mean] “how is the program ranked among other schools?” Reputation wise, I guess.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Subject:** The rigor of the programs and the program requirements. Originally I was looking at some schools that didn't require a GMAT. I was considering a lot of online possibilities. Then I was like, you know, maybe I'm just being lazy! (laughing) So I need to expand my options. And so, yeah...

**Interviewer:** Okay. Now, I've heard you mention a lot of things through the course of this interview. So – rankings, which I think also lends to reputation.
Subject: Right. Reputation. That’s what I was looking for. I was trying to think. Reputation, that’s it! That’s perfect.

Interviewer: Okay. So rankings, career opportunities and a career track for you, to differentiate yourself, to grow your salary, personal growth. I heard you say time management, that you prefer face-to-face, that you considered program rigor. You also considered would you get it. Entry requirements. Out of all of those things, which is a lot, what would you say is the one most important thing to you.

Subject: (made agreeing sounds as interviewer said each attribute but then paused to think about the answer to the question) I guess building my skill set so that I can create more opportunities for myself going down the road. Long story short: long-term success. That’d be the best way.

Interviewer: Okay.

Subject: Long-term success.

Interviewer: I am going to jump here. Back to the info session. How was it?

Subject: It was good. It was good. It was really insightful. Very informative. Um, there is, I think, two – two individuals spearheading it. Once was for the Executive, and one was for the MBA, just the regular MBA that I am going for, so I spent more time talking to her [the MBA recruiter]. She was very helpful, very insightful. Gave a lot of great feedback. A lot of advice on what to do, what not to do. They gave out some handouts that were really good. That I still refer to. So it was good overall.

Interviewer: Great. Um, so, if you decide to go for the degree, you’re mentioning UF and USF as your primary [schools]; USF – rather UCF you have kind of knocked out.

Subject: Mm-hmm. Yes.

Interviewer: What, um, information, um, are you looking for, or factors are you loo – thinking about when you are deciding which one of the colleges to attend?

Subject: I guess the same. The same things we talked about when we talked about – considering just the reputation. What kind of experience am I going to have when I go here? What am I going to be able to take away? I guess, you know, more than just a degree? How much will I really know? How much will I have really learned? How much will I have really grown as a person? Um, once I leave, I guess, talking to other students who have either gone through or still are
pursuing it, their degree at this school, seeing what
they have to say about it. Because that's important, I
think, today. You know, the people that are actually,
you know, in that situation that you're going to be in.

Of course, everybody at the school is going to say that
it's good but, you know You know. Do you get the
really hands-on?

Interviewer: Was there anybody there like that at the info session
you attended?

Subject: No, everybody there was a prospective student and
the only two people there that were not were the
people that were just leading the session. But, I did
come across someone at my job that is currently here.

He said that he, that he would, that he thinks it is an
excellent program. He transferred from somewhere, I
forget where, maybe somewhere in Pennsylvania, and
when he moved down here he said he – it came highly
recommended by him, so it just led me to look into
further, more.

Interviewer: That's actually my next question. Did you seek word-
of-mouth reviews from friends or ask coworkers about
institutions?

Subject: One coworker, yes. When I was still pursuing the
online – she's told me about what options she is
pursuing – that was pretty good for her because she's
also a mom, so she's a little bit busier. So no, but that
one, I just happened to have – it just came in general
conversations. Are you, you know...I don't even know
how I started it. They told me they were in grad
school. And I was, like, oh? Where? And what degree
were, are you pursuing the MBA at USF? I was like, oh,
well, I’m thinking about it.

Interviewer: Thinking about it.

Subject: Right. And so I picked their brain a little bit. So they
said a lot of great things.

Interviewer: Okay. Just out of curiosity, what, do you recall what
kind of things they were talking about?

Subject: Yeah, just like, how, um, it’s good. All the classes are
really good. All the teachers are really informative. It's
really hands-on. You get a lot of great interaction. You
really get a lot of feedback so that you know how you
are progressing. Um, just everything is really – they
really put emphasis on you as a student. Not so much
just you being here, just being more so “how can we
help you to become a better person?” Like, by the time
you leave this program, how much will you know?
How much will you, how successful will you be based off what you learned here? So I heard that there is a lot of emphasis on the students. Which is something that I, like, you know, really look for when exploring programs as well.

Interviewer: Good. Um, so what’s the one thing that’s been most important to you all along as you think about this?

Subject: Just in general, or in terms of...

Interviewer: Because it sounds like you haven’t made the decision to go yet.

Subject: I have. I just. I’m leaning more and more and more and more towards USF. I am going to go, it’s just a matter of where. But I think I have decided on USF. It’s just (unintelligible). So I guess – I suppose the most important thing – considering just getting the MBA or...

Interviewer: Getting the MBA at USF.

Subject: At USF. It’s really just the type of experience that I have. Um, how, you know, because, like I said, I do work, so I need to make sure that I will be, that I am going to be able to get the most of this experience. Because I can’t concentrate full-time as a student, so for the time I am able to spend here I want to just, you know, make sure that I make the most of it. So I want to make sure that it’s as valuable as possible. And that I can be as successful as possible by the time I leave.

Interviewer: There’s a couple of things that you haven’t mentioned along the way.

Subject: Okay.

Interviewer: It’s the faculty who are teaching the program, our accreditation, and cost. Have you looked at any of those things? Are they just not as important to you?

Subject: Well, the faculty, well, well, I kind of, I guess I kind of bunch that in with the whole experience. The type of, you know, teachers that I am going to have, the professors that I am going to have. Cost, yes, I don’t even know how I forgot about that one (laughs). I don’t even know how I forgot about that one! Yeah, that’s definitely a factor as well.

Interviewer: Are you on a tuition, will you have tuition reimbursement through your employer or anything like that?

Subject: Yeah. It will be tuition reimbursement, but after I complete the program. So right now it would be all on me. And then, you know, after I am finished, then that’s when that becomes a factor.
Interviewer: Okay, well, speaking of money, how long do you think it would take for you to see a monetary gain as a result of earning the MBA?

Subject: Realistically, I would say within, I want to say, two or three years. It’s all depending on, I guess, if I change jobs or careers or um, if I stay within the company, probably I would say less than that. But if I change, probably a little longer.

Interviewer: There will be headaches associated with doing this. I mean, call it what it is. How long do you think it would take for you to say, “this is worth it.”

Subject: That’s a great question (pauses). That really kind of depends on what happens after-the-fact. But I think, honestly, I think it would be worth it the day, probably the day I graduate. After the headaches are gone, after it is done, I can say, “You know what? I completed this. I’m done, I’m done with this stage of my life. I can move on to something else.” So I don’t really think it will take too long. I’d say the day after. The day after the cap and gown (starts to laugh).

Interviewer: You get that cap and gown and the (unintelligible) smile.

Subject: Yes, yes. Either that or when I get a pay raise.

Interviewer: Yup! Last couple of questions here. I didn’t also hear you mention anything about the caliber of people that you’re learning with. We mention – you mentioned earlier in the interview that most schools prefer a little bit of work experience and that is because it enriches the classroom.

Subject: Right.

Interviewer: Does that matter to you? Who else is in the classroom? The selectivity.

Subject: It does. Only because I like –I mean, when you are in the classroom environment, you don’t just learn from whoever is teaching the course, you learn from the people around you. And that’s why I thought it was awesome that they put so much emphasis on us as a student because they really want to see what we can bring to the table and how we can kind of use that to bounce back and forth. So that is important to me, just knowing what other people bring. What I can learn from those people. Because at the end of the day, I – most of us are already working individuals, so to see how their experiences can help me to maybe have a better experience at my job or advance my career.
Subject: Okay.

Interviewer: Okay. Well, the last two questions are actually related to your career.

Subject: Okay.

Interviewer: What are your career goals long-term and short-term?

Subject: Long-term and short-term. My long - I guess it would be easier to do long-term. My long-term goal is to be in business for myself. I want to own my own business. I know it takes some time to get there. It takes knowledge, and, obviously, financial support. Short-term, I just would like to work my way up the corporate ladder because every level there is something new that I can learn to better myself. You learn something new each and every day but there comes a point where, you know, how much more am I really learning? So it’s like before I get to that next level, well, how much more can I learn here? So short-term goal is to keep working my way up and keep learning as much as possible.

Interviewer: Great. Well is there anything I forgot to ask? Or anything you want to add?

Subject: There was like one question that I kind of blanked out on. When you asked me about factors, um...

Interviewer: What was the one most important thing to you all along. Kind of, when you are deciding, ok, it’s, well, let me back up. It’s, it sounds like you are going to go for an MBA at some point.

Subject: Right.

Interviewer: So as you are deciding, when to do it and where to do it, what’s the one thing that has been most important to you. Kind of the thing that’s, um, like, “man, I can’t afford it right now,” or “I don’t want to start studying again.” These are just - what’s the one thing - these are a couple of examples, what’s the one thing that you really have been thinking about?

Subject: This is really if I am going to be, if I am able to be successful in it while I am working. I don’t want to sacrifice. I don’t want to stop working but I don’t want to take, you know, years and years to complete the MBA or the EMBA, so I am going to (unintelligible). So the thing is, am I going to be able to do this in two years and be done. Financially, yes, but, I figure if I look at options, there are kind of like, just working on it as I go. I mean, I can do that, but really, is it going to be – how taxing is it going to be? To be able to do it in this economy and the goal I set for myself.
Interviewer: Great, that's all the questions I have.