

B.E.O.C. (Big Executives on Campus)

University-based executive education programs can contribute immeasurably to executives' personal and professional development. But it's not just a matter of packing the participants' bags and wishing them bon voyage.

By KENNETH R. GRAHAM and ALBERT A. VICERE

University-based executive education programs are potentially highly effective tools for developing top-level executives. By selecting candidates carefully, by defining for those candidates the purpose of a campus-based experience, by thoroughly debriefing participants and evaluating their experiences, and by integrating university-based experiences

Campus-based executive education emphasizes the development of broad vision; short-term results should not be expected.

with in-company development, organizations take major steps in developing executives with broad, conceptual skills, as well as skills for solving specific business problems.

According to a recent survey of nearly 200 Fortune 500 companies, more than 86 percent use university-based programs to help develop their executives.¹ An

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earlier Conference Board report heralded university executive programs as the most important single development in the field of adult education, and the most significant factor in contemporary business education.²

University executive programs typically are in-residence education experiences of at least two weeks in length, conducted on major college campuses and attended by upper-middle and top-level executives. Most participants have substantial management experience and have been identified as high-potential executives by their organizations. The programs focus on strategic decision making and planning for the organization as a whole or for functional areas within the organization. Participants must be sponsored by their companies.

According to *Bricker's International Directory of University Executive Programs*, about 50 U.S. institutions—primarily graduate schools of business—currently offer executive education programming.³ Although the total enrollment figures of university programs is relatively small, their influence cannot be underestimated since attendance at an executive program is often viewed as a rite of passage into the top echelons.

How are university programs different

Table 1 lists the objectives cited by nearly 200 Fortune 500 companies for

enrolling executives in university programs. These objectives reflect the companies' perception of university executive programs as challenging yet non-threatening settings where executives are encouraged to abandon old managerial responses and learn new ones. University programs are seen as opportunities for scanning the environment for ideas and information that promote personal development, awareness of external viewpoints and better understanding of the function of general managers.

Table 2 lists the contrasting objectives of the same companies for enrolling executives in in-company development programs. These objectives reveal the perception of in-company programs as developing a consistent organization culture, improving communications and encouraging interaction among organization members.

These sets of objectives reflect the significant difference between university and in-company executive programs. Most in-company executive development efforts focus on the development of organizationally specific competencies in technical, interpersonal or managerial areas. University executive programs emphasize conceptual thinking.⁴ They expose participants to ideas from outside their usual work environments, thereby challenging their current managerial assumptions, practices and techniques.

In a study of executive program par-

ticipants at M.I.T., Edgar Schein reported that this sort of challenge had a broadening effect on executives, making their attitudes less parochial and more global.⁵

University programs complement in-company executive development efforts and shorter term, more technical workshops and seminars.

Maximizing the benefits

Table 3 lists the most frequently mentioned techniques used by Fortune 500 companies to develop executive resources. This list suggests that a blend of performance feedback, coaching and mentoring, formal educational programs, participation in task forces and job rotation creates the most effective executive development network.

Many well managed corporations employ a full-time executive resource professional to work with key senior management to identify and prepare executives for both campus-based and in-company development. To dispel the potential connection with lower level training, or even the hint of remediation, these resource professionals often occupy separate management development or executive resource units.

Executive resource professionals are responsible for matching successful mid-career executive candidates with appropriate developmental experiences. They are most effective when they combine the broad-based, conceptual experience provided by university programs with practical experiences available within the organization. The following guidelines suggest ways to combine the best of both worlds in using university executive programs.

■ *Know the candidates, their superiors and their potential future career paths in depth.* Superiors may nominate an executive for an outside program because "nothing else has worked," "a sabbatical is needed" or the executive "has given long and faithful service." None of these reasons will support the high energy level and commitment to learning required by the developmental approach of a university executive program.

The candidate with broad experience should be given preference for campus-based programs. He or she should have a brighter than average career future that requires a general management perspective. The candidate's attitude is vital to the success of the experience. He or she should be fully aware of the developmental, not skills training, thrust of the pro-

Table 1—Why Fortune 500 Companies Use University-Based Executive Programs¹

Reason	Response Frequency
Provide outside perspective and exposure to other viewpoints	55%
Remove executives from daily work environment and expose them to a variety of programs that cannot be delivered as economically or effectively in-company	38%
Expose executives to faculty experts and latest management information in a high quality academic setting	35%
Generalize specialists and broaden their vision	21%
Allow executives to reflect on, and gain insight into, career, work role, personal style and effectiveness; encourage renewal	8%
Stimulate creativity and innovation	2%
Provide rewards and contribute to self-esteem	2%

N = 172

Table 2—Why Fortune 500 Companies Use In-Company Executive Education Programs Rather Than University Programs¹

Reason	Response Frequency
Programs more specific to organization and its needs	42%
Savings in both time and money	40%
Consistency, relevance and pragmatism of program content	29%
Better control of content, faculty and participants	27%
Help develop an organizational culture; build teams	19%
Provide a discussion forum; opportunity for people to meet	18%
Provide interaction with top management	6%
Better availability of resources; scheduling efficiency	6%

N = 177

gram and be eager to attend.

■ *Know the university-based programs you use.* Call or, preferably, visit universities to learn about the differences among the programs. Send well qualified trial enrollees to programs, debrief them personally and require written evaluations, to learn in depth what each institution offers.

Compile a company directory of university programs that describes the level of executive who would benefit most from each program. Circulate the directory to encourage the matching of executives to appropriate university programs.

■ *Use job rotation and task forces.* The broad outlook desirable for university program candidates is facilitated by cross-functional job experiences and responsibilities. They highlight for executives the need for a broad-based developmental experience and motivate them to learn from superiors and peers. The executive's ability to see himself or herself in a higher level position with broader responsibilities is encouraged through job rotation, task force participation and special assignments.

■ *Brief executives before they attend the programs.* Briefings help alleviate participants'

sense that they are attending the program only because their boss told them to. Briefings can eliminate the aura of remediation, replacing it with a sense of honor for being chosen to participate. Briefings should emphasize the value of learning from peers, the low-risk nature of the learning environment (no exams) and the highly participative, experience-based nature of the program. Briefings should emphasize the long-range aspects of development rather than the short-term search for specific answers.

■ *Arrange for executives to meet with previous attendees from the same program.* This further reduces anxiety and builds the desire to participate.

■ *Assign a project for the executive to formulate or complete during the program.* The project should have long-range implications, should focus more on defining problems than on solutions and should require the integration of learning from two or more functional fields of knowledge and experience. Projects provide a practical focus and may require the executive to interview his or her fellow participants to gain their input. The project mechanism helps assure that the executive will continue to integrate and apply the learning in his or her work setting.

■ *Require a written evaluation of the program.* The evaluation process can help the executive apply the classroom learning because it requires a review of the program content. Written participant evaluations also help the executive resource professional track programs and make good choices.

■ *Require an oral debriefing.* This debriefing should be a group effort, in which all executives from your firm who attended executive programs in a given year give summaries of their program experiences. The experience reinforces the legitimacy of applying newly learned concepts within the existing corporate culture. It also helps you to compare various programs.

■ *Reinforce campus-based executive education with in-company sessions.* In-company sessions add validity to education as a continuing individual executive responsibility. These can focus on problem finding rather than managerial treatment of symptoms; in-company executive education that focuses on opportunity identification is most effective.

■ *Involve this year's "class" of executives next year.* Executives selected to attend a campus-based program next year should be briefed by this year's graduates.

■ *Use shorter training programs in the first career decade and to enhance specific skills.* When specific skills and behavioral changes are the developmental goal, executive resource professionals should recommend shorter, more focused programs. Since campus-based executive education emphasizes the development of broad vision and the integration of prior learning, specific short-term results should not be expected.

Table 3—Techniques Used Most Frequently by Fortune 500 Companies for Management Development¹

Technique	Response Frequency*
Performance feedback	48%
Coaching/mentoring	37%
In-company management development programs	34%
Participation in task forces, special projects	28%
Campus-based executive development programs	20%
Job rotation	20%
On-the-job training	20%

N = 183

*Each company was asked to list three techniques.

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