Like so many professionals, Jeffrey Brunz had felt he hit a wall at work. Originally from Seattle, the program manager for a software company in Amsterdam has kept up with changes in his industry with a variety of certificate programs. But now in his mid-40s, Brunz believed his career had stalled.

“I felt like a hit a wall with the progression in my career,” he says. “Without the breadth of an MBA, I wasn’t able to participate in some of those conversations at a higher level.”

He had long thought about doing an MBA but his age and his professional life in the fast-moving tech field made it difficult to take two years off. “Tech moves so fast with releases and I just can’t afford to move and lose that time in this point of my career,” adds Brunz.

That was until he hit upon the idea of doing an MBA online. He wouldn’t have to quit his job and move. And he wouldn’t have to mortgage his future, either.
'IT IS BLOWING ME AWAY WHAT I'M GETTING FOR THIS PRICE'

For Brunz, the solution was the new online MBA program from Boston University's Questrom School of Business. Priced at just $24,000 for the entire program, it is one of two of the most highly disruptive MBA options in the world along with the $22,000 iMBA at the University of Illinois' Gies College of Business.

Both the price, the university brand and the program itself was appealing to him. Brunz had done his undergraduate work at UC-Berkeley and has a good friend who went to Boston University and enjoyed his college experience more than he did. So he thought the new program would be a perfect fit.

He is one of 392 students in the program’s very first cohort. Six months into the experience, he has no regrets. “It is blowing me away what I’m getting for this price,” adds Brunz. “At my age, some of my confidantes are saying, ‘You are older. This is a big commitment. You’ve been out of school for awhile. Can you do this?’ I debug software every day so I have no problems being in the first cohort.”

MORE THAN 800 ENROLLED IN AN ONLINE MBA LESS THAN ONE YEAR OLD

His classmates share his enthusiasm for an experience that has in less than a year become the largest single graduate program in the business school’s history. With the newly entered January cohort of an additional 419 MBA candidates, total enrollment now totals more than 800 students in a program that is not even a year old. The school expects to enroll an August cohort this year of 500 more students. Yet, that is the only the start. By the time the first cohort reaches its final semester in the spring of next year, Questrom expects to have between 4,000 and 5,000 in the program, an enrollment well above the 2,300 undergraduate business students.

The lightening fast, even explosive start, along with the school’s ambitious plans for expansion, in the midst of a pandemic no less, has been one of the most exciting and
challenging developments the school has ever undertaken. After all, the original expectation was to enroll an initial online MBA class of just 200 students. But at such an attractive price point, Boston University found ready demand. “When we saw the caliber of the pool and decided to increase the class size, it forced us to think about scale more quickly,” says J.P. Matychak, associate dean for strategic initiatives at Questrom. “It became a pressure test. We felt like we were going into the deep end.”

Despite some inevitable technology glitches in the early going, the school appears to have risen to the challenge. BU did not merely convert its existing MBA into an online option. The school’s faculty reimagined what a modern MBA should be in the current environment. Instead of studying business in silos, with separate courses in accounting, finance, marketing, BU’s professors have taken an integrated approach, weaving together business concepts in a half dozen semester-long modules. The first of them delved into the topic of creating value for business and society. Each module builds on the one before it, and each one ends with an action-learning capstone experience. Everything is core. There are no electives.

‘THIS IS SOMETHING THAT BUSINESS SCHOOLS HAVE BEEN TRYING TO DO FOR 30 YEARS’

The program’s unusual design poses a significant challenge itself. “This is something that business schools have been trying to do for 30 years and haven’t succeeded at it,” says Paul Carlile, senior associate dean for online learning. “There is everything from faculty approval to cultural change. The faculty have to meet all together and decide what to include, what to not teach, and what problem to explore to bring it all together. It is forcing them to be business professors and not just a marketing professor or a finance professor.”

For BU’s first online MBAs, the integrative learning experience clearly resonated. “I like the integrated curriculum where everything comes together and there are three professors who teach a module,” says Gopi Gopalakrishnan, a data evangelist for a Canadian bank in New York. The 48-year-old professional, who has also worked at both Citibank and Deloitte Consulting, signed up for the first cohort because he hopes to some day become the Chief Information Officer for a bank. “This is something unique and I was looking instinctively for that. It takes a lot of effort. It requires several professors to come together and it has to flow naturally.”

Faculty who have taught in the program acknowledge the demanding nature of it all. So far, 24 faculty members at BU have been involved in delivering the online MBA. That represents about 20% of the school’s tenure track professors. One of them, Marshall Van Alstyne, who taught a case on the voice wars involving Google, Apple and Amazon, believes the order of work for his online teaching was far more demanding than any of his in-person courses. “You are scripted down to the word level for the videos and presentations before hand. I have taught for 40 years and never had to do that. It is four or fives times the preparation for an in-person class. It involves scripting down, coordinating across faculty, and knowledge
checks. You have to provide all the answers in advance to the questions you’re asking. Everything is much more carefully scripted and integrated. I liken it to the production of a good TV series where each episode has a story line but still has to fit within the arc of the series.”

BU's Online MBA: The Tale of the Tape

Boston University's new $24,000 online MBA program now boasts an enrollment of more than 800 students in less than a year. Here's how the first two cohorts--entered in August of 2020 and in January of 2021—compare

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metrics</th>
<th>Inaugural August 2020 Cohort</th>
<th>January 2021 Cohort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
<td>392</td>
<td>419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average months of work experience</td>
<td>143 months</td>
<td>145 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average years of work experience</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>12 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average GPA</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Students</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countries Represented</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic students</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>States represented</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female students</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male students</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-represented minorities</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in Massachusetts</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with advanced degrees</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of students reflects only new students coming directly into the online program. The change in international students reflects a change in Graduate Management Admission Council reporting guidelines.

‘THE STUDENTS ARE AS ENGAGED AS THEY ARE IN THE LIVE PROGRAM AND THE QUALITY IS EXCEPTIONAL’

Van Alstyne says he has been especially pleased with both the quality of the students and their engagement. “The traditional MOOC online class has a completion rate of 3% with low engagement rates,” he notes. “So that set the expectations low, and I got the exact opposite. The students are as engaged as they are in the live program and the quality is
exceptional. We have students from Facebook and Google and Coca-Cola. The quality has exceeded my expectations. I was really pleased.”

Going through the first iteration of an entirely new program has led to a deep level of self-examination based on constant feedback. “Every week we ask, ‘What could we do better?’,” says Matychak. “What did you like? What did you not like?’ We have done a lot to make certain that the live weekly sessions add a lot of value with a lot of two-way engagement. People say you can’t do a case discussion with 200 people. Well, we’ve done it. We have really tried to make sure that this live experience really differentiates the program and the students feel they are really part of an MBA program.”

In fact, adds Carlile, the success of the two-hour-long weekly live classes has been among the biggest surprises. “It makes everything meaningful,” he says, “even for the faculty who ask what is this experience like? They want to be in an environment where they have an impact on students. They can have that impact in the live classes. They have total buy-in on this, and they see what is possible and they are doing things they have never done before.”

‘CLASSMATES REALLY AIDED IN THE LEARNING’

The live sessions are held at 7 a.m. and 8 p.m. every Thursday. Students engage with video segments and solo work before those classes. “In live, they apply what they learned and get challenged. And then they do more of the teamwork on the weekend and apply it in their own industry or a different place. You’ve got to give them a rhythm and it reminds them that this is an MBA program. There is cold calling, teams have spokespersons, and everybody is on the hook to speak for part of an assignment or case. It sets expectations. And then the students figure it out and they get in that flow.”
Out of the 15 live sessions in each module, attendance is mandatory at a third of the classes. Otherwise, they can be viewed later in the video archive. On average, 80% of the students are attending the live sessions, with a high water mark of 90% and a low water mark of 65%, according to Monica Moody Moore, assistant dean of the online MBA program. The live classes have proven instrumental in fueling an early objective of the program which was to insure that peer learning would take place in a virtual environment.

“One of the data points we have is that their classmates really aided in their learning process,” says Moore. “But the question whether that could really happen at scale. We saw this in student evaluations and they found that it aided and in some cases deeply aided their learning. They are learning from each other in meaningful ways.”

‘WE SEE ONLINE AS A GREEN SPACE TO ENCOURAGE CULTURAL CHANGE’

Paul Carlile, senior associate dean for online learning at Boston University’s Questrom School of Management

Through it all, the students aren’t only learning. So are the faculty and staff, particularly when it comes to BU’s integrated curriculum. “I don’t think we have nailed it,” concedes Carlile. “This is about changing the culture of a business school. We are delivering it for the online students and are probably 75% there but we are trying to change the culture of the school at the same time. We see online as a green space to encourage that change. It is an integrated curriculum but it’s also in the spirit of digital transformation an integrative set of services. We don’t have strong separation between staff and faculty. That is the old world. If you think about digital delivery, companies couldn’t just make a digital version of a product. They had to say this must be an integrated experience. We think higher education could be better off if it functions this way.”

The students in the program say an early highlight was the three-week-long capstone project at the end of the first module. Students were carved up into teams of five each and assigned one of ten existing companies from Uber and Lyft to Ford, GM and Tesla, for an analysis of the auto industry. The goal? To study the current state of the industry from that company’s perspective and to recommend action steps for the year 2025 to stay on top.
“It was a great way for me to consolidate all of the learning in the semester,” says Brunz, who was on the Toyota team. “It was a fantastic way for me to apply all of the tools I learned to a real world example. But if I don’t see a Toyota for a while, I would be happy. This really forced me to apply everything I learned, take a position and make a clear and coherent argument which is what I have to do in business.”

SURPRISED BY THE INTERACTION WITH FELLOW STUDENTS AND FACULTY

The auto industry assignment, along with the live class sessions, helped to allay an initial worry he had about doing an online degree program. “One of my concerns going into it was how interactive it would be,” says Brunz. “One of the things that surprised me most was how much I was interacting with people, whether it was in my team or in the groups within the live meetings. I have met so many people and I really feel connected to the faculty, staff and other students. I know that BU is known for its rigor and a great education. This program has really pushed me in a great way. It is challenging to look at the business and industry I’m in and all of the different forces on it.”

“This is the best thing I’ve ever done in education,” agrees Leo Baumann, a brand manager for a European automation company who is taking the program from Switzerland. “It has been outstanding. We are getting a lot more value than we would normally get. A similar program which isn’t accredited by the AACSB would cost a lot more in Europe. For the quality, standards and brand name, this is absolutely incredible.”

Meantime, the school and its faculty are literally creating what it will deliver to students just ahead of pushing it live in front of them. It is a daunting task for sure, more in the spirit of a startup than an established academic institution. And as the program continues to scale, the challenge will be to keep far more students deeply engaged and involved in the learning. Already, BU has learning facilitators in place, each of whom handles two pods of 50 students each.

“Our sessions are only limited by where the technology is,” believes Matychak. “The Zoom limit is 500 people and 50 breakout rooms. If we add more groups, you might have to extend the time or become big enough for a third live session every week instead of two.”