

# Executive Ed Goes Hybrid

**HAVE IT YOUR WAY. THAT, INCREASINGLY, IS THE MANTRA** of executive education programs. Business schools acknowledge that the economic downturn is substantially impacting enrollments. But the response by many leading schools is to hunker down and offer a product that delivers undeniable benefits at a keen price, in formats to suit any student. That last detail is an important new development. Want to learn in an online-only format? More schools offer just that opportunity. Still prefer traditional classroom learning? There's plenty of that too.

The big trend in 2009 is blended learning, says Curtis J. Bonk, a professor of education at Indiana University and author of *The World Is Open: How Web Technology Is Revolutionizing Education* (Jossey-Bass, 2009). By that he means instruction that mixes doses of Web-based study along with a sprinkling of in-person, on-campus learning time. Looking

A mix of online and face-to-face learning is putting a fresh focus on results that make a lasting impact

By Robert McGarvey



ahead, Bonk says the shift toward learning online — even via mobile phones, which he predicts will be crucial in delivering content in developing nations — is a trend that isn't going away. But right now it's in the early stages, and what students in the United States are signing up for is hybrid programs, which let participants do most of their studying remotely, from their own home or office, but which also build in time for experiencing the robust face-to-face aspect of university life.

These programs aren't for the uncommitted. "Our students are leaders who come here to interact with other leaders," says Deborah Nutter, founding director of the Tufts University Fletcher School Global Master of Arts Program (GMAP), an intensive one-year program that claims among its alums sitting CEOs, CFOs, ambassadors, and a member of the International Criminal Court. Most of the work is done online — Nutter estimates that a

## Learning online is a trend that isn't going away. But right now it's in the early stages.

typical student spends at least 25 hours a week on Fletcher coursework, but there also are three two-week residencies, in part to help students build face-to-face relationships that will last them a lifetime.

Right there is a key: The Internet is an adequate way to transmit information in most cases, but just as important for many students, adult learners included, are the relationships they build. And those relationships are more likely to flourish over a cup of coffee in a dormitory lounge or a glass of wine at a Friday night social.

Brian Brandt, a Tyler, Texas-based consultant who recently spent two and a half years earning a master's in global leadership at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, did most of his coursework online.

"I have three kids," Brandt says. "Going to a classroom often wasn't for me." But each year he logged a two-week residency in Pasadena where, he says, "I really got to know the 30 people in my program. We're keeping in touch after graduation too." Brandt adds that on an upcoming business trip to Turkey he plans to meet up with a fellow student. "For me, this approach — with most of the coursework online — really worked. But the face-to-face time also is invaluable," he says.

Sometimes, though, online learning does manage to foster breakthrough interpersonal moments. Lee Igel, an assistant professor in New York University's School of Continuing and Professional Studies, relates that when he was earning

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his doctorate he took an online course on organizational development. In the midst of a talk about the role of managers in contemporary companies, a China-based student interrupted. "That's not how it is here at all," he wrote, going on to describe the very different attitudes around hierarchy and seniority in China.

"That's when I got how powerful online learning can be," says Igel, who points out that in an online class it's possible for a virtual United Nations of students to log in and participate.

Pat Cataldo, associate dean for executive education at Pennsylvania State

**Acknowledgement of the bad times seems to be spawning a renewed urgency around learning.**

University, believes the current economy will accelerate the trend toward blended learning. "There will be more use of technology in executive education," he says. "The technology now is fabulous. Blended learning is a rich experience, it works."

And now, the big question: Does executive education deliver demonstrable results for companies given the present economic doldrums? Michael Devlin, associate dean of executive education at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, believes it can. A stark acknowledgement of the bad times seems to be spawning a sense of renewed urgency around learning, he says. "Companies are coming to us for help in triggering the new thinking their executives will need to succeed in the changing economy." Smarter executives just may be the competitive advantage that helps some companies prosper, Devlin adds.

One unexpected development in executive education, however, is that more students are paying their own

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tuition, in part or in full. Some cash-strapped companies continue to pull back on executive education outlays, Devlin says. However, what pleasantly surprises many experts is that plenty of executives are digging into their own pockets to pay for this education, mainly because they see an indisputable value in what they will learn. That, they believe, will lead to positions with more responsibility, typically

### New Imperative: Demonstrating ROI

The message is loud and clear: Feel-good learning is out; bottom-line-oriented learning is in. "More and more, we're asked to show the ROI" — return on investment — "of our executive education offerings," says Brent Smith, associate dean of executive education at Rice University, in Houston. That's prompted Rice and other schools to find ways to demonstrate the value of what they teach. Sometimes it's easy to show. Says Smith, "We had one class where a project team, as part of their studies, suggested changes in their employer's global supply chain that resulted in real-world savings of significant magnitude to pay for the class before they even finished the program. Their class project saved their employer money."

That kind of quick return, is not necessarily the aim. "It's easier for us to show the value of executive education over the long term," Smith says. "That value is clear." It shows up in smarter employees who, typically, express great loyalty to the employer who invested in their education.

But know that, right now, all the savvy institutions are pursuing evidence of their ROI because that's what customers are demanding to see at a time when every expenditure is scrutinized. "Companies want to know the outcomes of the executive education they purchase for their employees, and we recognize it's up to us to provide the information they need to commit their dollars," Smith says. — R.M.

at higher pay. And at a time when many organizations are flattening management hierarchies, freshly minted executive education credentials just may be a way to stand out. "Our students come to us for career advancement," says Ross Pearo, a vice president at eCornell, an online arm of Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.

Different results won't come about by continuing to do the same things. Educa-

tion advocates insist that the way to jumpstart new thinking is through education, be it in the classroom or online. The where of the teaching doesn't matter — what does matter is committing to working smarter, and that's exactly where executive education makes its value felt. "We're all about teaching new skills," says eCornell's Pearo — and that may pave the path to a brighter tomorrow. ■

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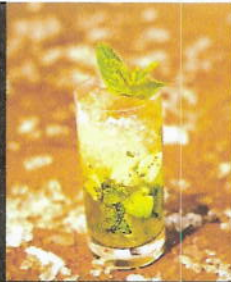
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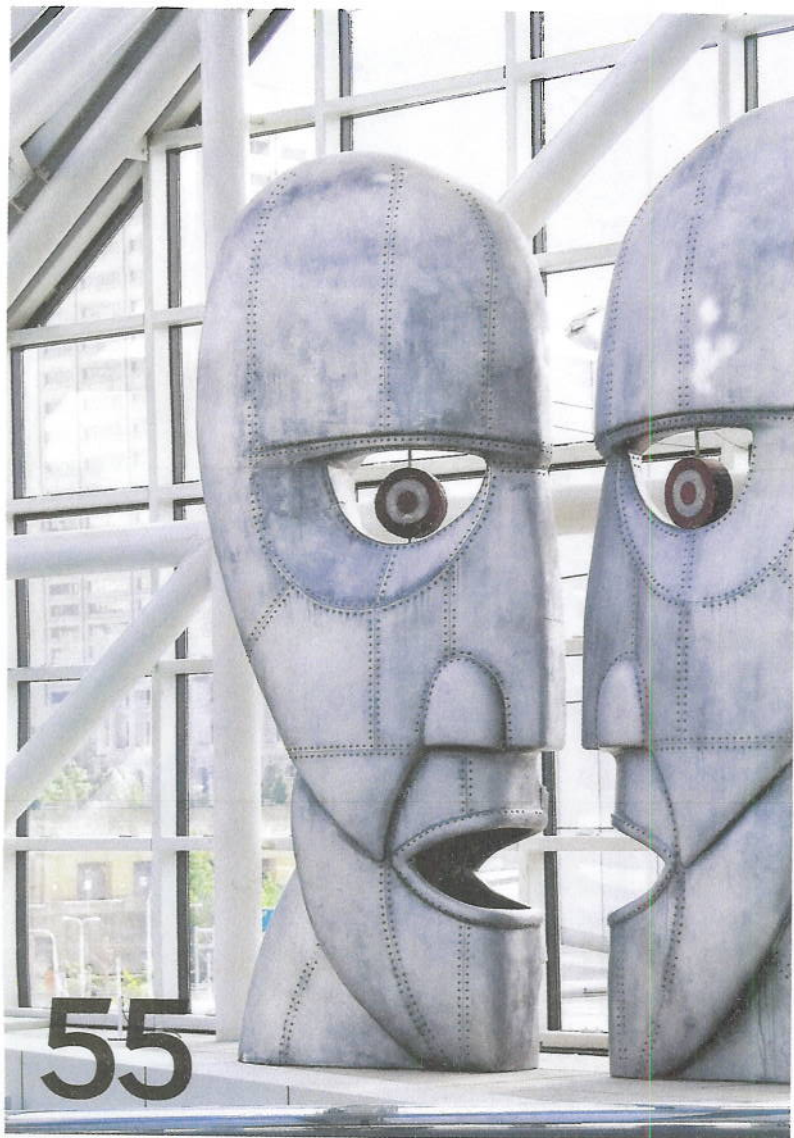
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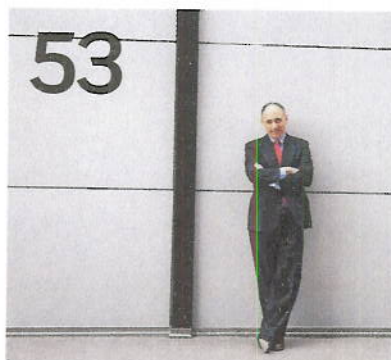
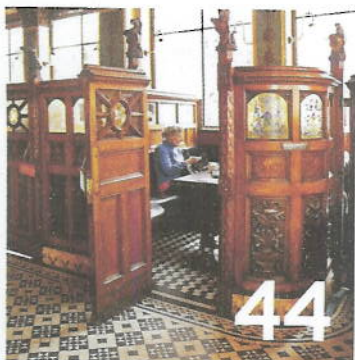
The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland recognizes music legends of the past and present. By Meghan Joyce

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(ON THE COVER)

The Queen Victoria statue in front of Belfast City Hall, with the Belfast Wheel in the background (p. 44). Photograph by Macduff Everton