AFTER COLLEGE | Several from the area have come to the crossroads

GO ON TO EARN AN MBA OR GO ON TO WORK?

It's the great debate faced by many students, and several factors figure into what high-stakes decisions they reach.

By SU BACON
Special to The Star

On college campuses this time of year, seniors are returning from winter break for the long-awaited final semester.

For some, a four-year degree will be their last pass through the halls of higher education as they leave with a sheepskin in one hand and a job offer in the other. Other students, however, will postpone launching a career to continue their studies in graduate school.

Whether to earn a master of business administration or a paycheck is a debate based not only on a college senior's career aspirations and bank account, but also on the advice and assistance of parents, college advisers, employers and peers. Thousands of dollars in texts and tuition are at stake, and so are potential future earnings.

Although the decision is always an individual one, many of the same factors are involved: money, current and future employment opportunities, professional expectations, and admission requirements to graduate school.

Sometimes the student's chosen career path makes the decision easy. Students who want to take the certified public accounting licensing test, for example, must have 150 credit hours. A bachelor's degree requires 120 to 128 hours.

"Why take 22 to 30 more credit hours just to take the CPA exam?" said Paul Franklin, director of grad-

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After graduating last May from Rockhurst University, Jamie Britt, above, entered the school's MBA program. He works as an intern at American Sterling Bank in Independence as part of the program. Leisha Harrison, left, is settling into a job in Minneapolis after graduating in December with a bachelor's degree in marketing from Kansas State University.
FROM THE ADOLESCENT business programs at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kan. “Why not get an MBA as well?”

Other considerations may not be so clear to students now in their 20s. Will I be able to get back into a study routine after being away from a classroom for several years? Will family responsibilities interfere with my education in the future? Will I have the energy later to juggle a career and classes? Youth, however, may not always work to a student’s advantage.

“I do not feel that many recent graduates are mature enough to begin a rigorous MBA program, myself included,” said Sarah Byrne, 21, of Overland Park. “So much of an MBA program is application-oriented, and I feel as though I need work experience to really absorb that sort of material.”

Byrne will work as a financial analyst at Koch Industries in Wichita after she graduates in May with a bachelor’s degree in finance from the University of Kansas. She said she wants several years of work experience before applying to graduate school.

National statistics show the average age of an MBA student to be between 25 and 28, indicating that many business students such as Byrne are getting work experience before entering graduate school.

So that’s the ongoing debate: Pursue an MBA on the heels of a bachelor’s degree or line up a job. Here is how several other Kansas City area college seniors and recent graduates handled the decision.

Goodbye, Manhattan; hello, Minnesota

After graduating from Kansas State University with a bachelor’s degree in marketing in December, Leisha Harrison of Leawood is settling into a job this month in Minneapolis.

Harrison, 23, is working as a sales associate with Siemens Business Technologies Division. Although graduate school had been on her radar screen, Harrison said, “I changed my mind midway through college.”

“You can do well in sales and may not need a graduate degree,” she said.

Harrison, who was the College of Business Administration’s fall 2007 Outstanding Senior in Business, has already experienced some sales success. On campus, she won a $1,200 scholarship in the 2006 Northwestern Mutual sales competition, edging out more than 120 participants to earn first place.

Graduate school may be in the future, but right now, Harrison said, “I want a couple of years’ work experience to get a feel for my strengths and weaknesses.”

BA in ’07, MBA in ’08

Participating in Rockhurst University’s five-year MBA program, Jamie Britt, 22, received a bachelor’s degree last May. He was a double major in business administration and psychology. He took his first MBA class last summer and plans to finish this July.

Britt said he decided to stay in school one more year and get an MBA to make himself “more marketable.”

The Rockhurst program allows students who qualify to take 30 credit hours of graduate school instead of the traditional 36 required for an MBA. Acceptance is based on the student’s undergraduate grade point average and score on the Graduate Management Admission Test. About 15 percent of students who get a bachelor’s degree in business administration go on to get their MBA in the program, said Michele Haggerty, director of MBA advising.

In August, Britt started an internship at American Sterling Bank in Independence as part of the MBA program.

When he gets his MBA, Britt said, he might opt to start a business. He is working on obtaining a patent for a product that he said would appeal to a “very broad customer base.”

A bite of the Big Apple

Ryan Ingle has a job in New York waiting for him when he graduates in May with bachelor’s degrees in finance and Spanish from KU.

Ingle, 22, will be leaving his hometown of Shawnee for a financial position in the investment banking division of Citibank.

For some time, Ingle said, he knew that he wanted to work in investment banking and that he needed to look to New York City “because that’s where most of the jobs are.”

He will be sharing an apartment with Rob Ralston of Olathe, another KU student who will graduate in May. Ralston, 22, is getting a bachelor’s degree in finance and has a position as a research analyst.

Both students said that they are looking forward to their jobs, but that they have not ruled out an MBA after working a few years.

“I’ve been in a classroom setting for the last 17 to 18 years of my life,” Ralston said. “I’m eager and excited to begin the next phase in my life.”

Still debating

In March, Kyle Kelsay of Oskaloosa, Kan., will begin a new trimester at Avila University. He enrolled in six credit hours to have the requisite 150 hours for the CPA exam.

He is uncertain about applying those hours to an MBA. Kelsay in December received a bachelor’s degree in accounting and currently works 16 hours a week in the internal audit department of YRC Worldwide, a transportation and trucking company in Overland Park.

“I am leaning toward getting an MBA,” said Kelsay, 23. “I’ll make that decision while I’m taking classes.”

He cited these as factors favorable to the pursuit of an MBA: He’s still in “school mode,” he has no wife or children, he is debt-free, and he has the time for graduate school.

On the flip side, a full-time job would give him work experience for graduate school, and a job might mean tuition reimbursement. He also could use his off-hours to focus on preparing for the CPA exam.

Working to pay for graduate school

Niyamul Haq, 26, received a bachelor’s degree in business and finance from the University of Missouri-Kansas City in May 2005. He said his parents, who live in Bangladesh, wanted him to get an MBA and offered to continue helping him pay for his education.

But Haq declined their generosity. “I wanted to pay for graduate school myself,” he said.

So Haq worked for a year at a bank and saved his money.

In fall 2006, Haq began the MBA program at Park University. He works 20 hours a week as a research assistant for Nico-
Nicolas Koudou, director of the MBA program, and takes graduate classes at night. He plans to finish in May.

“At Park, we expect MBA students to have work experience,” said Alphonso Ogbuehi, dean of the School of Business and Management.

Bringing work experience to the classroom enriches all students, he said, because contributions to classroom discussions are more meaningful.

Haq is considering accepting an offer for a business analyst position with an Atlanta consulting firm. He is also thinking about pursuing a doctorate, but his parents would rather he get a job first.

Life is good

“I am just thrilled to pieces with where my life is now,” said Marisa Fultz, 22, of Kansas City, North.

Fultz in December got a bachelor’s degree in business administration from UMKC and began working full time as a sales representative for The Astra Group, a professional employee organization for payroll and other human resource services in Kansas City.

Her job involves talking with owners of small and medium-size businesses in the Northland about outsourcing human resource functions to The Astra Group.

“I’m not at a desk,” she said. “I get to go out to all kinds of places.”

Fultz is so excited about her job that she wants to focus all her attention on work rather than try to fit an MBA into her schedule.

“An MBA will be more valuable to me once I have been in the workplace,” she said.

In fall 2006, Niyamul Haq (right) began the MBA program at Park University. He works 20 hours a week as a research assistant for Nicolas Koudou (left), director of the MBA program.
The Astra Group of Kansas City hired Marisa Fultz as a sales representative after she received a bachelor’s degree in business administration in December from the University of Missouri-Kansas City.
Q & A

Here are questions and answers for college seniors to consider about entering graduate school or the work force:

1. Can I afford two more years of school now?
The answer will depend on how much debt the student is carrying and whether financial assistance is available.

2. Is work experience a requirement for admission to graduate school?
Many schools require two to five years of work experience before students are accepted.

3. If I have a job offer, is this the job I want now?
If not, an MBA may bring better employment opportunities.

4. If I have a job offer, does my employer have a tuition reimbursement plan in place for graduate studies?
Some businesses will pay for an employee's MBA after a specified length of employment.

5. Does my school have a five-year MBA plan?
Some schools have programs that allow undergraduates to earn an MBA a year after they finish a bachelor's degree. To do so, students may take graduate-level business classes during their senior year, or they may be allowed to take fewer credit hours to earn an MBA if they go directly to graduate school.

6. What are the education requirements for my future profession?
Consider the qualifications for the career path you plan to follow. Is an MBA necessary?

7. I can't make a decision. What should I do?
For those who feel overwhelmed at the prospect of looking for a job, don't feel ready for the work force or have unclear career plans: "These are not the right drivers for an MBA program," said Jennifer Jordan, director of business career services at KU. "I would encourage these students to meet with a career adviser to develop a job search strategy and explore their full range of employment options."

MORE INFORMATION

[www.mba.com]
The site allows students to compare and contrast MBA programs and identify the best possible programs for their specific interests.

[www.businessweek.com]
Students can set up a free account to review the admissions questions and answers for business schools and MBA programs.

For additional resources, as selected by the Johnson County Library, go to KansasCity.com and click on Business.
Ryan Ingle has a job in Citi's investment banking division awaiting him in New York after he graduates in May with bachelor's degrees in finance and Spanish from the University of Kansas.

Avila University's Kyle Kelsay in December received a bachelor's degree in accounting, and is “leaning toward getting an MBA.”