

Here's exactly what it takes to get into Wharton's MBA program, the No. 1 business school in the world

Robin Madell Mar. 24, 2020, 10:24 PM



- **If you aspire to get into this elite graduate business school, it helps to be aware of what — and who — you're up against.**
- **Wharton likes to look at candidates holistically, and will turn down interesting candidates who lack clarity of goals, according to an admissions expert.**
- **Business Insider grilled six Wharton grads and a leading MBA admissions advisory on their advice for what to do and what to avoid if you want to have the best shot at getting in.**
- **"It's all about storytelling; the key is to own your narrative," said one graduate.**
- **The deadline for applying in round three has been moved to April 15 due to the coronavirus pandemic; the new advance access deadline was moved to May 27.**
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The Wharton School at University of Pennsylvania routinely appears at the top of the list in MBA program **rankings**. A recent **2020 Global MBA Ranking** list led by education specialists Quacquarelli Symonds put Wharton as No. 1 of the **best business schools** in the *world*.

But if you aspire to get into this elite graduate business school, be aware of what — and who — you're up against.

Wharton's website shows that out of 6,245 applications for its **2020 MBA Class**, 862 students are currently enrolled. Drilling down further, you can learn from the Wharton School's admissions **department** that this is a typical class profile. Admissions generally

receives 6,000 to 7,000 applications in any given year, and the vast majority of all applicants (up to 80% of them) meet the required qualifications for admission. Around 1,000 candidates are offered admission, with the final class size usually averaging about 840 students.

This year, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the **application** deadline for third-round admissions was moved to April 15, and the advance access deadline was moved to May 27. And applicants no longer need to submit test scores, given the limited ability for students to sit for tests at this time.

How can you get in? Stacy Blackman of **Stacy Blackman Consulting**, an MBA admissions consulting firm whose team includes former **Wharton admissions officers**, explained that it's "not an exact science."

"Flexibility is inherent to the admissions process at Wharton," said Blackman. "Wharton is very willing to take applicants with strong GMAT scores, professional experience, and clear goals without that 'wow' factor, though of course the preference is both. Also, Wharton will turn down interesting and unique candidates who lack clarity of goals and ability to succeed in academics."



Courtesy of Stacy Blackman

If your GMAT numbers are high, though, Blackman underscores that increasingly, the admissions team is less interested in that metric as a predictor of student success, as it's no longer a clear enough differentiator among applicants. "Don't think your smoking GMAT is enough to get noticed," said Blackman. "Wharton could throw darts at a wall and hit 730 GMATs. Wharton wants to make sure the applicant can cut it quantitatively — which means they like to look at candidates holistically as a starting point."

If you're a prospective student, you can learn many key **facts and figures** — such as the average mean GRE score (163 verbal; 162 quant) and the average undergrad GPA (3.6) for the class of 2020 — from the Wharton website. The site is also a great resource to begin studying the **admissions process** and requirements. But while the website gives you a starting point for your goal of being accepted into this prestigious program, nothing beats getting the inside scoop from successful applicants who beat the tough odds and earned a coveted Wharton MBA.

Business Insider grilled six graduates — as well Blackman's leading MBA admissions advisory, which has a strong track record of acceptances to the world's top MBA programs, including Wharton — on what's most challenging about the admissions process to the Wharton School, and their advice for what to do and what to avoid if you want to have the best shot at getting in.

Meet the trifecta of criteria

Blackman notes that Wharton is very focused not only on making sure the applicant can do the work, but also on managing everything else that's part of the MBA experience. With this in mind, she states that applicants to Wharton's MBA program must meet the "trifecta of criteria":

- Exceptional career trajectory
- Quantitative chops (strong GMAT, GPA)
- Demonstrated leadership/teamwork/interpersonal skills

"Quality and rigor of professional career path are extremely important to Wharton, especially as they've combined Admissions and Career Services under the same umbrella," said Blackman. "The Wharton admissions readers are thinking about exit opportunities when reviewing applications in terms of: is this person already on the fast track, are their goals logical and reasonable, do they have a plan for how they will use their time during the program and how they will meet their goals?"

Blackman added that analytical prowess is a hallmark of Wharton's admissions process: "It is very important to show success via a strong test score and a college transcript that ideally includes calculus, stats, and/or economics. If you don't have the coursework exposure, consider taking additional classes unless your GMAT is high and analytical work experience like investment banking/private equity is already demonstrated." To address the third point in the trifecta, leadership and active engagement on campus, Blackman recommended including specifics in your application about how you will contribute to the Wharton School community and/or classroom.

Fill in your 'gaps' before applying

As you think about the trifecta of criteria, determine where you currently may fall short. When **Phyllis Zimble Miller** decided to apply for a Wharton MBA, she had a realization: "I had nothing going for me that could interest Wharton. I hadn't had math since junior

year in high school since there were no math requirements for my BA in journalism, and although I grew up in a business-oriented family, I had no actual business experience."

So instead of beginning the application process right away, Zimbler Miller, who is today an author and screenwriter, set off to fill in her "gaps." In her case, this entailed taking a pre-calculus college course to demonstrate her math skills, and convincing the newspaper at which she was a reporter to allow her to write a bi-weekly Money Matters column to showcase her finance expertise.



Courtesy of Phyllis Zimbler Miller

Next, she homed in on prepping for the MBA program's in-person interview and carefully chose who would write her business school recommendations. (When it comes to recommendations, Blackman points out that it's preferred that they be from a professional experience, not from a professor or an extracurricular capacity.) Zimbler Miller then leveraged her preparation by including one of her

best finance columns in her application, noting that with a Wharton MBA, she could do even better in financial and business reporting. Zimble Miller believes the same strategy can help other applicants.

"Do an honest review of your strengths and weaknesses in terms of what Wharton might be looking for in MBA candidates," she advised. "Then work on filling in those gaps before applying, emphasizing your unique strengths."

Another type of gap to address is any interruption in your work history, according to Blackman. As examples, she notes that Wharton is wary of those who are not working at the time of application, and that too much job jumping is also frowned upon.

Work at a company with a history of high Wharton MBA acceptance rates

Recent Wharton business school graduate Ashley Lim (class of 2018) suggested that targeting your employment toward certain industries and organizations may give you an edge in selection for the MBA program. "A large percentage of Wharton students come from major management consulting firms, investment banks, and big tech companies," said Lim. "These companies go through their highly selective hiring practices to vet their candidates, so having their brand on your resume can help your chances. These firms also hire Wharton

students as interns or full-time hires, so the relationship seems to be symbiotic."



Courtesy of Ashley Lim

Lim pointed out, however, that affiliation with one of the Big 5 firms or other corporate behemoths isn't a prerequisite to get in — and it doesn't ensure that you'll stand out.

"You don't need to have worked for one of the major companies. Nor does being one of the many Google employees guarantee your acceptance to Wharton," said Lim. "What is more important is your story. What are your interests? What type of work did you do, and what have you accomplished? What do you plan to achieve in the future, and how can a Wharton MBA help you?"

Lim explained that while she both interned and worked as a consultant at the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) before applying, she took pains to differentiate herself from other BCG management

consultants by emphasizing her deep passion for health and food — as well as her plan to start her own aged tea company. It worked, and today she is founder and CEO of **Mansa Tea**.

Don't be ambiguous in your essays

When it comes to your story, there's no better vehicle for communicating it to admissions than the business school essays. It goes without saying that to gain entry to any top MBA program, you must be prepared to write stellar essays — and this is particularly true at the top tier. To succeed in this mission, Blackman recommends avoiding ambiguity in your writing at all costs.

Apu Gupta, who obtained his MBA from the Wharton School in 2005 and today is CEO of the social commerce company **Curalate**, said that he found the biggest challenge of getting admitted was figuring out how to make his application stand out among so many superstars.

"Illustrating who I was beyond my numbers and resume took a lot of introspection," said Gupta. "It was an exercise that forced me to better understand what I was trying to accomplish with my life."

His solution was to leverage the essay portion of the application for optimum impact. "I viewed the business school essays as an opportunity to connect the dots on what could otherwise seem like a bunch of disparate life experiences," recalled Gupta, adding that it was

important to do this in a way that didn't seem "manufactured" for the school.

Instead, he focused on crafting "an authentic reflection" of the story of who he was, and who he wanted to become. Once that was established, he used the essay to link his story to his thoughts around why he believed Wharton was the right fit for him.

Wharton MBA holder Nithya Thadani (class of 2012) — who is CEO of the voice technology agency **RAIN** — also felt the biggest challenge of getting into the Wharton School was building a clear and compelling narrative that "cuts through the noise and allows your candidacy to shine."

Like Gupta, Thadani emphasized the importance of "connecting the dots" in your essays. In her case, she prioritized showing the link between what she was currently doing — a career in banking and product development — and her future ambitions in social innovation, suggesting the role that a Wharton MBA could play.

"It's all about storytelling," said Thadani. "The key is to own your narrative."

Avoid online forums

Like anything in life, some things are within your sphere of influence, and others aren't. Gupta emphasized that he found spending too much time comparing notes with other applicants about the latter was

unhelpful, and distracted him from doing what he could do to maximize his own application.

"Applying to business school involves a great deal of anxiety," said Gupta. "Is my GMAT high enough? Do I have the grades? What are my chances of getting in? Unsurprisingly, these questions get asked on various online forums and people start sharing their scores and grades and their success or failure in getting in. Reading this stuff is terrifying. It got me into a terrible headspace. So I ditched the forums and focused on what I could control — the story of me."

Figure out your fit

In addition to a careful approach to your essays, several of the Wharton business school alumni with whom we spoke stressed the importance of cultural fit in both your general application and your interview.

"Fit carries real weight in the interview process, and demonstrating genuine interest and enthusiasm for Wharton can tip the balance," advised Thadani. Because of the importance of fit, she prescribes that applicants do their homework by getting to know not only about Wharton and its programs and values, but also about the nuance of the local area, or "Philly culture."



Lindsay Brown

Gupta agreed with this approach of getting to know the school intimately, and suggests going beyond the obvious in your research.

"Go deeper than 'case method' versus 'lecture,'" he said. "Schools have cultures. Investigate them and try to understand the ethos of the program. Then figure out if and why it's the right home for you."

Haley Russell, class of 2018, referred to this strategy as thinking about the "broader university ecosystem" and determining how you might like to participate. She highlighted that the networks at Wharton and

Penn more broadly were instrumental in providing support and feedback for the pet food company she ultimately launched, **Chippin** — and emphasized that understanding this in advance can help you position your application.

"The University of Pennsylvania is home to an incredible body of knowledge, cutting-edge research, and potential collaborators for you during your time at school and beyond," said Russell. "Wharton was my number-one choice because I knew I wanted to use my time as an MBA student to set the foundation for my future venture."

Go all in

Kon Leong, CEO of **ZL Technologies**, earned his MBA from the Wharton School with distinction in 1986. Leong said that having an MBA from Wharton makes him a popular informal advisor for others who are trying to do the same thing — and that it's often a leap of faith that prospective applicants most need.

"Don't be your own worst enemy," said Leong. "Instead, open up your mind to your potential."

He added that having counseled many applicants toward pursuing their MBA at Wharton, he faces the recurring challenge of assuring them it's not that impossible to get in — but that this "intimidation factor" can be overcome by building confidence, understanding what the admissions committee is looking for, and then over-delivering.

To that end, Leong recommended making sure you're ready to invest yourself fully in the mission of preparing your application.

"I don't mean normal preparations — I mean total dedication and focus on every aspect of the process, including the interview," said Leong. "If you're not willing to go the extra mile, maybe you should reconsider."

Stay business-school specific

As you work on fine-tuning the story you want to tell, your focus is important. Thadani recommended that your message stay firmly on what a Wharton MBA specifically can help you achieve.

"Try to avoid defaulting to reasons for attending business school that can be achieved outside of the classroom," said Thadani. "For example, if you're looking for hands-on operational experience, you probably don't need an MBA for that. Wharton provides you with the tools, resources, and community to tackle challenges in the real world."

Blackman concluded: "When a succinct and clear 'why MBA', 'why Wharton' is missing, it will sink an application."