MIT exec MBA program banks on experience

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MIT Sloan School of Management is completing the first year of its executive MBA program and recruiting for the second, joining the game later than its peers in Boston and entering the market when corporate sponsorship for executive education is declining.

Sloan also offers Sloan Fellows, another midcareer program, but the executive MBA is the Sloan track that accommodates executives’ work schedules while they study. Students attend classes on Fridays and Saturdays every three weeks, and Sloan’s first cohort has an average of 17 years of professional experience, said Jonathan Lehrich, director.

In offering an executive MBA, Sloan locally joins Boston, Northeastern and Suffolk universities. But several characteristics make the Sloan program different from others, Lehrich said, aside from the more senior level of its students.

For example, the program is as academically rigorous as Sloan’s traditional MBA and focuses on what Lehrich called “the science of management” — the integration of technology and a data-driven approach that one might expect MIT to take. In addition, nearly half the Sloan executive MBA students travel from beyond a driving distance — California and Texas, and even Canada, Colombia and Costa Rica.

Yet, why offer an executive MBA program now when so many companies are reluctant to subsidize the tuition and when other executive MBA programs have existed for so long — Suffolk for 26 years and Boston University for nearly 25?

“It’s like this is a wave of the future. It’s been around,” said James E. Samels, CEO of the Education Alliance, a higher- ed consulting firm in Framingham. Samels pointed out that the profit margin for executive MBA programs is high, with the cost to recruit and teach lower than traditional programs.

“We would like to have more reach and contact and dialogue in the Greater Boston area, and we haven’t been able to do that at the midcareer level for far too long,” said Lehrich.

At $132,000 for 20 months, the Sloan program is pricier than some more established programs. In comparison, Suffolk costs $82,569.00 for 21 months.

At $132,000 for 20 months, the Sloan program matches high price with high selectivity — 506 people applied for this year’s class of 65, and Lehrich said he expects 450 applicants for next year’s class of 75.

Suffolk University’s executive MBA receives about 40 applications for up to 25 slots, said Kristin Polito, program director. Dwinding company sponsorship for students attending the programs has posed a challenge, she said.

Even executive MBA programs that once had 100 percent corporate sponsorship for students now have between 30 and 60 percent, Polito said. To that end, about half of the students in the Sloan program are being sponsored by their companies, according to Lehrich.

Russell Low, director of technology for Varian Semiconductor Equipment Associates, is among the Sloan students footing most of the tuition bill on his own, with a small amount paid by his company. Low decided to pursue the degree nonetheless to “get a complete framework in business” in hopes of one day being promoted to general manager.

And then there is Sloan’s reputation.

“I wanted to go to a world renowned program,” Low said.

Meanwhile, Lynn Bollenger receives full tuition support from L-3 Warrior Systems Division, Insight Operations in New Hampshire, where she is vice president of product development. What attracted her to Sloan, in addition to its technical approach to management, she said, is the academic challenge.

“I looked at other executive MBA programs. They were more check-the-box programs. I wanted to be pushed academically,” said Bollenger. “This is not a light MBA.”