

ECONOMIC BACKBONE

Florida Trend

MBA's

By Cindy Krischer
Goodman

Across Florida, universities are rolling out a variety of MBA programs to attract working professionals looking for the big-picture thinking skills that employers value. Some earn the degree to boost their knowledge in areas of weakness. Others earn the degree to pursue a new career path. Almost all recent MBA graduates say the bonds they establish with their fellow students and professors and the sharing of real-life scenarios are the biggest benefits of the MBA programs. Some recent MBA graduates share their experiences here.



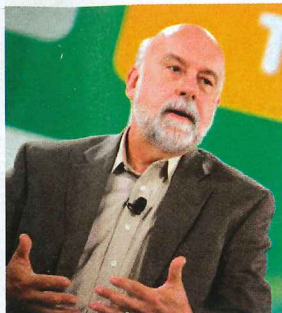
The University of South Florida's part-time MBA ranks 11th among public schools nationwide and 32 among private and public universities, according to *Bloomberg Businessweek*.



Jim Stikeleather

University of South Florida

Doctor of Business Administration



Research Driven

'You are contributing to general knowledge of the world,' says doctoral student Jim Stikeleather.

Jim Stikeleather is executive strategist and chief innovation officer at Dell. He also holds an MBA from the University of South Florida and wants to add another title to his resume: Doctor of business administration.

Earning his MBA from USF in 1987, Stikeleather says he gained

confidence in business and discovered many areas in which he realized he was uninformed. Now, he's become a member of the first cohort of USF's DBA program when it launched in January 2015. "A DBA is a

lot of work and time, but it doesn't interfere with your day job like a Ph.D. program would," he says.

"I am learning how to do certain types of research, how to construct experiences and different theories of management. Most of the classes teach you how to write and research and publish and the content or area of focus is in your control."

Stikeleather says he has had a growing interest in how people make value-based decisions and will further study this topic in his courses. For example, he will delve into why people donate their fortunes and why they choose to live a certain lifestyle at the expense

of the environment.

While many employers are supportive of an MBA, a DBA is more research driven and not as recognized for bringing value to the company, Stikeleather says. Still, he considers the degree valuable. "You are learning how to do research and contributing to general knowledge of the world."

He sees companies gaining more appreciation of the degree as senior executives bring problems into the academic world to solve, learn how to do research and analysis, and understand the methods for presenting results. "Eventually those skills sets will be of more value to businesses," Stikeleather says.

For now, Stikeleather says he is learning about the writing process and becoming a more disciplined researcher.

In his job at Dell, Stikeleather helps customers become more innovative. He is based in Tampa, but his team operates from all over the world. Travel time has become his opportunity to do school work.



Sara Behnke

University of South Florida

MBA



Sustainable Future

Sara Behnke discovers a passion while studying for her MBA.

When Sara Behnke considered furthering her education, her first instinct was to go to law school. Behnke, 34, works as a judicial assistant for the criminal division in the Hillsborough County Courthouse and has held various jobs in the courthouse since she was 15. She began studying for her LSAT but decided that a master's in

business administration would open more career paths. "Lucky for me by making that choice I discovered my passion," she says.

Her first semester in the MBA program, Behnke took an ethics course that focused on the effects business has on society and the environment. "What I learned was that there is a silver lining called sustainability, which to me means creating and implementing innovative solutions that will sustain our limited natural resources."

Behnke went on to take more courses with the same professor, all with a sustainability component.

One of her class assignments was to develop a sustainability plan for her employer. "We have massive amounts of paper coming in and out of our offices, but we had no paper recycling program and no budget to start one," she says. Behnke teamed up with other co-workers and put together a no-cost recycling program at the courthouse, run entirely by employee volunteers. "In just the first year, we recycled 25,700 pounds of paper."

Behnke recently began a job search for a position in sustainability. "Not only have I found my passion," she says, "but the MBA program has provided me with the tools that I needed to pursue it."

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