

School Readies Students for the Real World

The University of Texas at Dallas puts the focus on arming students with the project management skills they need to get the job done.

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*—Jim Szot, PMP, interim director
University of Texas at Dallas'
School of Management Executive
Education project management
program*

SUMMARY:

All the project management knowledge students learn in a classroom will not do much good if it can't be applied in the real world. So educators and administrators at the University of Texas (UT) at Dallas' School of Management Executive Education project management program want to make sure the school's project management coursework reflects how things play out on the job.

"From the very beginning, we give students an overview of what project management is, explain its processes, and give them the big picture: Projects exist to achieve a strategic mission for the organization," says Jim Szot, PMP, interim director of the Dallas, Texas, USA-based program. "The whole point is to get the students started off thinking that the project is not just about the deliverables at the end of the project."

He says it's about the way project management contributes to the bigger picture. "That way, they're not just thinking about what needs to get finished when it comes to decision making during the project. When making decisions, they're also considering how to maximize the results for the organization."

"The first 21 credit hours [of the graduate degree program] are what we call the 'project management core.' It contains six sequential project management courses that follow the life cycle of a project with an embedded organizational behavior course," says Mr. Szot. "Within each course, we have multiple instructors—balancing both the sociocultural and the technical aspects of project management."

For students, it is a chance to experience the project from start to finish, complete with all the ups and downs.

Jim Joiner, PMP, recently retired director of the Project Management Program at the School of Management Executive Education, calls it an integrated curriculum, conceived from of a joint effort between UT Dallas and industry representatives. Not only does the approach allow the school to tap into a variety of faculties, it also lets students learn material in the context of how it's used and how it forces thought-process integration.

The setup, however, requires logistical coordination and linkage between modules. And Mr. Szot admits the arrangement can cause some initial confusion for students. "It's a little complex to explain and to administer as far as not having one professor for each course," he says. "But the students like it, and we're trying to give them content that is as relevant as possible to the associated project life cycle phase for each course."

UT Dallas' project management roots date back to 1997, when it began offering an on-campus certificate program. Two years later, its first master of science in management and administrative sciences degree with an emphasis in project management concentration was awarded. And, in 2002, an online program was launched, and the school bestowed the first master of business administration degree with a project management concentration.

Now, the online and on-campus programs are virtually identical, each offering three exit points: a graduate certificate in project management supported by 21 hours of graduate coursework, a master of science in management and administrative sciences with a project management concentration, or a master of business administration with a project management emphasis.

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Most of UT Dallas’ project management students opt to complete the entire program and leave with a master of business administration degree.

Both the master of science and the master of business administration degree programs include an international study trip as part of the coursework.

“You don’t see [these kinds of trips] very often in a master’s of science and project management program,” Mr. Szot says. “It’s not about going on a tour. It’s about going and being immersed in a different culture and spending two weeks in that culture, commuting to school and company visits. It’s a pretty rich experience, much like they would have if they worked there.”

THE PARTNERSHIP PAYOFF

Along with its alliances with the corporate community, UT Dallas has forged long-standing ties with Project Management Institute. As a PMI Registered Education Provider (R.E.P.), the school is approved to issue professional development units (PDUs) that count toward students’ continuing certification requirements for PMI credentials. Being an R.E.P. lends the school added authority and can be a selling point for students. All UT Dallas coursework qualifies for PDUs. (See What is an R.E.P.? on this page.)

As a PMI R.E.P., UT Dallas also has increased visibility through PMI’s online, searchable provider directory. “Many of our students find us and our project management program through a web search on PMI.org,” Mr. Szot says.

As Mr. Szot knows firsthand, deans are always looking to boost enrollment, so every bit of added exposure helps. Being an R.E.P. also provides “an avenue to reach people who are looking for degree programs and training programs, which we do as well, and that is a huge benefit,” says Mr. Joiner.

Another benefit of being an R.E.P. is that it helps academic leaders ensure that coursework is aligned with the needs of the profession. “Those standards help us create a common language for people from different organizations to more effectively communicate with each other,” he says.

Mr. Joiner adds the school has relied on PMI-created materials within the classroom and has even incorporated some of those materials into the curriculum.

Along with its R.E.P. status, UT Dallas is accredited by PMI’s Global Accreditation Center for Project Management Education Programs (GAC). GAC serves two fundamental purposes: to ensure the quality of academic degree programs in project management and to assist faculty and universities in the improvement of degree programs. (See What is the PMI Global Accreditation Center for Project Management Education Programs (GAC)? on page 3.)

GAC accreditation is an intense process, says Mr. Joiner. “You have to have graduated two classes, at minimum,” he explains. “You have to meet certain specific criteria and outcomes for your program. You have to present a very

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT DALLAS, SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

Program: Graduate curriculum with opportunities to earn a certificate in project management, master of science or master of business administration with specialization in project management

Established: 1997

Delivery methods

- Traditional Classroom
- Web-based real-time instruction
- Web-based asynchronous instruction

<http://project.utdallas.edu>

WHAT IS AN R.E.P.?

A PMI Registered Education Provider (R.E.P.) is an organization approved by PMI to issue professional development units (PDUs)

for its training courses. Courses offered by R.E.P.s are pre-approved for contact hours in the fulfillment of certification eligibility requirements, as well as PDUs to fulfill the continuing certification requirements for PMI credentials. (The eligibility of contact hours/PDUs from other sources is the responsibility of certification candidates and is determined on a case-by-case basis.)

The R.E.P. program has been designed to enhance the ongoing

professional development of PMI’s members, those credentialed through PMI and others in the project management profession.

For more information, visit PMI.org/REP

WHAT IS THE PMI GLOBAL ACCREDITATION CENTER FOR PROJECT MANAGEMENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS (GAC)?

GAC serves two fundamental purposes:

- To ensure the quality of academic degree programs in project
- To assist faculty and universities in the improvement of project
- Web-based asynchronous instruction

Academic accreditation may be conducted at the bachelor's, master's and doctorate program levels.

Graduates of PMI GAC-accredited programs receive 1,500 hours of project management experience toward earning their Project Management Professional (PMP)[®] and Program Management Professional (PgMP)[®] credentials.

For more information, visit [PMI.org/Accreditation](https://www.pmi.org/Accreditation).

detailed [self-evaluation], be subjected to a two- to three-person site visit and [have your application] voted on by the GAC board."

It was worth the effort, though. Not only does GAC accreditation help build credibility, it also assists in developing the academic program. Because GAC accreditation is project-management specific, both Mr. Szot and Mr. Joiner view the accreditation process as a means to see how they're meeting the needs of project management learners.

Having both the GAC accreditation and the R.E.P. status helps pull in a variety of students as well as industry interest. Last year, for example, the school

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was selected to train hundreds of the executives, project managers and support personnel who are involved with the Panama Canal expansion project. When screening potential educational partners, project leaders required the school be a PMI R.E.P. and be PMI GAC accredited.

"Oftentimes, people are interested in getting the Project Management Professional (PMP)[®] credential and wonder what type of PMP credential examination prep courses are around," says Mr. Szot. "They see we have that and see that we have an academic program. Since we're mainly an academic program, one of the main benefits [of having both] is the increased visibility."

With more than 4,000 members, the local PMI Dallas Chapter has proven to be another valuable resource to the school. The school and the PMI chapter will be partnering for their fourth annual symposium later this year, for example.

"This is a relationship that gives us visibility and [the chapter] exposure within the community," says Mr. Joiner. "Many of our students attend their meetings that have good speakers and such." The chapter has an annual vendor showcase in Dallas, and representatives

such as UT Dallas have the opportunity to have a booth and talk about its program.

UT Dallas has exhibited at PMI's North American global congresses as well, because the wider audience at this venue is very appealing to attracting students for both their executive education degree programs.

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READY FOR THE REAL WORLD

Once they've wrapped up their coursework, UT Dallas graduates are armed with both the technical and people skills required to handle a wide range of projects.

"You can hire people to manage your schedules and budgets for you, but to be the project manager, you need to be a leader," says Mr. Szot. "In addition to helping people be competent in the technical aspects of project management, like scheduling and budgeting, we do our best to help them hone their leadership skills."

The approach seems to be working. "Satisfied customers are your best advertisement. We get a lot of our students from referrals from former students and alumni," says Mr. Joiner. "Somewhere in the 90 to 95 percent range are very pleased."

Designed with a practical approach to learning and potential immediate benefits, the program appears poised for sustained growth with the continued support of PMI. ■