Executive education programs are a big investment, and there are lots of choices out there. Here are six things to think about before taking the plunge:

• Before beginning your search, have a clear understanding of what you expect to get out of the experience and the skills you're trying to develop. Programs can be industry-specific or focus on broad subjects such as strategy, global management, leadership development or driving performance. Consider your strengths and weaknesses and career aspirations. In general, executive educators say that courses designed to help broaden managerial skills may likely run at least two to four weeks. A specific business challenge often can be covered in three to five days.

Locally, the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, DePaul University and Loyola University Chicago offer a variety of options. Review the websites of schools you're interested in to get a sense of their specialties and program offerings. See the list of top-ranked executive education programs published by the Financial Times (FT.com) and BusinessWeek (BusinessWeek.com). BusinessWeek publishes rankings every other year; the next rankings come out in November.

• Check out the background of professors and look closely at curriculums and reading lists. See if programs are structured in a way that suits you. Many programs blend lectures, case studies and hands-on learning.

• Look for a diversity of industries and geographic origins among participants and a format that fosters relationship building. "There's value not just from sitting in class but from soundboarding ideas and relating business war stories with classmates," says Steve Bishop, a 43-year-old business development consultant enrolled in the six-month Kellogg Management Institute program at Northwestern University. "Often you hear a fresh perspective from people outside your industry."

• Request referrals from colleagues about programs they have attended or talk to your human resources department for referrals. Speak to a school's course counselor or program adviser and sit in on a class, if possible.

• Factor in the timing of the program and costs, which vary greatly. "You want to be able to come in and say, 'I can focus,' without other distractions," says Mario Polizzi, associate director of executive education at Loyola University Chicago.

• Before classes begin, formulate a list of questions relevant to your company and create a plan for sharing information with teams or colleagues upon your return. "It helps to go into these programs with some sense of intention," says Eric Fridman, assistant dean and director of marketing for executive education at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern.
"You'll be a more engaged participant when you have some degree of accountability and your company will get much more of a return on their investment."