Charting a different course
By Janet Kidd Stewart
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Getting an MBA is still the logical step toward the corner office, but more students are veering off the beaten path.

Business schools increasingly are offering a wide range of specialized degrees or partnering with sibling departments within their universities to mix business and a host of other disciplines.

Loyola University Chicago's School of Business Administration this fall will offer a master of science degree in supply chain management. Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management offers a major in social enterprise. At DePaul University, graduate students can weave business courses into a master's degree they design for their own interests.

With a sales background and a startup company on her resume, an MBA could have been a natural progression for Laura McLaughlin.

Instead, she is completing a master's degree at DePaul's Interdisciplinary Studies Program, combining sociology and communications courses with traditional business classes at the school's Kellstadt Graduate School of Business.

"It's a bit of a challenge to explain. I'm a real eclectic mix," said McLaughlin, who went back to school midcareer to break away from strictly sales positions.

Ultimately, she envisions a career helping companies with their communications strategies. Already, she has started her own food-canning instruction business and companion social media presence (theglassrooster.com).

McLaughlin admits to the occasional worry that her degree will be viewed skeptically. She is confident she can connect the dots in a face-to-face interview, but without a traditional MBA her resume will fall through the cracks of recruiting software or strict hiring procedures.

"The degree isn't a shingle the way an MBA is," said David Gitomer, director of Interdisciplinary Studies at DePaul, where students are given broad latitude to design their degrees.

"If you are going into a gigantic corporate setting where they want someone with an MBA, then go do an MBA. But if you're going into a smaller company where you may wear different hats, this can actually
work quite well."

At highly ranked Kellogg, meanwhile, nearly 90 percent of its MBA candidates now choose at least one elective course in the Social Enterprise at Kellogg (SEEK) program, said Jamie Jones, assistant director.

SEEK applies management and leadership training to global initiatives such as world health, said Jones, a 2009 graduate of the program. She calls her own education a "transformative experience about the options that exist to use business models to address societal and environmental challenges."

Students typically travel abroad to observe gripping health or societal problems, then assemble business models to address them.

It's a far cry from the Gordon Gekko era, and the school offers loan payback assistance for students whose jobs after graduation are higher on mission than margin, Jones said.

Students with social enterprise startup projects can also win small monetary awards to help seed the business.

"There are certainly students whose parents are concerned they are majoring in this," she said. "You can easily get roped into these conversations about what your peers are doing, and it can make you feel like maybe you should just go be a consultant. The difference is, when I wake up, I'm really happy."

Alternative degrees can also add a layer of depth for students who have a keen sense of where they want their careers to go.

Kenneth Jones, a Loyola MBA candidate, will tack on the new supply chain master's degree program this fall.

"A lot of companies are creating the role of a chief supply chain officer," Jones said. "There's always risk, because you're using money for a degree that you could be saving, but I'm hoping this has a good payback. And I'm just one of those people who likes to try new things."

Supply chain management (formerly "logistics," which was formerly "distribution," which was formerly "truckling") is not a business fad, said Loyola's Maciek Nowak, director of the new program. Global product sourcing has become an integral part of business, moving into discussions in the executive suite instead of just operations, he said.

"An MBA is a broad degree, and that's important, but a lot of employers are looking for something that is more focused," Nowak said.

"I'm getting calls every week from companies asking how many graduates we can send their way, and we haven't even started yet."