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Wharton M.B.A.s Get More Training in Data and Decision-Making

B-school is pushing business analytics amid a growing interest from students, employers in data science

The University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School in Philadelphia is expanding its offerings in business analytics. *PHOTO: BETH J. HARPAZ/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

By **LINDSAY GELLMAN**

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The Wharton School has long been a destination for Wall Street-bound M.B.A.s. Now, the University of Pennsylvania's elite business school is betting on big data.

Wharton is expanding its offerings in business analytics, the application of data science to business problems, as more firms seek to make sense of the large troves of data they collect. The school last week unveiled an M.B.A. major in the subject and plans to add courses and, it is hoped, faculty in the discipline in the near future.

Administrators say the analytics initiatives are intended to help meet student and employer demand, citing a growing number of data-science jobs at companies like Amazon.com Inc. and Uber Technologies Inc.

The analytics push comes as the number of elite M.B.A.s who aspire to finance careers, particularly in investment banking, is shrinking. Some 306 students in Wharton's 2008 M.B.A. class entered the financial-services industry right after graduation; last year, that number was 219, according to the school.

"Twenty years ago, data science didn't exist," said Eric Bradlow, professor of marketing, statistics and education, and co-director of the Wharton Customer Analytics Initiative. "Now there are more industries, more opportunities for Wharton to expand its empirical focus."

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Wharton Dean Geoffrey Garrett describes analytics as a discipline that "helps leaders make better decisions," and even managers without a technical background must be "able to talk to the geeks," he said. Mr. Garrett added that the school has begun using analytics tools in its internal processes, such as matching students to desired courses.

At Wharton, the finance faculty—led by longtime professors like Jeremy Siegel—have wielded heavy influence at the school. The analytics push is championed by upstart faculty in newer disciplines, like Adam Grant, a 34-year-old professor of management and psychology and author of two best-selling business books.

Among Wharton's early forays into analytics was its introduction in 2008 of a research unit focused on customer decision-making, which has matched students to do projects for Procter & Gamble Co. and other companies.

Students and faculty also tour potential employers, and the school hosts career fairs focused on data-heavy jobs, an annual conference and online courses, said Mr. Bradlow,

co-director of the school's Customer Analytics Initiative. In 2014, the school added an annual people analytics conference to its agenda. The school is currently aiming to form partnerships with large firms and other organizations to do human-resources data crunching with its People Lab.

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—Prof. Adam Grant

Mr. Grant said the strengthened focus on analytics will train students in rigorous thinking and decision-making based on large data sets, rather than the isolated scenarios students encounter in a case study.

"We want to create a hub where evidence-based management is the norm rather than the exception," he added.

Unlike several b-schools that have recently rolled out one-year specialized masters programs in business analytics, Wharton administrators said the school has no plans to create a separate degree program, and aims instead to further integrate analytics content into its full-time M.B.A.

Faculty members said the school has been attracting M.B.A. applicants intent on pursuing careers in data science. Daniel McAuley, a current second-year M.B.A. at Wharton, said he wrote his application essays about his interest in data analysis. He was "on the fence" about whether an M.B.A. fit his goals, he said, until he sat in on a marketing-analytics class and was impressed by the level of technical detail.

"Wharton has always been regarded as quantitative," Mr. McAuley said. "It's just that in the past, a lot of that reputation came from the finance department."

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