Areas of Focus for Leadership Education Continue to Evolve

By DAVID WILSON



In 2026, graduate business education is undergoing one of its most significant transformations in decades. Nowhere is this shift more visible than in Southern California, where universities are closely aligned with industries like technology, entertainment, healthcare, and sustainability. As a result, MBA and specialized business master's students are focusing less on traditional theory and more on real-world, future-facing skills that match a rapidly evolving economy.

AI AND DATA FLUENCY BECOME CORE, NOT ELECTIVE

Perhaps the most defining shift is the integration of artificial intelligence into nearly every aspect of business education. What was once a niche concentration is now a foundational requirement. MBA students are learning not just how to use AI tools, but how to evaluate their outputs, manage risks, and apply them strategically across functions like marketing, finance, and operations.

In Southern California, this trend is especially pronounced given the region's proximity to major tech hubs and startups. Business students at schools like those in Los Angeles and Orange County are increasingly collaborating with tech companies on projects involving machine learning, automation, and data-driven decision-making. The emphasis is clear: tomorrow's business leaders must be as comfortable interpreting algorithms as they are reading balance sheets.

A SHIFT TOWARD SPECIALIZED, SKILL-BASED LEARNING

Another major change is the move away from generalist MBA programs toward specialized degrees and concentrations. Students are prioritizing programs that offer targeted expertise in areas like fintech, supply chain management, healthcare administration, and entertainment business.

This reflects broader market demand. Employers are increasingly valuing specific, job-ready skills over broad managerial knowledge, and students are responding accordingly.

Southern California's economy reinforces this trend. With Hollywood, Silicon Beach, and a booming healthcare sector, students are tailoring their studies to industries where they can immediately apply their knowledge. It's not uncommon for graduate business students to pursue hybrid paths—combining, for example, an MBA with coursework in digital media, biotech, or sustainability.

LEADERSHIP IN UNCERTAINTY AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

The instability of recent years—from economic volatility to global conflicts—has reshaped what leadership training looks like in business schools. Today's graduate students are spending more time on crisis management, stakeholder communication, and decision-making under uncertainty.

Courses often include simulations that mirror real-world disruptions, requiring students to navigate ambiguous situations with incomplete data. This reflects a broader shift away from static case studies toward dynamic, experiential learning.

In Southern California, where industries like entertainment and tourism are particularly sensitive to global trends, this type of training is especially relevant. Students are being prepared not just to lead in stable environments, but to adapt quickly when conditions change.

THE RISE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND HUMAN SKILLS

Even as technology becomes more central, there is a growing recognition that human skills are more important than ever. Graduate business programs are placing greater emphasis on emotional intelligence, communication, and ethical leadership.

Students are being trained to lead diverse teams, manage conflict, and build trust—skills that are critical in increasingly global and polarized work environments.

This aligns with feedback from employers, many of whom report that while technical skills can be taught, strong interpersonal and leadership abilities are harder to develop and highly valued.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND INDUSTRY INTEGRATION

Finally, there is a strong push toward hands-on, experiential learning. Instead of relying solely on classroom instruction, business schools are embedding students in real-world projects, internships, and consulting engagements.

In Southern California, this often means working directly with startups, entertainment companies, or established corporations. Students might spend weeks consulting for a local business or collaborating on a live project with a major firm, gaining practical experience before they graduate.

A MORE STRATEGIC, ROI-DRIVEN STUDENT MINDSET

Underlying all of these trends is a shift in how students approach graduate business education. Today's students are more strategic and selective, carefully evaluating the return on investment of their degrees.

They are looking for programs that offer clear career outcomes, strong industry connections, and immediately applicable skills. In a region as competitive and opportunity-rich as Southern California, that mindset is shaping not only what students choose to study—but how business schools design their programs.

In 2026, graduate business education is defined by adaptability, specialization, and real-world relevance. From AI integration to sustainability and experiential learning, today's business students are preparing for careers that demand both technical expertise and human insight. The traditional MBA is not disappearing, but it is being fundamentally reimagined to meet the needs of a new generation of leaders.

David Wilson is a retired business school professor and freelance writer on education related topics.

LEADERSHIP & UPSKILLING

From Ambition to Impact: The Power of a Graduate Education Degree

In a world defined by rapid technological change, global interdependence, and evolving social challenges, the value of a graduate degree has never been more closely tied to purpose. Today's professionals are not just seeking advancement — they are searching for meaning, impact, and the ability to lead responsibly. At University of Redlands, graduate education is designed with exactly that in mind: empowering individuals with the skills, perspective, and community needed to make a difference.

Across its schools and programs — including the School of Business & Society, the School of Education, the Presidio Center for Sustainable Solutions, San Francisco Theological Seminary, and specialized programs in geographic information systems (GIS), communication disorders, and public policy and administration — Redlands offers a graduate experience that blends academic rigor with real-world relevance, rooted in ethical leadership and social impact.



Master's students in the geographic information systems program engage with a professor during a class.

BUSINESS WITH PURPOSE

The modern business landscape calls for leaders who can navigate ethical dilemmas, balance stakeholder needs, and innovate responsibly. The School of Business & Society answers this call with programs that integrate business fundamentals alongside ethics, social responsibility, and purposeful leadership. Whether pursuing an MBA, MS in Business Analytics, or MS in Organizational Leadership, students are equipped to address complex economic and societal challenges.

For Michelle DeArmond '21, the MS in Organizational Leadership helped her fill knowledge gaps and become a better leader.

"The degree gave me the tools I needed to take this leap," said DeArmond. " It reinforced what I had instinctively believed about leadership and introduced me to research-backed strategies that have made a real impact in my work."

Faculty with experience at organizations like KPMG, Esri, and Boeing bring practical insight into the classroom, ensuring learning extends beyond theory. Students also gain access to a powerful professional network of peers, faculty, and more than 30,000 alumni working across industries.

GLOBAL INSIGHT AND SPATIAL INNOVATION

Experiential and global learning are central to the Redlands experience. Through study abroad and consultancy courses, students engage with diverse cultures and business environments, gaining the perspective needed to lead in an interconnected world.

This global outlook is strengthened by Redlands' leadership in spatial education. Through the Institute for Geospatial Impact, students learn to apply spatial thinking and technologies to better understand markets, supply chains, and social and environmental systems. These skills are central to the university's graduate programs in GIS, preparing students to use geospatial data in fields such as urban planning, sustainability, and national security.

Lisa Berry '13 credits her education for bringing together her dual passion for geospatial science and high-speed competition. By day, she is the Senior GIS Engineer and ArcGIS Living Atlas Evangelist at Esri, and on weekends, she races cars with her family. Berry said earning her MS in Geographic Information Systems equipped her with both the technical tools and the mindset needed to thrive in a fast-evolving field.

"The MSGIS program has been a critical part of my journey in GIS," Berry said. "It gave me the tools and resources to be successful and help me find my job. I'm so grateful to have been part of a program that gave me everything I needed to do the things that I love."

EDUCATION, COMMUNICATION, AND HUMAN IMPACT

For those drawn to education and human development, the School of Education offers programs grounded in equity, access, and social justice.

Sara Guerra '04, '06 earned a bachelor's degree in liberal studies, a master's in curriculum and instruction, and a teaching degree.

"I realized that Redlands wasn't just a place with a strong academic reputation," said Guerra. "It was a university with a legacy of developing outstanding educators and people of character."

Students like Guerra gain hands-on experience in classrooms and counseling settings, supported by mentorship and pathways like the Teacher Residency program. Through initiatives such as the Race in Education Analytics Learning (REAL) Lab, they engage in research that challenges systemic inequities and prepares them to advocate for meaningful change.

Redlands also prepares students to make a direct impact on individual lives through its Master of Science in Communication Disorders. This program equips future speech-language pathologists with clinical knowledge and hands-on experience to support individuals with communication and swallowing disorders. Through supervised practice and community engagement, students develop the expertise and empathy needed to improve quality of life across the lifespan.

LEADERSHIP, POLICY, AND SUSTAINABLE IMPACT

This commitment to justice and impact extends to San Francisco Theological Seminary (SFTS), where students engage in theological study grounded in academic excellence, spirituality, innovation, and social justice.



University of Redlands' original campus in Redlands, California.

At the Presidio Center for Sustainable Solutions at the San Francisco Bay Area campus, Redlands offers a forward-thinking approach to graduate education focused on sustainability, equity, and systems thinking. Through interdisciplinary coursework, real-world projects, and close collaboration with faculty who are active practitioners, students explore how to address complex challenges at the intersection of business, policy, and community impact.

Another distinctive program at Redlands is the Master of Public Policy and Administration (MPPA), which combines the analytical rigor of public policy with the leadership and management focus of public administration. This integrated approach prepares students to both shape policy and lead the organizations that implement it.

Guided by faculty with real-world experience as policymakers, nonprofit leaders, and public service professionals, students build skills in policy development, communication, data analysis, public sector management, and grant writing.

THE REDLANDS DIFFERENCE

What unites all of these programs is a shared philosophy: education should be transformative. At University of Redlands, graduate study is not just about gaining expertise — it is about developing the mindset, values, and connections needed to lead with purpose. Students are challenged to think critically, act ethically, and engage deeply with the world around them resulting in graduates who are prepared to solve complex problems, advance in their careers, and create measurable impact within their fields.

In an era where complexity is the norm and meaningful leadership is in high demand, a graduate degree from University of Redlands offers more than advancement. It offers direction. It offers community. And above all, it offers the opportunity to turn ambition into lasting impact, with outcomes reflected in career mobility, leadership opportunities, and meaningful contributions across industries and communities.

Learn more at Redlands.edu.

WHY CHOOSE A REDLANDS MASTER'S DEGREE



University of Redlands offers a graduate experience that blends academic rigor with real-world experience, rooted in ethical leadership and social impact.

"Being able to learn alongside other highly talented individuals and figure out how to lead groups was the biggest draw to the MBA program," Alex Lemos '09 said. "[U of R] gave me the opportunity to receive a very high-quality education right at home, which would help me reach my long-term goals."

Now Vice President of Accounting for Stater Bros. Markets, Lemos applies the leadership foundation shaped in his Redlands classroom, and rooted in empathy, communication, and collaboration.



EXPLORE REDLANDS GRADUATE PROGRAMS

Learn from expert faculty, engage in fieldwork and hands-on learning experiences, and prepare professionally to advance your career and realize your goals. Choose from more than 30 graduate programs, and options for online, hybrid, and in-person classes.

EDUCATION, TEACHING, AND PROFESSIONAL TRACKS

- M.A. in Education, Learning and Teaching
  - Credentials: Multiple or Single Subject or Mild/Moderate Support
  - Dual: Multiple or Single Subject with Mild/Moderate Support
- M.A. in Clinical Mental Health Counseling
  - MFT
  - Child Adolescent Intervention
  - School-based Mental Health
  - Spanish-Speaking Communities
- MA in Counseling & Psychotherapy
- M.A. in Education, School Counseling
  - K-12 and College
- M.S. in Communication Sciences & Disorders

BUSINESS & STEM

- MBA
  - Concentrations in Finance, Global Business, Healthcare Administration, Human Resources, Location Analytics, Marketing, and Organizational Leadership
- Presidio
  - MBA in Sustainable Solutions
  - MPA in Sustainable Solutions
  - MBA/MPA Dual Degree
- M.S. in Business Analytics
- Executive Master of Geographic Information Systems
- M.S. in Geographic Information Systems
- Master of Geographic Information Systems

LEADERSHIP

- M.S. in Organizational Leadership
- Master of Public Policy & Administration
- M.A. in Higher Education and Student Affairs
- M.A. in Education, School and District Leadership

THEOLOGY

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- M.A. in Theological Studies

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LEADERSHIP & UPSKILLING

Global Demand for Business Education Grows Amid Economic and Geopolitical Uncertainty

Graduate management education (GME) programs worldwide saw a 7 percent rise in applications in 2025, building on the previous year's record-breaking growth, according to the latest Application Trends Survey of global business education trends released today by the Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC), a nonprofit association of leading business schools worldwide.

Last year's gains, though significant, were not evenly distributed, with clear shifts emerging across program types, delivery formats, and geographies. Notably, major GME hubs such as Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom experienced application contractions as their tighter visa policies and labor market uncertainty discouraged international applicants.

While US programs recorded a slight one-point decrease, in Canada and the UK, the drop was pronounced, with 84 percent of Canadian programs and two-thirds of UK programs reporting fewer applications. By contrast, applications to programs in Asia and Europe (outside of the UK) surged ahead, attracting applicants redirected from other regions. International application growth was particularly strong in India (up 26%) and East and Southeast Asia (up 42%), highlighting the success of their business schools in marketing strategies and reputational gains.

"The next era of business education is being reshaped by changing student and employer expectations, challenging geopolitics, and new skill demand prompted by technologies like AI," said Joy Jones, CEO at GMAC. "While some regions and program offerings might face serious headwinds, this year's application growth gives strong evidence that business schools are quickly adapting to these dynamics through innovative curricula and industry-aligned experiences, positioning themselves for long-term relevance."



OTHER KEY FINDINGS TO NOTE INCLUDE:

- **Shifting program demand:** Growth in applications to GME programs was concentrated in full-time, in-person formats—especially full-time, two-year MBA and business master's programs in accounting, finance, and marketing. On the flip side, Master of Business Analytics programs experienced another year of weakened demand, with nearly two-thirds of these programs reporting application declines for the second year in a row.
- **RTO impacting application trends:** More than half of executive, online, and part-time MBA programs reported application declines, marking a sharp contrast to the growth seen in full-time, in-person MBA programs. The downturn among flexible formats reverses earlier gains and may be linked to shifting candidate preferences in the wake of widespread return-to-office (RTO) mandates.
- **Business schools embracing AI:** AI in the classroom is now mainstream, with only 16 percent of programs reporting no AI integration in 2025, down from 22 percent last year. More than half of schools now teach AI as a tool for decision-making, business strategy, and societal impact, often through hands-on experiences.
- **Sustainability becoming a differentiator:** Three in four programs now offer opportunities to study sustainability—most commonly through MBA curricula. Candidate demand is clear—63 percent of prospective students responding to GMAC's 2025 survey say sustainability is important to their studies. Regionally, Asian programs outside of Greater China and India are the most likely to require studying the subject and those in the United States the least likely.
- **Business master's applications near parity:** Globally, women continue to make up just over 40% of GME applicants, a level that has held for more than a decade. In 2025, although the median share of women applicants rose only one point, women applied to MBA programs at a faster rate than men and their representation among business master's applicants held steady just below parity.

GMAC is a global nonprofit association of leading graduate business schools committed to connecting future business leaders with educational opportunities and advancing graduate management education worldwide. Through assessments, research, events, and recruitment solutions, we provide the tools and information necessary for schools and candidates to discover and evaluate each other.

To learn more about all the top findings from GMAC's 2025 Application Trends Survey, please visit gmac.com.

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