

A photograph of two women in professional attire engaged in a conversation in a modern office. The woman on the left has dark curly hair and is wearing a grey blazer over a white top. The woman on the right has long brown hair and is wearing a white blazer. They are both smiling and looking at each other. In the background, other office workers are visible, and the office has large windows and a modern design.

# Focus on Collaboration:

GME Leaders Discuss Barriers and Opportunities  
Around Forming Beneficial Partnerships



In times of crisis, we look to our peers to gain new insights into problems as they arise and to ease the burden of addressing these challenges head-on. Traditionally, these partnerships have been one-dimensional, built tentatively around single issues, and while helpful, they've rarely been transformative. In 2020, these types of shallow collaborations are inadequate for the tasks of weathering the pandemic, navigating economic crises or getting to the root of systemic racism and bias in our institutions.

How do we form partnerships in the GME community that are up to these generational challenges? In Summer 2020, BusinessCAS has convened a series of focus groups featuring enrollment leaders from some of the country's top programs to explore topics like this and offer actionable solutions institutions can use to meet today's most urgent needs.

# Meet the Focus Group



**CHERI DECLERCQ, Ph.D.**

Assistant Dean, MBA Programs



Broad College of Business  
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY



**LEISER SILVA, Ph.D.**

Associate Dean, Graduate and Professional Programs

**BAUER**  
COLLEGE OF BUSINESS  
UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON



**BRIAN ROTHSCHILD, Ph.D.**

Director, Graduate Management Programs

 **STEVENS**  
INSTITUTE of TECHNOLOGY  
School of Business

# Defining the Problems in GME Partnerships Today

“Partnerships are obviously essential,” said Stevens Institute of Technology’s Brian Rothschild, Ph.D., “whether it’s with international institutions, where we’re exchanging students, or with Workday Student, where we’re trying to build a new student information system.” However, while everyone agreed on the ubiquity and necessity of reaching outside of the institution for support in meeting goals, they also noted several flaws and frustrations in traditional partnership models.

University of Houston’s Leiser Silva, Ph.D., prompted everyone to remember the “Garbage Can Model,” in which solutions are looking for problems. “Sometimes, we have partnerships as a solution, but what is the problem? We have to start by articulating the problem, and why we think it could be solved through a partnership.”

The other panelists agreed that oftentimes partnerships arise for good reason, but aren’t agile enough to change with the times. Some of the larger associations haven’t evolved,

and so while they have large memberships and considerable resources, where they direct those resources and influence doesn’t always make sense.

Another source of frustration came from simply not knowing where to look for what was needed. Michigan State University’s Cheri Declercq, Ph.D., described looking for the solution to a problem by hunting her way through a dozen different association websites, trying to find which one could offer the information or resources she needed.

What held the group back from getting more out of their partnerships? The answer was, unanimously, time. As Dr. Declercq put it, “In order to have this mutually beneficial partnership, I have to be able to contribute as much as I get out of it. It has to be a quid pro quo, and so I might be interested, but time is a constraint that doesn’t allow me to. At the end of the day, there might be fifteen things I need to do, and twelve fires I have to put out, and contributing to research is a luxury I’m not able to get to.”



# Partnerships as Advocacy

A key area in which the group saw an opportunity for a paradigm shift in GME partnerships was the idea of using major associations like AACSB or GMAC to advocate for policies that would benefit the field as a whole. Dr. Silva gave the example of a recent decision by Ernst & Young to offer all employees a free-of-charge, online MBA.<sup>1</sup> “That’s potentially over 100,000 new MBAs who didn’t go through a rigorous admissions process, and it leads to market devaluation for us,” he said. He asked what major accrediting bodies could do to either differentiate these degrees or stop something like that from happening to the GME field.

Another area was rankings, which panelists noted may be loved or hated depending on where your institution falls. What if, they wondered, we came together as a body behind one of our more powerful associations and said, “This is what makes sense, this is what doesn’t and this is what’s fair to all of us?” At an individual school level, these complaints go unheard, but in speaking as a monolith, they might be able to effect change.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-top-employer-of-m-b-a-s-creates-a-degree-of-its-own-11593603900>

# Partnerships for Deeper Understanding

The difference between a partner and a vendor is the amount of effort — and benefits — both parties contribute in working together. Most business schools are members of various trade associations, but are these true partnerships, or are schools simply consuming? For example, some associations have vast reservoirs of data relating to industry trends throughout the country, but do they work with member schools to make the most of this data? The answer from the focus group was largely no. Associations provide point-in-time snapshots (usually disseminated well after the fact), but nothing prescriptive that could be operationalized for upcoming planning and recruitment efforts.

Dr. Declercq put it this way: “Part of the challenge [these associations] have is that in the higher ed space, we’re much more open with each other, in ways the corporate world thinks are insane. The reason, though, that we’re willing to share our ‘secret sauce’ is because we typically aren’t head-to-head competitors like Coke and Pepsi.”

“I would love to see a regional breakdown of the trends,” said Dr. Rothschild.

“Something to say, our data shows there are plenty of people in your region who are interested in marketing, so you should consider adding to or expanding your program. We’ll probably wind up having to pay for it through a research firm, but if somebody is collecting that information and would let us see, we wouldn’t say no.”

## Partnerships for Operations

“There’s a balance,” said Dr. Declercq, “that’s a classic organizational design problem. You can outsource things that are so routine that anyone can do them, but when it comes to workplace culture or nuance, we do those things best ourselves.”

Dr. Silva added, “For us, it’s difficult to farm out even our call centers because our marketing team works closely with our recruiting team, who work with our program directors, who work with our faculty — so we can’t separate that part out.”

All of which points back to one of the initial hurdles the group discussed: everyone wants to be more strategic and to participate more meaningfully in different partnerships, but it can feel impossible to get away from the daily operational needs of their programs.



## Conclusion

It would be understandable if the events of the past year had made academic institutions want to hunker down, tighten their belts and focus solely upon themselves; however, that wasn't the attitude of the focus group. All agreed that the interconnected GME community made such isolation a bad idea and were much more focused on improving current associations than abandoning them altogether. The focus group ended by asking what resources individuals wanted to see moving forward. Panelists wished the following were widely available:

- Real-time, actionable data around student trends
- Centralized, curated lists of associations and partnership opportunities
- Networking opportunities for discussing best practices (especially as no one is certain when in-person conferences will resume)

The enthusiasm around working together was palpable for the group and shined a spotlight on the spirit of collaboration innate to GME. While time constraints hindered panelists' ability to participate in collaborations as fully as they would like, all agreed that fostering these mutually beneficial relationships was essential to their shared futures.

## About BUSINESSCAS<sup>™</sup>

by LIAISON

BusinessCAS<sup>™</sup> is a community of like-minded graduate management education leaders who work together to drive the industry forward. Through participating in the Centralized Application Service (CAS) Community, members gain access to

- **Knowledge.** The CAS for GME programs features visual application and enrollment trend reports to facilitate strategic admissions decisions.
- **Connections.** The CAS expands members' applicant pools with branded program listings, multi-channel ads and targeted drive-to-apply campaigns.
- **Inspiration.** CAS Community members learn what works — and what doesn't — from peers who are facing the same obstacles and working toward similar goals.
- **Resources.** The CAS Community regularly publishes magazines, ebooks and white papers and hosts focus groups, webinars and in-person events to facilitate the sharing of industry insights.
- **Support.** The CAS technology is complemented by application processing services and applicant support that saves member institutions time on manual administrative tasks.

## Who We Are



### Toby McChesney, Ed.D.

Senior Assistant Dean of Graduate Programs, Santa Clara University Leavey School of Business  
Advisory Board Chair, BusinessCAS



### Dee Steinle

Executive Director of MBA and MS Programs, The University of Kansas School of Business  
Advisory Board Vice-Chair, BusinessCAS



### Stephen Taylor

Research Director, BusinessCAS



### Robert Ruiz

Managing Director, BusinessCAS



## Meet the BusinessCAS Advisory Board