

POETS & QUANTS

USC Marshall First Major B-School To Reach Gender Parity

BY: JOHN A. BYRNE ON JULY 23, 2018 | 3 COMMENTS 4,401 VIEWS

The University of Southern California's **Marshall School of Business** has become the first major business school in the U.S. to reach gender parity in its full-time MBA program. The school reported that 52% of its incoming MBA students this fall will be women, a whopping 20-point percentage jump from just 32% last year.

Many of the top schools have been working hard to increase the women in their MBA programs in recent years but have fallen far short of the 50-50 mark. Last year, the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and Dartmouth College's Tuck School of Business were at the high end, both with women making up 44% of the Class of 2019. The University of Michigan's Ross School of Business and the Yale School of Management followed closely with 43% each.

Five years ago, only three of the top 25 U.S. schools had 40% or more women enrolled in their MBA programs. Now nearly half do (see **MBA Programs With The Most Women**). The emergence of Marshall as the school to break the 50% mark, however, is a big surprise, largely because the school hadn't yet reached the 40% level.

Marshall's breakthrough is a stunning development. Only seven years ago, in 2011, Elissa Sangster, executive director of the Forte Foundation, had pretty much given up hope that female enrollment at business schools would ever equal the 50% levels at law or medical schools. "I would just like to see us get to 40 percent," she then told Poets&Quants (see **Why More Women Go To Law Or Med Schools**). "I'd like to see the day when a school puts together teams of MBAs and they just don't have one woman. It's been a decade, and we've seen it move a few points. But I don't think we'll get to 50 percent."



USC's Marshall School of Business is the first major U.S. school to reach gender parity in its full-time MBA program



USC Marshall
Dean James G. Ellis

'THE QUALITY OF THE POOL WAS STRONG AND THE YIELD WAS GOOD'

But a number of things came together to help the school, ranked 20th by U.S. News this year, achieve its new record of female admits. "The quality of the pool was strong and the yield was good, and it all fell together nicely," says Dean James G. Ellis. "A lot of our students were helping with recruiting and we always use alumni because our Trojan family network is so damn strong. "Some of positive reputational stuff transpired along with a rankings increase really helped. Our efforts

pulled the right quality of students in. All of a sudden 52% jumps up and it's wow."

Ellis attributed the school's success to several factors. Marshall jumped four places in the latest U.S. News ranking to earn its 20th place finish, an even bigger improvement from 2016 when the school placed 31st on that list. Marshall also ranked 20th in the world and 12th in the U.S. as the best place for women to get an MBA, according to the Financial

Times in March of this year. Poets&Quants singled out Marshall as one of ten business schools to watch in 2018 (see 10 Business Schools To Watch In 2018).

"What makes me feel best about it is that we know industry is looking for more women for leadership level positions so it will give us a chance to satisfy those needs from our employers," adds Ellis. "Every organization is looking for more women. The need runs from boards to senior leadership down to entry level."

INCOMING CLASS AT NYU STERN WILL HAVE FEWER WOMEN THIS YEAR, WHILE UT-TEXAS WILL REMAIN AT 40%

Bucking a downward trend in application volume, Marshall saw a slight increase in applications to 2,017 from 1,998 last year. The average GMAT score for the newest class of 221 students is 705, up slightly from 703 a year earlier, while the average undergraduate grade point average rose slightly to 3.50 from 3.48. While reaching a new record for women, Marshall also hit a new record on underrepresented minorities who represent 21% of the domestic students, up from 16% last year. International students compose 30% of this year's incoming MBA students, down a single percentage point.

But the big change occurred in yield, the percentage of admits who ultimately enroll. The yield on women for this year's entering class, which started orientation on Monday, soared to 40.1% from 31.3% for last year's entering class. Overall, Marshall's yield for its full-time MBA program last year was

38.7%. The school then admitted 581 candidates and enrolled a class of 225 students.

The increase in women also wasn't a function of a significantly larger scholarship spend. "Surprisingly, we did spend a little bit more in scholarship money," explains Evan Bouffides, assistant dean and director of MBA admissions at Marshall. "If you account for the difference in tuition, it was almost a wash."

Asked if he thought California helped his school get to gender parity, Ellis wasn't entirely sure. "It's a tough one to figure out whether location matters but California is a desirable place to work and you have Los Angeles and the Valley that are two centers of work that are continually looking for people. California is a place where graduates are going to get some good placements on the other end of the program. There is a lot of growth coming out of here and you can feel it. There is just an energy out here."



Evan Bouffides,
director of MBA
admissions at Marshall

'WE CERTAINLY DIDN'T GO INTO THE ADMISSIONS SEASON WITH THIS GOAL'

It was certainly not a no-brainer for Marshall to hit the 52% record. So far only two other prominent MBA programs have released their class profiles for the Class of 2020. At New York University's Stern School of Business, women dropped to 35% of the incoming class from 38% a year earlier. The University of Texas' McCombs School of Business maintained last year's 40% level of women for its incoming class this fall.

Marshall hadn't even set a goal to achieve gender parity this year. "We certainly didn't go into the season with that goal," says Evan Bouffides, assistant dean and director of MBA admissions. "It kind of went in peaks and valleys throughout the season. Early in the cycle, the first round was pretty small but we got a huge response rate from our invites to women, in the 40% range. As we proceeded through the admissions cycle, those numbers changed and fell slightly and then started to rise again. We peaked at a time when a bunch of things were going well for us, including the rankings gain in U.S. News. I am sure that had an impact."

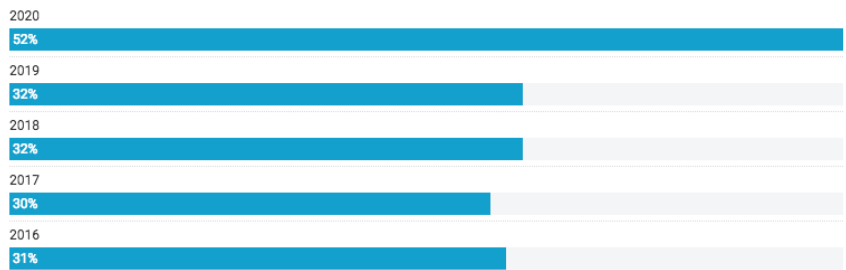
Bouffides cites a number of other factors that helped to get more women into the MBA program. The school is in the second year of a new customer relationship management (CRM) program which changed admissions ability to better connect with prospects. "We are communicating with prospective students more frequently than we had in the past," he explains.

THE SCHOOL'S TWO MAJOR YIELD EVENTS FOCUSED HEAVILY ON INCLUSION & DIVERSITY

The school's two major yield events—a women's weekend in January and its admit weekend—had a greater impact than usual on women

USC Marshall Sets Gender Parity Record

Some 52% of this year's incoming class of full-time MBAs at USC's Marshall School of Business are women, a record for both the school and the top end of the business school community



Source: USC Marshall • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

admits because diversity and inclusion were a major focus of the events. Yield—the percentage of admitted students who actually enroll in the MBA program—was much higher for women than it was last year.

And the school's student ambassadors—a disproportionate share of them women—also helped to sway more female admits. "Our students pretty aggressively recruited people we liked and especially people we admitted," adds Bouffides. "We have a lot of women involved in the ambassador group and our Graduate Women in Business club also helped to convince people to come.

"It strikes me that the quality in the overall pool was the strongest that I have seen and stronger than last year," he adds. "Had I known last year that the cycle would end up with 2,000 applicants maybe we could have done better. So some of it is processes. Some of it is the terrific work of our students and staff, and there's probably a little luck in there."

ONE POSITIVE MACRO TREND: MORE WOMEN TOOK THE GMAT IN TESTING YEAR 2017 THAN EVER BEFORE

Mark Brostoff, assistant dean and director of graduate career services at Marshall, thinks the record will also help the school with job placement. "As we go to market with internship opportunities and full-time jobs, employers are going to be very happy that we have a 50-50 split in the class," says Brostoff. "They want more women in their pipelines. The resumes requested most often in the last couple of years are of female candidates."

One macro trend that is helping schools increase the number of women in graduate management programs is the fact that women sat for 45.4% of the GMAT exams delivered in testing year 2017, the highest percentage in the history of the exam. Five years earlier, women sat for 42.5 percent of GMAT exams. Women, in fact, accounted for 63% of GMAT exams taken by citizens of East/Southeast Asian countries, the highest percentage of all world regions. Even so, men sent a greater percentage of their score reports to MBA programs (71%) compared with women (53%).

A handful of second-tier schools have achieved an ever higher level of female representation in their full-time MBA programs. Durham Business School in the United Kingdom and Essec Business School in France both are over 60%, with Durham at 67% and Essec at 65%. Several U.S. schools even boast higher percentages, but they are smaller, relatively unknown MBA programs. Meredith College in Raleigh, N.C., which enrolled a full-time class of only 15 students last year could claim that 89.1% of its incoming class was composed of women. The University of North Texas, with an incoming class of just 14 full-time MBA students, was at 71.4%.