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Dean at For-Profit Kaplan Seeks to Raise Standards

By DIANA MIDDLETON

Thomas Boyd, dean of Kaplan University's School of Business and Management, is looking to polish the online school's reputation.

Mr. Boyd, who was appointed last April, has since ushered in new strategies to try to elevate the for-profit business school's status, including a plan to improve the quality of professors and help graduates find better jobs.



Jason Henry for The Wall Street Journal

Thomas Boyd is trying to improve quality at Kaplan's business school.

This comes at a time when for-profit institutions like Kaplan University, part of [Washington Post Co.](#)'s Kaplan higher-education unit, have come under fire from the U.S. Department of Education for supposedly miring students in debt.

Illinois is the latest state to scrutinize Kaplan, according to a securities filing Wednesday. Kaplan was also named in an investigation by Florida's Attorney General in October—a probe that included six for-profit schools looked into for potential misrepresentations in financial aid, recruitment and other areas.

Kaplan said Wednesday that it intends to cooperate with the Illinois investigation, but declined to comment further.

In response to efforts by the Education Department to link a program's eligibility for federal student aid to its graduates' ability to pay off their loans, Kaplan made changes this year to its marketing and admissions tactics that raised student selectivity—but contributed to a 47% decline in new-student enrollments in the fourth quarter, Post Co. reported last month.

The School of Business and Management enrolls approximately 10,000 students out of a total of 65,000 at Kaplan University. A Kaplan M.B.A. costs roughly \$26,500.

Mr. Boyd's appointment as dean last year marked his first foray into online education. The 54-year-old previously spent nine years as a professor and associate dean at California State University, Fullerton. He spoke recently with The Wall Street Journal about his goals for the school, one of which is to shake off the stigma of being an online school by earning accreditation from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business

—often considered the gold standard for business schools.

Edited excerpts:

WSJ: According to the Department of Education, 30% of Kaplan students defaulted on their loans within three years. What steps are you taking to get students better-paying jobs?

Mr. Boyd: We've assigned a faculty member to be an internship coordinator, and we just hired a new career services director dedicated solely to the business school.

At an Ivy League school, a lot of people go into those programs already making six figures, and they leave making even more. My focus [is] improving students' prospects when they aren't making as much to begin with.

WSJ: How much does a typical graduate earn after receiving the degree? Have you determined the ROI [return on investment] for alumni?

Mr. Boyd: Salaries are all over the map. Because the vast majority are working while getting their degrees, we don't yet have a good way to measure ROI.

WSJ: You came from a traditional state school. What are some of the changes you've made at Kaplan that were inspired by brick-and-mortar programs?

Mr. Boyd: Where I had an opportunity to make a big difference was by hiring quality faculty. Online schools have not been particularly strong in this arena because they've been so focused on the actual delivery of education to students. But if we are going to play in the sandbox with the traditional business schools, we have to make a push toward academic rigor.

WSJ: Now you're only hiring PhDs to teach at the business school. What tier of school do you want to compete with for faculty?

Mr. Boyd: There are people publishing in the top journals who have a world-wide reputation in their field and often command huge salaries—I'm not trying to compete for that class of faculty. What I'd like is the kind of faculty on par with what you'd find at a good state school although I should point out that if a great CEO wanted to teach without a PhD, I wouldn't turn it down.

WSJ: One of the hallmarks at traditional business schools is the emphasis on faculty research. What sort of culture are you trying to create?

Mr. Boyd: Previously, only a small number of faculty were actively pursuing research. We began collecting data about the fields they were interested in so we could link them as collaborators. Roughly half are now doing research in their chosen fields—economics, finance, accounting—and others are developing an expertise in online learning pedagogy.

WSJ: Is the goal to make [the program] more difficult?

Mr. Boyd: I want to change the image that being more convenient means being easier. My rebranding strategy is focused on quality, careers and credibility. That includes increasing the rigor of the program, getting students better jobs and gaining credibility through accreditation.

WSJ: How would you describe the school's image now?

Mr. Boyd: There's a mixed image, but it's leaning toward the bottom half of business education. Reputation is going to lag quality—you have to earn it.

WSJ: How do the students learn? Are there Webinars, live chats? Is it mostly independent study?

Mr. Boyd: They do online seminars—chats led by the faculty members— which are required once per week. They also do live chats and Webinars. We also emphasize group work and team assignments, which makes up half of

the M.B.A. curriculum. It can be very challenging for students who are across different time zones, but it's exactly what's happening in the real world.

WSJ: So much of an M.B.A.'s value comes from networking with other students. How do students network at Kaplan?

Mr. Boyd: The reason much of our student population opts for an online degree is because they are tied to the home. They may have young children or a sick parent or live in a rural area. We show students how to network using Facebook and Twitter, but also more professional sites, including LinkedIn. Some classes also require students to network within their own communities.

WSJ: You received your own M.B.A. at Florida Atlantic University, and your PhD from the University of North-Carolina, Chapel Hill. If you were getting your degree today, would you consider Kaplan?

Mr. Boyd: I would. Here's why: Before I finished my M.B.A., I was working full-time as a swimming coach in Michigan while attending Wayne State University. I was taking one class at a time, and it was going to take me five years to finish. So I made a choice to attend a full-time program. But if I could have done it in two years while I was working full-time, I would have opted for an online program.

—Melissa Korn contributed to this article.

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