



# THE WINNING INGREDIENTS OF A DYNAMIC MBA GOALS ESSAY



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**Five Fatal Flaws to Avoid in Your  
MBA Application Essays**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR - KELLY WILSON



In her past roles as executive director of admissions at CMU Tepper and assistant dean of admissions at Georgetown McDonough and Pittsburgh Katz, Kelly oversaw admissions for 23 years for the MBA and master's programs in management of information systems, computational finance, business analytics, and product management. Having approved more than 38,000 admissions decisions, she has a deep understanding of what top MBA programs value. Her working style is warm, supportive, straightforward, and organized. Kelly is also a member of AIGAC.

[Click here to learn more about Kelly Wilson.](#)

# MBA GOALS SHOULD BE ASPIRATIONAL YET ACHIEVABLE

The admissions committee's (adcom's) discussion was robust and largely positive until we reached the candidate's career goals. Based on his experience and description of how he would move into a venture capital (VC) role, his desired professional path just wasn't achievable. Like many MBA applicants, this candidate had dreams of going into VC – he surely could do it, given a chance, and it would be wonderful for him – but in reality, his chances of getting a VC job post-MBA were about zero. The adcom knew that, and he should have known it, too.

Impractical and ineffectively presented goals can get otherwise well-qualified applicants dinged from top MBA programs. This story is not an isolated case and was a recurring theme during my 23 years in B-school admissions.

How do you avoid this scenario?

**With effort, thought, and research, you can show how your goals are realistic.**

Many people start their MBA application process with a vague sense of their goals, but a vague sense won't cut it.

It's not enough to focus only on what you'd like theoretically. You need to develop clarity, be specific, and connect the dots between what you have done and what you want to do, presenting a realistic plan for achieving the next step – your short-term goal – which will set you on a concrete path, guided by your long-term goal. The candidate in our story belatedly discovered this reality at the cost of being admitted to his dream school.

Let's say that our applicant had noted in his original essay that he knew how hard it would be to land a VC job and mapped out a plan to go about it. If it still didn't work out, he was ready with Plan B, which would provide an alternative path to his long-term goals. Based on the adcom's conversation, he likely would have been admitted.

Goals need to be specific, credible, and well articulated. But how do you craft them in your goals essay? This guide will walk you through that process step by step so you can build out your goals statement in your essay and make your discussion of your goals engaging and exciting.

# UNPACKING YOUR SHORT- AND LONG-TERM GOALS

We usually think about “goals” in three phases: short term, intermediate, and long term. It helps to have the whole, three-part picture in your mind, regardless of which segment you’re focusing on in a particular essay. Short term refers to the time frame immediately post-MBA, *long term* applies to roughly ten years from completing your MBA, and the time in between is considered *intermediate*. Usually, essays ask about your short- and long-term goals, but you’ll need to know your intermediate goals as well to create a bridge between the short and long term.

Your short-term goal should be the most specific for obvious reasons and because it also links directly to the MBA program. As you describe successive steps in your career that reach further into the future, you can be a little less certain about how things will play out. Don’t write beyond what seems reasonable and practical, and avoid going into detail about what you’ll be doing in 20 years. So many industries are in great flux, so that point should be acknowledged in your goals.

Your short-term goal indeed operates as a stepping-stone toward achieving your long-term goal, but if room allows, explain not only what you will learn as you make this move but also the experience you will gain and the people you will meet.

## Responding to specific goals questions

Different [sets of essay questions](#) will emphasize different aspects of your career goals; they’ll require various lengths and have distinct tones. Some are open, while others are focused and directed. The key is to pay attention not just to the words of the school’s essay prompt but also the tone. The trend toward short, focused goals essays continues, and fewer essay questions ask about your broader “vision.” Most programs want the facts, straight.

Read for context in each question: What is the essay prompt really emphasizing? Is there an equal focus on the short term and the long term, or is it just about post-MBA goals in general? Be guided by the question as it is asked. Any elements you introduce should support your main points.

When a question asks why you want an MBA or want to attend the specific program you’re applying to, link these points directly to your goals. Ensure that your goals actually require an MBA education. Adcoms want to know that you really need the resources the school offers, which they view as precious and not to be squandered (and they’re right!). So, if you can weave in mentions of [your school visit](#) and/or interactions with students and alumni, great!

# HAVE A BACKUP PLAN AND SHARE IT

Following the 2008 financial crisis, many B-schools began to ask applicants about their backup plan – their Plan B. With a seemingly permanent state of global economic volatility, having a backup for your immediate post-MBA goal not only represents smart planning on your part but also enhances your goal essay's credibility. It's particularly important if you're targeting a difficult-to-enter industry (remember that VC dreamer?) or [changing careers](#). In fact, adcoms welcome this recognition of reality; it gives them more confidence that you will land a job.

However, space is limited, and you can't afford to sound undirected. In your goals essay, focus primarily on your main short-term goal. Even if you are not specifically asked about a Plan B, include one to three sentences in your essay about a reasonable alternative that you'd consider, explaining how it would also be a good step toward your further goals. For example, an applicant who is targeting an IT manager role with the long-term goal of becoming a chief information officer could have as their backup plan a tech strategy consulting role post-MBA.

# DETERMINE YOUR DIRECTION

Managing your career takes more effort than simply following the next step in responsibility within your existing organization. Do you envision where you'd like to be in your career in ten years? Maybe you are wondering why you need to have a long-term goal in mind. Doing so provides direction for the next step in your career.

Your long-term goal serves as a framework to build toward. Like entering your desired destination into a navigation app, establishing a long-term career goal gives you direction and a path for your journey while allowing for flexibility along the way. There might be more than one way to reach your goal, and you could even have some specific interests that you want to incorporate into your plan. For instance, if you want to travel from Pittsburgh to San Diego, you can choose between several different routes and even consider points of interest along the way. The same holds true in pursuing your long-term career goal.

Once you have determined your long-term goal, you can work backward to determine what steps you need to take in the near future to make progress toward that long-term aspiration. You might have considered that your short-term career goal is to get your MBA, which is why you are reading this guide. Now it is time to lay out the plan for your next step.

# DEFINE YOUR NEXT STEP

When you're applying to business school, adcoms want you to define the role you will seek immediately after you graduate from the MBA program. From the school's perspective, the career office is charged with supporting the achievement of your short-term career goal and therefore has a vested interest in the admissions decision. From your perspective, the short-term goal describes the role you will seek post-MBA. Your career goals essay should clearly explain your plan to attain the job you will pursue during your time in the MBA program and your motivation for doing so. As you research your target roles, it is essential to identify the skills you already have and can build on and those you need to develop through the program to help you achieve your goal. This level of self-awareness is welcomed by adcoms.

With your long-term goal in mind, there are some necessary factors to consider as you create your short-term goal for your MBA application.

The two key components of an MBA goal are industry and function. Geography might be a third key component for some applicants, if it is integral to their goal (e.g., developing solar energy in northern Africa). What will the work consist of? What do you hope to accomplish? What skills are needed for the role? Knowing and presenting these details will help flesh out your goals.

## Show your research

I'm frequently surprised at how few people do real-life research into their goals before writing their application essays. Researching careers on the web for a couple of hours and talking to people in professions related to your goals can yield rich detail for your essays. Moreover, mentioning this research enhances the sense of commitment to your chosen path. Read up on your target industry and its current and future challenges, and conduct informational interviews (See "[Stanford MBA Discusses Coffee Chats](#)") regarding the industry or business function.

This due diligence will enable you to write intelligently and engagingly about your goals. It will also make your essay more interesting and will prevent you from making some big mistakes, as the candidate mentioned at the beginning of this guide did. By presenting selected tidbits of your research in your essay, you'll show that you're resourceful and committed – someone who is likely to have something meaningful to contribute in class.

But how do you find someone who is doing what you aspire to do? Here are some possible ways:

- Think about your personal network. Does your older cousin work in the marketing area you want to work in? How about the woman from your running club? Even though the context in which you

know these people is your personal life, no doubt they would be willing to talk with you about their profession.

- Consider contacts that you have made through your company or industry. Maybe a client, a vendor, or someone you met at a conference is in a role that you aspire to. When the next conference is approaching, reach out to your contact to see whether you can meet for a cup of coffee before the start of a session to learn more about what they do.
- Expand your professional network via LinkedIn. Use the platform's [search function](#) to find people who attended the same college as you and now work in your field of interest. Send them a request to connect and a note asking for a 15-minute call to learn more about what they do. You'll be surprised at how often a loose connection (e.g., someone who went to the same college) can turn into a valuable resource.

Once you clearly understand the role you are considering, it is time to craft your goals statement. Here are some examples that incorporate a candidate's research and self-reflection:

 "I plan to return to operations but work at a higher, decision-making level, such as Senior Operations Manager, in an East Asian semiconductor firm or a related industry. In this role, I would, for example, oversee \$XXX operations, a global high-tech supply chain, and a diverse range of technical and business professionals."

 "I aim to shift from business process reengineering consulting to strategy consulting at a top global firm, such as Bain or McKinsey, ideally focusing on clients in the pharma/biomedical space and helping them set up operations in Eastern Europe."

Typically, a school's essay question will also ask how the MBA program will help you achieve your goals. This part of the goals essay allows you to explain your motivation, acknowledge the skills you need to build, and describe how the program will support you in developing them.

# STRIVE TO BE ENGAGING AND DYNAMIC

It's one thing to write clear, credible, and convincing goals. But if you have the available space, can you make them exciting? How can you make the adcom reader think as they read, "Yes – that makes perfect sense for this candidate!" Your goals essay should aim to capture the reader's attention and enthusiasm. You want to make the reader your cheerleader.

To get admissions readers excited by your essay – and your candidacy – you need to deliver "goals plus." This means explaining how your goals developed from your *experience* and describing your motivation and vision to achieve them. Let's define those terms.

- **Experience** refers to when, where, and how your goals developed. This element adds to your story's credibility.
- **Motivation** is the spark point, the "Aha!" moment when something gained traction with you. At what point did you become engaged and captivated in such a way that you wanted to pursue a given path?
- **Vision** is the broader impact of achieving your stated goal, beyond your immediate efforts.

These three elements will likely be intertwined. Here is a brief example taken from a sample goals essay:

 "Last year, when I was in Taiwan advising a global financial services company on consolidating its Asia strategy, I found myself thinking what a shame it was that my relationship with the client proved responsive rather than proactive. With my knowledge of the region's changing demographic and logistical realities, I could have recommended strategic opportunities a year ago to prevent the client from getting bogged down in redundant acquisitions and incompatible markets. Following that experience, I envisioned a new consulting paradigm resembling primary care medicine, based on a long-term, prevention-focused relationship between the consultant and client."

Adding experience, motivation, and vision turns your goals discussion from straightforward to engaging and dynamic. It enhances the credibility of your claims based on your personal experience, differentiates you and your goals (because this is YOUR path and naturally unique), and creates a more engaging and memorable story than what you would have in pure exposition.

# WHAT'S NEXT?

The self-reflection involved in determining your career goals will affect your applications and ultimately your MBA journey. This is critical information for identifying programs for your short list. Knowing your career goals gives you clarity on what you need from an MBA program and allows you to effectively determine which schools are therefore best suited to help you achieve your goals.

Ready to take the next step? Sign up for a free consultation with an Accepted MBA admissions expert!

**GET STARTED!**

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