



Executive Education
OWEN GRADUATE SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

Pioneering the **MOOC**

It was Owens who introduced online courses to Vanderbilt when he created one of the university's first MOOCs. That initiative was born out of a realization that while reading might be fundamental, the Internet was the 21st century resource of choice.



An Interview with
David Owens,
Professor for
the Practice of
Management and
Innovation at
Vanderbilt
University's
Owen Graduate
School of
Management

In early 2017, Vanderbilt University's Owen Graduate School of Management launched its online Business Essentials program as part of its Executive Education offering. The online program is built around four modules: **Strategic Innovation, Finance and Accounting, Strategy and Operations, and Leadership.**

"This online program is for people who can't come to campus, either for time or distance issues. It removes those two barriers," explains David Owens.

Owens, who is Professor for the Practice of Management and Innovation at Owen, is a veteran of online education. It was Owens who introduced online courses — in a different form — to Vanderbilt when he created one of the university's first MOOCs (Massive Open Online Course). That initiative was born out of a realization that while reading might be fundamental, the Internet was the 21st century resource of choice. In addition to book-writing, Owens decided to explore other ways to distribute knowledge.

Pioneering the MOOC

David Owens's published his book, entitled *Creative People Must Be Stopped*, in 2011. Based on his MBA courses and using research from multiple disciplines, the book identified the six core constraints of innovation and creativity in organizations.

The book brought his ideas out of the classroom and introduced them to readers across the country, but Owens had bigger ambitions. "I don't see people reading books the way I grew up reading books, or the way that I understand the value of books," he says. Instead, people were more likely to get their information from online resources.





MOOC –
a revolutionary idea
in which courses are
offered online, for free,
to anyone anywhere
who signs up

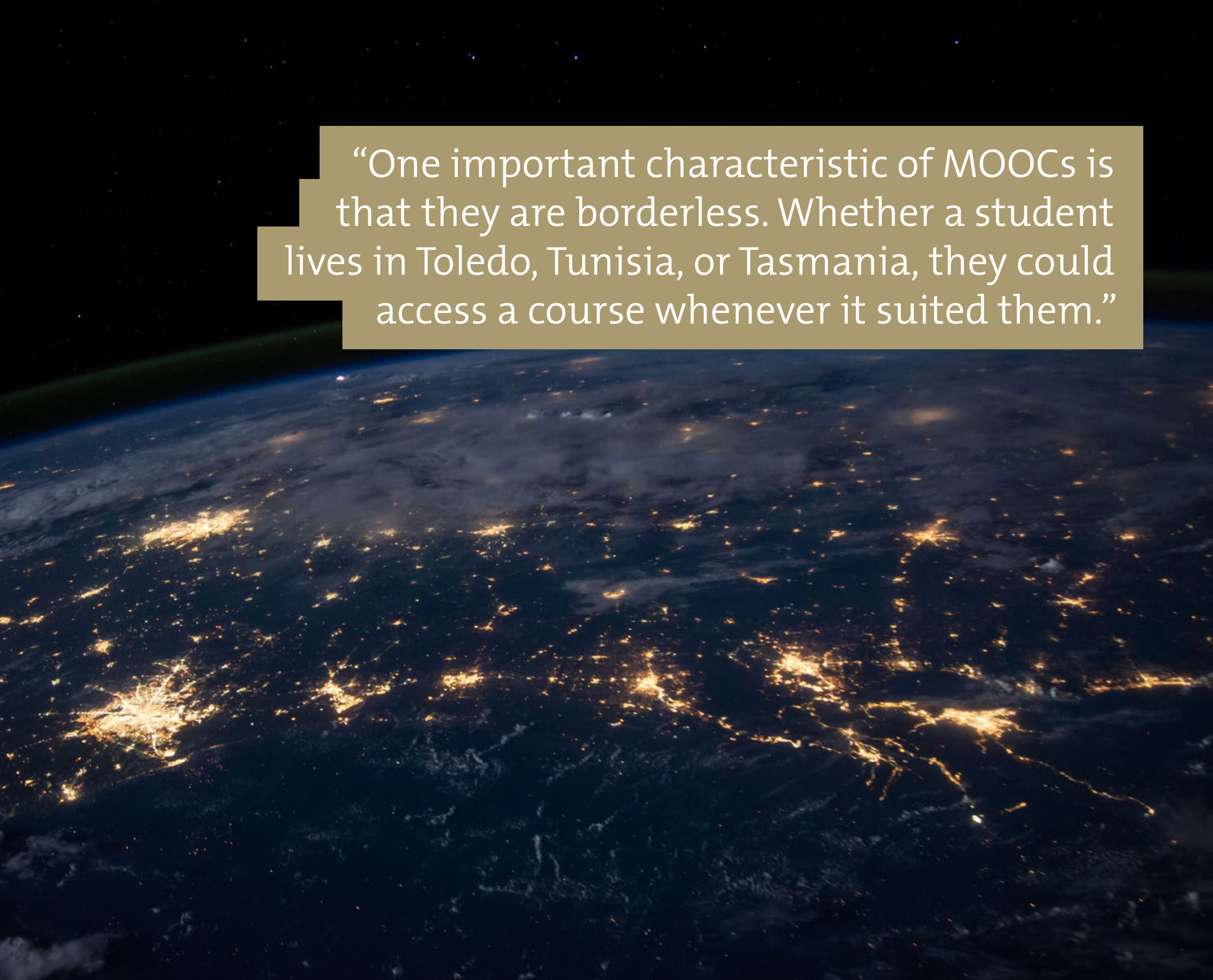
Owens thus became interested in the concept of the Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs — a revolutionary idea in which courses are offered online, for free, to anyone anywhere who signs up. People can take such courses according to whatever schedule they wish to follow, explains Owens, and they can also drop out at any time. The term “massive” is well chosen: This is a volume business meant to attract tens of thousands of users, recognizing that many may drop out. To add value to the courses, and encourage retention, MOOCs began offering, for a fee, certificates that confirmed the new knowledge acquired by the students.

One important characteristic of MOOCs is that they are borderless. Whether a student lives in Toledo, Tunisia, or Tasmania, they could access a course whenever it suited them. And even language is not a problem. As Owens explains, because many of the courses had a translation component, “language was less of a barrier than it might have been.” (Owens himself has a borderless

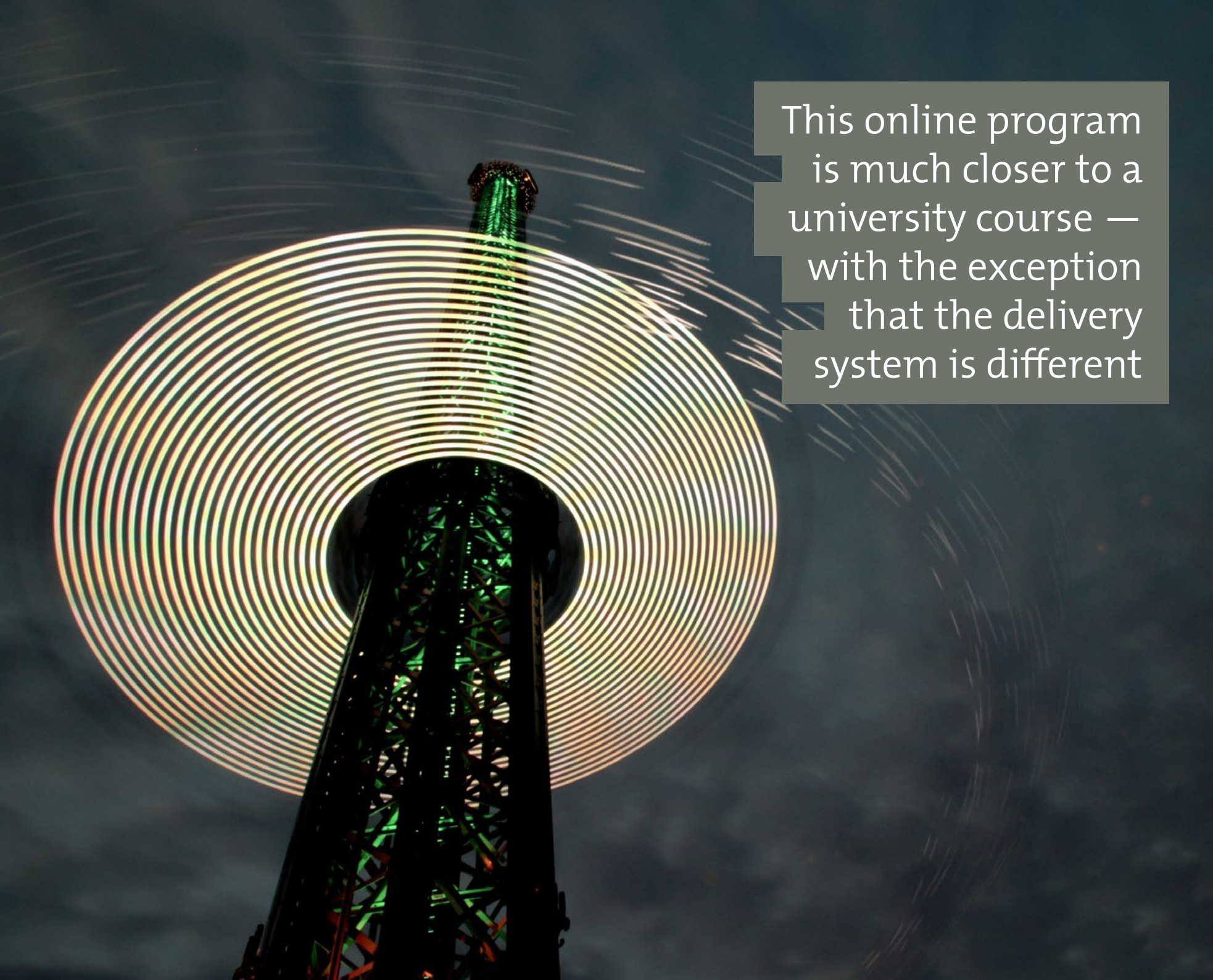
background. The son of an African-American soldier and a German wife, he was born and raised in Germany, and although he attended American schools in Europe, “my real coming to America was when I was eighteen to go to college,” he says.)

No MOOC had been attempted at Vanderbilt before, but Owens found the administration of the university receptive to the idea (“I think their perspective was one of, ‘If there’s going to be a party, we need to be there,’” Owens says.) With the help of some of his students — including an artist who hand-drew many of the courses images to avoid copyright issues — Owens began creating an online course based on videos. “I’m into tech, so I would record the video, fire up my video editor and build the course sessions. I even created little jingles for the videos,” he says. “It was a crash course in film production that I got to work on with a few of my favorite students. I learned a lot and it was fun.”



A satellite view of Earth at night, showing city lights and cloud patterns over the Americas. The lights are concentrated in the eastern United States and Mexico, with a prominent bright area in the northeast. The background is the dark blue and black of space, with some stars visible.

“One important characteristic of MOOCs is that they are borderless. Whether a student lives in Toledo, Tunisia, or Tasmania, they could access a course whenever it suited them.”



This online program
is much closer to a
university course —
with the exception
that the delivery
system is different

Once his MOOC on Strategic Innovation was completed and launched, Owens then worked with Jim Rosenberg at National Arts Strategies, a DC-based non-profit that supports arts and culture organizations, on a version of the innovation course for arts administrators. “I had worked with a lot of small arts organizations that can’t afford to send their administrators to executive education and recognized that there was a true need,” he says.

By the massive measures of the concept, the MOOCs were successful. “I think in the end, I counted over 150,000 people who had enrolled in the course,” he says. “Of course, not everyone finishes.” The attrition rate was about 80%, he says — but by MOOC standards, this is actually low.

Best of Both Worlds

Reaching 150,000 students across the globe is an astounding achievement, but Owens notes that there is a downside to the “massive” part of the MOOCs: there is little to no personal connection to the creator of the MOOCs. Students are taking courses with course material but with no interaction with the professor. “The massive part of a MOOC means that it really has to handle itself, completely,” Owens explains. “It had to be fully automatic, whereas the online course we created for this program at Owen still has a hands-on component and a personal touch.”

The new Business Essentials online program is in essence an effort to take the best of both worlds. The delivery of the course still offers students the opportunity to be “time shifters” — to work on the course at their convenience. At the same time,

however, students are able to make a connection with their professors through feedback sessions and message boards. “This online program is much closer to a university course — with the exception that the delivery system is different,” Owens says.

At first, Vanderbilt’s online program was focused only on Owens’ Strategic Innovation course. The program was then expanded to include three other courses — Finance and Accounting, Strategy and Operations and Leadership. Today, ten professors, including Owen Graduate School of Management Dean Eric Johnson, teach courses in “a much more comprehensive offering,” Owens says.

Business Schools will probably continue to incorporate even more online courses and components into their executive education programs in the future. Owens notes that the versatility of an online program based on videos allows universities to offer students — especially executive education students — a variety of course structures. For example, Owens says, “Students

can download the course videos on their phones, they can watch them at work, they can watch them at home. They take the course on their own time and wherever they’re comfortable.”

In some ways, the convenience of online courses even reflects a subtle shift in power. As Owens explains, “the efficiencies of teaching are really set up in the faculty members’ interest. I teach a class but it requires twenty or fifty other people to coordinate their schedules around me. We have to find some time to meet, but it’s usually going to be when it’s convenient for me, not when it’s convenient for them.” This lopsided advantage disappears with online courses: the learning occurs at everyone’s convenience.

In sum, Vanderbilt Owen’s online course program reflects in various ways the new priorities and habits of a 21st century in which people refused to be constrained by time or space.



“Students can download the course videos on their phones, they can watch them at work, they can watch them at home. They take the course on their own time and wherever they’re comfortable.”



We're the B-School built for the persistent. The genuine. The professional who knows he or she hasn't heard it all before-and uses that humility to grow. To learn. To change. Take note of Vanderbilt. We're building a new type of business leader-together.

This is the third in a series of four interviews with members of Vanderbilt Executive Education faculty.

Learn more about Vanderbilt Executive Education offerings by visiting: www.vanderbiltexecutiveeducation.com

Owen Graduate School of Management
401 21st Avenue South
Nashville, TN 37203
615-343-9551



Executive Education
OWEN GRADUATE SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT