

HIGH GOALS,

HARD WORK:

The Birth of a PhD Program

When College of Business Dean Labh Hira appointed a task force in September 2003 to “examine the nature and feasibility” of a PhD program, his vision was that a program would emerge—but his vision did not include many details.

“My goal was that this could be a landmark event in the college which many of us thought ought to happen, and whether or not it was going to happen, it was worth exploring,” Hira said. “However, I wanted it strictly to be a faculty-driven process, so the proposal had to come from the ground up.”

Hira appointed a task force that cut across faculty ranks—Professor of Marketing and Heggen Faculty Fellow Sridhar Ramaswami, Associate Professor of Management Information Systems Brian Mennecke, and Associate (then assistant) Professor of Operations and Supply Chain Management Frank Montabon—and charged its members with fully exploring the interest in, and potential look of, a PhD program. He offered only a few constraints.

“We had to rely on the strength of Iowa State University



MIKE CRUM, ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR GRADUATE PROGRAMS, AND SRIDHAR RAMASWAMI, CHAIR OF THE PHD TASK FORCE, HELPED THE PHD PROPOSAL BECOME A REALITY.

and find ways to be unique,” Hira said, “and not directly compete with the University of Iowa.”

Nearly four years later, the PhD program, or at least its approval, became a reality. What happened in the interim involved hundreds of meetings and discussions, thinking and rethinking about approaches and priorities, and round after round of approvals at various levels in the college and on campus.

“It turned out to be quite a time-consuming process,” said Ramaswami, who chaired the task force. “It took us almost a couple of years before we decided on the three major areas of study that we were going to offer.”

The task force filtered its analysis through three main considerations: the “unwritten mandate” from the Board of Regents, State of Iowa, that the program not duplicate what was available elsewhere in the state; the determination to remain consistent with the missions of the university and the college; and the desire to “be consistent with the skill set” that the college possessed.

“We decided that one of our differentiated programs was transportation and logistics, so we quickly latched on to the major of supply chain management,”

Ramaswami said. “The moment we decided that, the others fell into place.”

Supply chain management, it was reasoned, is essentially a process

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Labh Hira



LABH HIRA

within a firm, so other processes within a company were examined. One of them, the customer management process, could be tied to marketing and management, so it was a logical choice. “Given that technology plays a critical role in being able to manage and implement both supply chain and customer management processes,” Ramaswami said, “we decided to offer a major in management of information technology.”

Because the proposal was being developed by experts in business, the principles of sound business practice were always on the table. Ramaswami, for example, teaches brand management. “This aspect of defining differences and offering something unique to students was a guiding factor right from the beginning,” he said. “We also spent a lot of time thinking about how we could provide value to customers. If you think of the PhD program as a product, then you have to address all these product issues.”

Faculty participation throughout the entire process not only enriched the quality and depth of the proposal, but also generated enthusiasm for ensuring its ultimate success. Ramaswami describes the dynamic as “a major advantage” as the program now works toward implementation. “We hope and we believe that the faculty is going to give their best to make sure that the program is successful.”

“People are looking forward to this,” he said, “but the hard work is in front of us.”

That may be true, but at least the yearlong process of guiding the finished proposal through college-level committees and layers of university oversight had the ancillary effect of gaining positive attention from outside the college.

Michael Crum, associate dean and John and Ruth DeVries Chair in Business, helped the task force prepare the proposal for university-level scrutiny. He says he welcomed that sort of spotlight.

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Sridhar Ramaswami

campus,” Crum said. “It made us feel good to know that our colleagues around campus see this as a positive for the university, and that they have the confidence that we’ll put out a top-quality program.”

Crum knows that such a major undertaking can have its doubters,

especially considering that the College of Business has so recently, in historical terms, established itself and its reputation with undergraduate programs. To address that concern, he offers some perspective.

“Quite frankly, Iowa State needs all of its programs to have a terminal degree,” he said. “But bringing a PhD on board doesn’t mean that we don’t place a high value on bachelor’s programs. They are critical to us. Those programs will not be compromised because we waited until we had the resources.”

That sort of reassurance has been critical to the entire proposal process. Ultimately, as the business faculty faced the decision of whether to proceed, it was Hira who stepped forward to direct the tone of the conversation.

“As you would expect, a program of this kind created some fears and discomforts, but we went through the same process when we started the MBA program,” Hira said. “So I gave a short speech to the faculty about whether it was the right thing to do.”

As part of that speech, Hira pointed out the “catch-22” of some people suggesting the program should not go forward because it would take so many years to have an impact. Hira’s response? “Does that mean we should never have it? We’re looking at maybe 20 years or more in order to see the real effect, and I told the faculty that many of us won’t even be here to see it.”

His appeal to the future clearly made an impact.

“I applaud the faculty,” Hira said. “Not only did they endorse my appeal, but they also suspended the rules by unanimous vote in order to vote on the proposal at the same meeting.”

Now another round of work begins to implement the program, with an intended start date of fall 2009. ■

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