

Why a PhD Program, and Why Now

There are plenty of statistical reasons for the Iowa State University College of Business to offer a PhD program, but for those closely involved with the program's design and approval, the motivations go far beyond numbers. Instead, a doctoral program represents the relatively young college's coming of age.

"I've been around this place for 25-some years, and we have always discussed that one of our dreams is to have a PhD program in order to become a comprehensive college," said Labh Hira, dean of the college. "It means a lot to me. It almost brings tears to my eyes."

What Hira has seen in those years includes the formation of the college itself, the inception of the now-flourishing MBA program, and opening of the spectacular Gerdin Business Building—watershed events that each transformed the study of business at Iowa State. The PhD program is no less significant.

"It's a major landmark," said Hira, who expresses his gratitude for having "a front-row seat" as the program unfolds.

The development occurs at a critical time in business education. According to the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, which accredits business programs, a shortage of 1,800 qualified business faculty

will exist in 2008—and the shortage is projected to reach 2,500 by 2012. By some estimates, more than 1,000 PhD vacancies remain open today. Yet less than one-third of accredited business schools have doctoral programs.

Some universities are responding by introducing "doctoral bridge" programs that train holders of PhDs in other areas to become business faculty. Iowa State's response is to prepare faculty in ways that are specific to the university's research mission.

"This is the Iowa State University of Science and Technology, so we wanted to be sure that technology was emphasized," said Michael Crum, associate dean. "That's how we differentiate our program from others. Our students will clearly understand the role of technology in strategic management."

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—Michael Crum

Those students, Crum notes, will likely include mid-career professionals who are seeking an opportunity to use their skills in a way that helps others, advances the field, and still brings the financial reward that

could be expected from a position—business faculty—in such high demand.

"I think there are a number of individuals out there now who don't know they're prospective PhD students but who will be attracted to it," he said.

Sridhar Ramaswami, the professor who chaired the task force that proposed and then shepherded the program through its various approvals, sees an opportunity to work with committed, energetic, and intellectually curious peo-



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—Sridhar Ramaswami

treat that person as a colleague rather than as a student,” Ramaswami said. “We want students to believe that they are the engine behind the growth of the program.”

ple who will be treated as peers.

“The PhD culture is different. I believe that when a PhD student walks in the door, we have to

And Ramaswami has no small interest in contributing to the program’s growth and ultimate success.

“I’ve been here for about 20 years, so I’ve seen how this business program has grown,” he said. “At one point, nobody gave us a chance. But we have taken the college as far as is possible with current programs, and if we are to get to higher levels of visibility in the state and the nation, a visibility that I believe we deserve, we need this PhD program.” ■

PhD Program: The Basics

Program emphasis: business and technology

Areas of specialization: supply chain management, customer relationship management, management of information technology

Prospective recruits: mid-career professionals, current graduate and undergraduate students from business and other fields

First class of students: fall 2009 (proposed)

Credits required for graduation: 74 (dissertation required)

Goals: to prepare individuals for academic careers in research, teaching, and public service

Estimated annual cost: \$1.14 million

academia as the next generation of business professors, or in some cases to perform high-level research in the private sector, the PhD program will take a much different approach than what is familiar to most business students, or even mid-career professionals.

Earning a PhD involves intellectual curiosity, rigorous research, and the creation of knowledge. Passing courses—the primary labor of undergraduate students—is just one of the challenges in a PhD program. Staying motivated and focused for at least four years, and often longer, takes commitment. Energy and determination, in addition to talent and experience, separate the top students from the rest.

The same is true for faculty. An extraordinary time commitment is required to be a mentor and, ultimately, colleague to a student over four or more years of intensive literature reviews and research investigations. Faculty and PhD students will work more closely together than is the case with undergraduate or graduate programs currently in the College of Business.

In addition, faculty and the first cohorts of students will face the multiplier effect of a fledging program trying to establish itself. For that reason, the program will start small.

“You’re not going to admit 16-20 PhD students the first year,” said Michael Crum, associate dean. “It’s a gradual process. We also understand that the first group of PhD students we graduate are going to set the bar. These first ones will get tender loving care—they are going to be our showpieces. They have to shine because they will be creating our future reputation. The first years of implementation are tough.”

The Board of Regents, State of Iowa, voted in July to approve a PhD program for Iowa State University’s College of Business, but that doesn’t mean that the college has been instantly transformed. Plenty of work had gone into investigating, proposing, and gaining approval, and now plenty more remains to make the program a reality by fall 2009.

Much of that work involves putting the finer points on the program’s structure: PhD foundation courses must be developed, approved, and put into the catalog, and existing courses must be adapted. Some new faculty will be hired, and then there’s the task of recruiting the first class of students—perhaps the most key element in ensuring the program’s long-term success.

Because the goal is to prepare students for careers in