

A PhD program may be new territory for the Iowa State College of Business, but experience will still play a role.

Learning from Experience

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON THE NEW PROGRAM

It already has, in the sense that business faculty have been through their own PhD programs from throughout the world and bring their personal experiences to the process. But there are other voices in the conversation. One of them, David Ecklund, is a 1972 industrial administration graduate of Iowa State. After a successful career with Caterpillar Inc. and Caterpillar Logistics Services, Ecklund has returned to academia as a faculty member at the University of Tennessee. From early in the process of developing Iowa State's PhD program, he has brought the perspective of alumnus, business executive, and faculty member.

Yet there is nothing quite like having been there—right in the middle of developing and implementing a new PhD program at a university—and that's where Ajay Kohli enters the discussion. The Issac Stiles

Hopkins Professor of Marketing at the Goizueta Business School of Emory University served as the founding director of Emory's business PhD program, launched in 2002. Invited to speak to Iowa State business faculty in November, Kohli offered advice, encouragement, cautions, and forthright analysis based on what he has observed at Emory, which was ranked in the top 20 of business programs by the latest *U.S. News & World Report* ratings.

The Emory Experience

What Kohli saw at Emory, a private university of 11,300 students in Atlanta, illustrates that program development comes with some universals: expectations, doubts, unanticipated developments (good and bad), and hard work. Much hard work. Not surprisingly, then, Kohli stressed the



AJAY KOHLI VISITED THE COLLEGE OF BUSINESS IN OCTOBER TO RECOUNT HIS EXPERIENCE OF BUILDING A PHD PROGRAM.

themes of dedication, energy, passion—the sorts of traits that buoy faculty experiencing the demands of working with a crop of new PhD students in a program trying to establish itself in a vacuum of precedent.

Of all the challenges of imple-

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mentation, Kohli said, gaining an appreciation for the sheer magnitude of the task is paramount.

“Faculty are busy people, so something’s got to give,” he said. “Most people don’t realize how much time this takes. As you set up the program, issues will arise, such as the selection of courses, the sequence of courses, the determination of how to assign students to faculty. This requires someone or some set of people to be reflecting on these issues.”

Time becomes even more of a factor once the first students arrive. They will not have the benefit being able to turn to PhD students who are in their third or fourth years. Instead, as they face the great unknown of the doctoral path, they have only one place to turn: faculty. And turn they will. Part of the reason for such “handholding,” as Kohli put it, is that business students, especially in the early years of a program, do not have a clear idea of what a PhD is all about.

“You need to instill the idea that a PhD is about original research and creating knowledge,” he said. “I still remember spending enormous amounts of time with the first cohorts

just to get them to appreciate what PhD learning is all about. Most think it’s about coursework and passing classes, or they think it’s an extension of the MBA. But a PhD program is about creating an environment and providing a platform off of which students get exposure to content while developing skills to ask important questions and pursue rigorous research.”

These initial misperceptions intensify the need for effective recruiting, which is a job that requires participation by everyone in the college, encompasses an international outlook, and—perhaps most importantly—comes with the commitment to accept only students with the best chances of succeeding.

“You must instill the value system that it’s better to have no students than to have mediocre students,” Kohli said. “Faculty are going to spend a tremendous amount of time with them, and you want those students to bear fruit. Faculty need to ask themselves, ‘Am I really excited about the prospect of working with this student?’ ”

On the other side of the recruiting equation, outstanding students must be convinced that a new program is in their best interest. With numerous established programs from which to choose, they are well aware of the risk of committing to a new one.

“They’re going to be branded forever as having a PhD from Iowa State,” Kohli said. “They’ll spend four to five years there, and that’s a lot of time and energy in their prime years, so they want to go to a place that serves them best.”

These are the challenges that Emory has faced and that Iowa State must now meet as the fall 2009 goal approaches. As Kohli explained, eventually a structure takes shape, the first students arrive, and implementation evolves into a fully operating program. How long does it take to become established? About four years, according to Kohli.

“Now, we’re not trying to solve all the questions about ‘How is this done?’ or ‘How should we do that?’ All of the procedures have been put into place, ranging from curriculum, to research assignments, to teaching, to expectations of students in seminars, to faculty expectations of what to ask the students to do.”

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The benefits of an established program are quite real, Kohli said, not the least of which is the establishment of the college’s reputation on campus. “People around the university were

wondering what this program was all about and what business research really meant,” he said. “As they got more exposure to our students and our research, they learned. Our students compare extremely favorably with the caliber of students elsewhere in the university.”

Other benefits include objective measures—such as placement of graduates, published research, and connections developed with other schools—and subjective qualities, such as the growth of a research climate in the college, the expansion of faculty knowledge, and an increase in the amount and quality of published research. By those standards, Kohli sees Emory as having achieved success.

“The program is a success,” he said, “if our students go to good schools, publish good work, and energize the faculty into conducting more research.”

An Alumni Perspective

Experience in higher education as a student and a faculty member, combined with a high level of success in the business world, gives David Ecklund’s views a valuable breadth and depth. Fortunately for Iowa State, he remains keenly interested in staying involved with the place where he earned his undergraduate degree.

“I was appreciative that I had the opportunity to be a part of discussions with faculty from time to time,” Ecklund said. “The perspective we all shared was that without a PhD program, Iowa State’s business program was not really comprehensive. That was borne out by the competitive



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ratings published each year: without a PhD program, Iowa State didn’t have all the boxes filled.”

But it couldn’t be just any program, and Ecklund endorses the specialization choices that Iowa State has made.

“I think they’ve done an outstanding job of building on their strengths and differentiating themselves from a growing group of competitors,” Ecklund said. “They are positioned to take advantage of the sweet spot of supply chain management.”

Ecklund knows a little something about the topic. After earning an MBA at the University of Arkansas, he embarked on a long career with Caterpillar, ultimately taking an entrepreneurial tack as one of the founding members and ultimately a vice president of Caterpillar Logistics Services. He also played a central role in the development of Caterpillar’s Remanufactured Products Program.

“Businesses will continue to globalize, making decisions not only to source from a more global supplier

base but also selling products and services to more global market structures,” Ecklund said. “At the core of business’s ability to do those things is capability in supply chain management.”

But there’s more to the “sweet spot,” and thus the importance of Iowa State’s additional emphasis on information management technology and customer relationship management.

“If you can’t manage information, you won’t be able to manage material flows,” Ecklund said. “And the customer relationship side is the ability to determine how well you’re executing.”

The growing importance of these areas reflects significant changes in business opportunities and practices, the cumulative impact of which are challenging businesses as well as researchers, according to Ecklund. Critical issues include higher customer service expectations, shorter product life cycles, and the need to increase profitability through improved cost management. U.S. businesses

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have responded to these issues initially by sourcing more products internationally to reduce costs and improve profitability. Improved competitiveness and increased global market awareness has led U.S. businesses to further develop global markets for their products and services. These decisions have resulted in increased size, cost, and complexity in both inbound and outbound supply chains.

“Both universities and businesses have been challenged to keep pace with these changes,” Ecklund said. “Businesses require graduates who have a much more global perspective and understanding. In turn, faculty are being challenged to significantly increase global perspective and content in business curriculums. Faculty are well-read, but many are not looking at supply chain management historically or looking at the global perspective, and that has had an impact on the way we were educating our students,” he said. “That’s starting to change.”

But what do those changes have to do with a PhD program? Because of the intensive approach to research that a PhD entails, the many questions raised by today’s business world are ideal fodder for more exploration.

“The mainstream of business still looks at the master’s as a terminal degree,” Ecklund said, “but because of this much more complicated and challenging environment, business will look for the unique capabilities that come through advanced education.”

As that happens, Ecklund said, Iowa State’s College of Business will have an opportunity to build upon its strong reputation.

“Caterpillar is a good example of the success companies have had with Iowa State graduates, and as the PhD program produces graduates, they will develop their own reputations through research and other contributions,” Ecklund said. “They will become people who are sought out

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by other professionals in the field for their experience and knowledge, and they will contribute in writing, research, and presentations. That will be a positive thing.”

Ecklund has seen the impact that a strong program can have on a university. At Tennessee, where the supply chain management curriculum is rated in the top 10 in the country, there is “an excellent balance of teaching, research, and business outreach,” he said. Logistics and supply chain management as a major is available to

undergraduates, master’s candidates, and PhD candidates. Faculty collaboration has resulted in the effective integration of supply chain management with marketing, finance, and other complementing curriculums. “Many undergraduates elect to take a double major and through this educational process are better prepared for future business opportunities,” Ecklund said.

In addition, UT’s Center for Executive Education offers supply chain management courses for executives. Ecklund will be joining the Center’s faculty in 2008 to lead the development of an executive MBA program in global supply chain management and a center for global supply chain risk management.

“The continuing development and expansion of our supply chain management program at Tennessee is the direct result of the demand for our graduates and the interest that industry has in getting this knowledge,” he said.

And at Iowa State, the place of “some of my fondest memories,” Ecklund said, the impact will be to bring a sense of completion and at the same time increased opportunity for the future. “Iowa State has excellent facilities,” he said. “The Gerdin Business Building can compete with any facility anywhere, and it rounds out the package that makes Iowa State, with this PhD program, truly competitive as a comprehensive College of Business.” ■