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COVER STORY

Go To The Head Of The Class

A crash course aims to get executives ready to teach

Three years ago, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) sounded a warning to its accredited schools around the world. A cancer was eating away at the heart of the nation's MBA programs--a looming shortage of PhD-qualified faculty so severe that the future of graduate business education was at stake. With the number of business doctorates dwindling, the B-school establishment was facing a future of faculty vacancies, overcrowded classrooms, and declining quality.

As AACSB saw it, B-schools had to promote, fund, and generally pay more attention to their PhD programs, or else. This was a tall order, and still is. MBA programs are among the most lucrative on campus, and, as a result, receive the lion's share of resources, while PhD programs are a financial drain. With MBA enrollment at an all-time high, demand for faculty is growing. New business doctorates have declined, down to 907 in 2004 from 973 in 2000. And more than a third of all newly minted business PhDs never enter the academic job market.

AACSB now has an answer, but it's by no means a silver bullet. The organization's Bridge Program, which makes its debut Oct. 22, is a five-day crash course to certify senior executives to teach in MBA programs. AACSB President and CEO John Fernandes acknowledges that this program, even if implemented in the long term, will not be enough. "The only real fix is graduating more PhDs," he says. "I hate to be a pessimist, but I just don't see that happening."

While Fernandes defends the program as a necessary measure, and insists it will make executives "as classroom-ready as any other graduate, including PhDs," that's far from certain. The program includes courses on teaching methods, learning styles, and classroom management, as well as an actual class session prepared by the executives. But critics say that hardly compensates for a lifetime behind a lecture-hall podium--or even the classroom experience that most doctoral candidates get in their six years in a PhD program. That's why the Cox School of Business at Southern Methodist University does not permit executives to teach before spending at least one semester observing from the back row. Dean Albert W. Niemi Jr. says the Bridge Program alumni will be no exception: "That would be a huge mistake."

Even for the most highly motivated executives, the transition to academia isn't easy. Robert D. Rogers, who taught strategy and organizational behavior at Cox from 2000 to 2004 while he was president and CEO of Texas Industries Inc., ([TXI](#)) a nearly \$1 billion supplier of building materials, hadn't set foot in an MBA classroom since his days at Harvard 40 years before. The student body was a revelation--one student he flunked for not showing up sued him, unsuccessfully--and the amount of prep time required was a surprise. Says Rogers: "It was a lot of work."

By making it easier for schools to find qualified executives to teach, the Bridge Program might shift the focus of B-school curriculums from theory to practical knowhow. This is especially true among lesser-ranked institutions, which lack the resources to compete for top faculty and might rely more heavily on executives. For some the shift in focus is not a bad thing, but neither is it an unalloyed good. It would dilute the very things that make American-style management education unique, namely its focus on conceptual and analytical learning. And substituting theory with

executive "war stories" may produce a generation of MBAs unprepared for tomorrow's challenges. "Theory and practice go together," says Edward A. Snyder, dean of the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business. "People who understand theory are more likely to understand practice--today and tomorrow."

With baby boomer faculty on the cusp of retirement, the B-school brain drain may be at its worst in the next few years. To help fill the inevitable vacancies, AACSB will launch another program aimed at converting PhDs from business-related disciplines, such as economics and sociology, into new B-school faculty. The program is expected to take longer and be more costly than the one designed for executives. But it won't create a single new PhD trained in the kind of management disciplines required for MBA programs. At best, it will be a partial solution to a seemingly intractable problem.

By John Debruicker

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