

The Interdisciplinary Business Doctorate for Executives: A novel way to bridge academic research and practice

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents an overview of a new type of degree program that is rapidly emerging and gaining acceptance in the U.S.: the business doctorate for executives. Roughly a dozen of these programs currently exist at institutions accredited by *AACSB International*, the nation's premier accrediting agency. Although they are research-focused, like their Ph.D counterparts, they are quite different in a number of ways. Among the most important of these: they target applicants with substantial executive experience, they are part time and assume their participants will continue working while in the program, they are interdisciplinary in focus and their emphasis is generally on applying research methods to practical business problems, as opposed to producing published research articles. As a consequence, they are well-positioned to serve as a bridge that increases partnering between academic research and practice. After summarizing the general nature of these programs, the paper considers the structure and objectives of the new Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program being offered by the *Muma College of Business* at the *University of South Florida*.

Keywords: DBA, executive education, interdisciplinary, doctorate, curriculum.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a number of concerns have been raised about the impact of business research. These include [6]:

- Lack of evidence that the research is actually useful in practice [5] (p. 81)
- The rigorous scientific method prized by researchers appears to be in conflict with the production of insights that are relevant to practitioners [4] (p. 1)
- That degree to which the most significant contributions to management practice come out of practice, as opposed to being the result of academic research [10].
- To the extent that concepts actually flow between research and practice, they began in practice [3].
- Books written by academic business researchers are read much less often than those by practitioners and journalists [11].
- Theoretical business research so systematically underestimates the likelihood of "Black Swans" that it is dangerous to follow in practice [12].

AACSB International, the premier accrediting agency for business schools in the U.S. recognized these concerns and studied them in a 2008 special report. Only in the area of

finance could it produce compelling evidence of the impact ideas originating from academic research [6] (see [1]). Even there, however, critics like Taleb would argue that the influence has been far from positive, because such theories tend to ignore the realities of the complex, external business environment.

A variety of factors that might explain this observed gap between research and practice have been advanced [6]. First among these is the closed nature of both the academic research and business practice communities. Looking at the two communities as informing systems, both have become so focused on informing each other within the community that they have ceased to be concerned about the use of their knowledge across communities. Second, the increasing degree to which academic disciplines have become specialized and siloed is a poor fit with the types of complex, multidisciplinary, specific problems that practicing managers are trying to solve. Finally, the types of complex analysis required to address real world problems are ill-served by one-way communication channels that attempt to broadcast knowledge, such as publications. Only through a channel that provides continuous iterative interaction between the informer and the client can a useful solution be achieved.

An interesting and practical approach to addressing this research-practice gap involves developing a new way of introducing executives to academic research through a highly interactive informing channel. It involves a type of academic degree that is relatively new to the U.S.: an interdisciplinary doctorate that specifically targets working executives. These innovative programs seem capable of building rich informing channels between academic research and practice (Gill & Hoppe, 2010). Among their principal objectives is constructing a new bridge between research and practice.

The current paper examines the common features of such programs and the variety of program structures that have evolved over the past decade. It then takes a deeper look at one of the most recent programs to be launched, the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program being offered by the *Muma College of Business* (Muma COB) at the *University of South Florida* (USF). Specifically considered are both the structure of the program, the design of the curriculum, the requirements and, most important, the underlying rationale behind the design.

2. EXECUTIVE DOCTORATES IN BUSINESS

Outside the U.S., the notion of a doctoral degree that is targeted towards practicing managers is relatively widespread, although variations between different countries is large. In Germany, for

example, the vast majority of CEOs have a doctorate, although not necessarily in a business-related discipline, and doctoral programs that accommodate the needs of working professionals are common [9]. Between Australia and the U.K., with a combined population of less than a third of that of the U.S., about 60 programs currently exist [2]. Next door to both the UK and Germany, on the other hand, is France—where degrees are more tightly controlled by the government. There such programs are much less common, as are executives with doctorates.

U.S. Programs

In the U.S., the first program truly aimed at executive participants at a university accredited by *AACSB International*, the premier accrediting agency for business schools in the U.S., was the Doctor of Management degree introduced by *Case Western Reserve University (CWRU)* in 1993. Despite the great success of that program, for nearly 15 years afterwards, the field lay dormant. In 2009, however, that changed rapidly as a number of new programs launched. By 2015 there were eleven of these programs that targeted working executives with at least 10 years of work experience, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: U.S. Executive Doctorates at AACSB-accredited schools

| Year | Program |
|-------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1993 | Case Western Reserve University, OH |
| 2009 | Georgia State University, GA |
| 2009 | Kennesaw State University, GA |
| 2012 | Oklahoma State University, FL |
| 2013 | Rollins College, FL |
| 2014 | Jacksonville University, FL |
| 2014 | Temple University, PA |
| 2014 | University of Dallas, TX |
| 2014 | University of Florida, FL |
| Spring 2015 | University of South Florida, FL |

Common Design Features

All of the programs listed in Table 1 shared a common set of features, which included most or all of the following [8]:

- They were designed for working professionals
- They required substantial work experience (10-15 years)
- Classes were taken as part of a 10-30 person cohort
- Participants were required to attend frequent short weekend residencies (2-3 days, 8-10 times per year)
- 10-20 hours of outside work per week was expected between residencies
- The dissertation requirement was more flexible than would be the case for a typical Ph.D.
- Substantial program costs were involved, ranging from \$75,000-\$150,000
- They were not intended to prepare participants for tenure-track academic positions, although the fact that the degree prepared them well for adjunct opportunities was frequently emphasized.

Common Differences from Ph.D.

From a knowledge and informing standpoint, these executive doctorates differed from a Ph.D. in a variety of ways, summarized in Table 2.

Broadly speaking, the first four items on Table 2 represent the differences in clientele (i.e., other researchers for academics vs.

other practitioners for executives) and objectives (i.e., publication for academics vs. problem solving for executives). These differences are substantial, since what a researcher seeks is answers in the form of theory that is compact, generalizable, testable and timeless. The answers a practitioner seeks, in contrast, are generally specific to a particular problem encountered in a messy and dynamic environment. The bottom two rows involve informing across boundaries. For academics, making sure that what they teach is relevant is critical if students are to be engaged; for executives, the challenge is presenting more than just “war stories” and anecdotes. When academics and practice seek to inform each other, researchers must convince practice that their research—which was created principally with the goal of publication in mind—can also serve a need in practice. For practitioners, the stumbling block is most likely to be defining the problem and applying a rigorous method to its solution in a manner that interests or can be shared with a community whose objectives are so different from their own.

Table 2: Differences between Executive Doctorate and Ph.D.

| Category | Academic Business Ph.D. | Executive Doctorate |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Knowledge Core | Acquire an in-depth knowledge of the research literature in a particular area of focus | Synthesize knowledge from a variety of sources, often highly divergent in form and content |
| Informing | Communicate findings to narrow group of specialists in a format driven by the specifications of top tier journals | Frame findings in a manner that allows them to be communicated through a variety of channels to a diverse group of stakeholders that may include subordinates, superiors, customers, suppliers and owners; tell compelling stories |
| Research Problems | Investigate problems that appear to be enduring in nature and where findings seem likely to generalize | Investigate problems that may be transitory in nature and where the generalizability of findings is largely immaterial |
| Meaning of Rigor | Distinguish true effects from the coincidental through systematic application of the scientific method and other accepted research practices | Distinguish true effects from the coincidental through synthesizing whatever evidence is available |
| Teaching Challenge | Translating theory so that it can be applied in practical settings | Recognizing when past experience is and is not generalizable |
| Boundary Challenge | Convincing organizations of the practical value of research | Figuring out how to partner with academic researchers effectively |

Disciplinary Structure

One area where the U.S. programs diverge considerably is in their disciplinary structure. While most programs start with a core set of courses on research methods, and end with a dissertation, what happens between the two can differ substantially. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

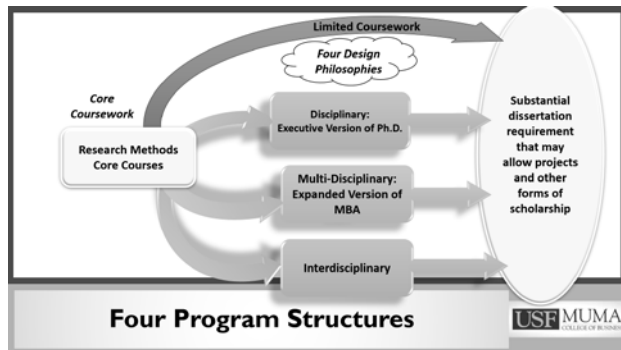


Figure 1: Alternative executive doctorate program structures

These different types of programs look at disciplinary coursework preceding the dissertation in very different ways, described as follows (Gill, 2014b, p. 3):

1. **By publication.** Typical of many European programs, although not in the U.S. Students get some training in research methods and then proceed directly to their dissertation without much—if any—coursework. The Ph.D. is awarded based upon the resulting publication(s)...Conceptually, these seem well-suited for individuals who know precisely what questions they want to study prior to entering a program. In Europe, the master's degree often provides this background. The nature of the degree makes it difficult to translate into credits, which might prove an obstacle to teaching at U.S. institutions.
2. **Disciplinary.** A direct mapping from the regular Ph.D. to the executive doctorate. Coursework is focused on a specific discipline, often through the use of electives. Students write functional dissertations...Conceptually, this doctorate is probably best suited to individuals who would like to make contributions to the academic literature, which tends to break down along functional lines. Since business problems rarely break down into purely functional problems, it may prove more difficult to apply to practical problems. Students also should have a good idea of what functional area they plan to concentrate in prior to entering the program.
3. **Multi-Disciplinary.** Survey courses are presented in each functional research area, making the coursework look superficially similar to an MBA (although the content is more focused on the research literature). Students would normally write functionally-oriented dissertations... Conceptually, these programs seem to offer a breadth of research literature coverage, well-suited to students who are not sure where their interests lie. They might be particularly useful for executives coming in without a broad-based business degree, such as an MBA. The drawback is that the coverage of so many areas may lead to superficial treatment. Also, it is not clear that the

functional research literature is a particularly good source of insights for practice, and executives already practicing in a particular function may find much of it insipid, if not unbelievable.

4. **Interdisciplinary.** Coursework focuses on topics that do not easily fall within a single business function, such as systems theory, analytics, and innovation. Dissertations will often have an interdisciplinary flavor... Conceptually, the content of the curriculum for these programs varies widely, as being interdisciplinary opens up a wide range of possibilities. The interdisciplinary flavor will, however, provide executives with exposure to areas where they are unlikely to have previous familiarity. Also, the interdisciplinary focus may make it easier to map what has been learned to “real world” problems.

The Executive Ph.D. offered by *Oklahoma State University* is unique among the group in offering students the options to pursue specialized disciplinary course-work. The recent DBA programs at the *University of Florida* and *Rollins College* both follow the multi-disciplinary model, having specific courses devoted to the research of different business functions. The earliest programs, at *Case Western Reserve* and *Georgia State* universities, both provide good examples of the interdisciplinary approach.

3. MUMA COLLEGE OF BUSINESS DBA PROGRAM

The DBA program offered by the *Muma College of Business* at the *University of South Florida* launched its first cohort in January 2015 after a 2 year period of intensive investigation by the college's faculty, including the development of two 30 page case studies [7][8] that were discussed with faculty members and Executive MBA students to get their feedback.

Philosophy

The Muma DBA program was highly interdisciplinary in its design, focused on helping its executive participants acquire the skills necessary to apply research techniques to the business problems that they faced. It was very specific in distinguishing its goals from those of the college's disciplinary Ph.D programs. Whereas the latter focused on producing graduates well suited to academic life in general, and publishing research in particular, and pursuing tenured faculty roles at research institutions, the DBA emphasized applying research to practice.

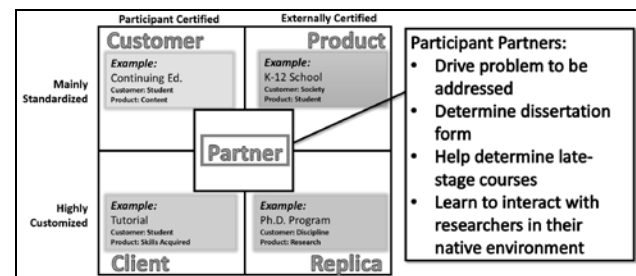


Figure 2: Goals of the DBA program

The distinction between the goals is illustrated in Figure 2, which describes informing activities on two dimensions: the degree to which they are highly standardized vs. customized for each individual participant, and the degree to which progress and completion is externally certified vs. being determined by the client being informed. The standardized/external quadrant is

labeled *product*, since the goal is to achieve a standard outcome that can be validated and is typical of the average K-12 environment. The standardized/participant quadrant is labeled *customer*, and might be typical of many continuing education courses whose content is fixed but which are taken entirely at the discretion of the client, for example a lecture course on literature. The customized/participant quadrant is labeled *client* because it suggests a highly adaptable interaction whose continuation is under the control of the client; a piano lesson is an example, as might be a consultation with a lawyer. The customized/external quadrant is labeled *replica* because it frequently describes an apprenticeship process, where the individual being informed accepts the individual tutelage of a master who, in the long run, certifies the process as being complete. Such a process would be typical of the journey taken over the course of an academic Ph.D. in which the candidate seeks to become qualified for the same job (and lifestyle) as the professors that he or she was learning from.

The Muma DBA does not fit nicely into any of the four quadrants. While its coursework, taken in cohort fashion, offers far fewer courses than and none of the discipline specificity that would be available for a Ph.D., it nevertheless offers considerable flexibility in terms of dissertation. In addition, while faculty members must certify completion, the participants are expected to exert substantially greater influence in determining how and to what extent their research provided the solutions to the problems they were posing. Thus, we place this box in the middle and refer to it as the *partner* region. It is so named because the intent of the program was that faculty should partner with the participants as they were acquiring their degrees. Upon graduation, it was further hoped that the skills they will have acquired will complement those of their academic researcher instructors and form the basis for future research partnerships benefiting both groups.

Program Design

The Muma DBA was designed to meet one Friday/Saturday weekend each month for 10 months each year. It was designed so that cohort participants should be able to meet all requirements in three years (and was designed to be quite expensive if they did not).

Six categories of courses were included in the program, described in the 2014-2015 USF course catalog as follows:

1. Core research courses: The first are designed to develop the student's quantitative and qualitative research skills, and to provide opportunities to practice these skills in real world contexts. These required courses consist of:

- Research and Writing Skills for Doctoral Students
- Applied Linear Statistical Models
- Introduction to Research Methods
- Applied Multivariate Statistical Methods
- Qualitative Research Methods in Business

2. Strategic focus courses: The second category is intended to provide students with exposure to research in the multi-disciplinary topics that represent the current areas of focus of the College of Business. These required courses consist of:

- Strategic Business Analysis
- Business Analytics
- Creativity and Innovation
- Ethics, Law and Sustainable Business Practices

3. Special topics courses: ...proposed by faculty members based upon their areas of interest and expertise as well as student interests...

4. Publication courses: These courses are offered during the first three semesters of the program and have a substantial distance learning and collaboration component between class meetings, with members of the cohort being required to peer review each other's work and make revisions. They represent an extension of previous courses, and require the students to create publishable documents, such as journal, conference and book chapter submissions.

5. Issues courses: These courses are offered starting in the fourth semester of the Program, and are intended to run in parallel with proposal and dissertation activities. Although meeting according to the same schedule as regular courses, issues courses offer fewer credits than regular or publication courses, and therefore have commensurately reduced outside workloads to avoid interfering with the dissertation process. Members of the cohort select the topics from a list of proposals made by faculty members and other members of the cohort. Students may also elect to facilitate issues courses under the direction of a faculty supervisor, who acts as the instructor of record.

6. Dissertation-related courses:

- A *proposal course* is offered during the student's fourth semester. It requires the student be matched to a four (4) person Dissertation Committee and submit a dissertation proposal for approval by the Committee.
- *Dissertation courses* are offered every quarter throughout the student's last year, upon satisfactory completion of at least 44 course credits, four (4) proposal credits, and Admission to Doctoral Candidacy. These courses require the student to work towards the completion of the Dissertation approved by his or her committee.

Because the DBA degree is designed to be responsive to the needs of the Candidate, there is some flexibility in the form that the Dissertation can take—subject to approval by the Committee. University policy allows for two variations in the format:

1. A traditional research dissertation
2. Collection of articles/papers

In addition to the course and dissertation requirements, the program had a conference requirement described in the 2014-2015 catalog as follows:

each student is required to participate in three external activities that involve meeting with academics and/or doctoral students from other institutions. Examples of such activities could include academic conferences, workshops, colloquiums, doctoral symposiums or academic association annual or regional meetings. At least one of these should include a substantial proportion of international attendees.

The rationale for the specific selection of courses was to cover the core topics that every business researcher needs to know (core research courses), but to include topics that are important to the college (strategic focus courses), to individual faculty members (special topics courses) and to the participants (issues courses, which are ultimately also intended to provide a vehicle suitable for recent DBA instructors). At the same time, nearly

one third of all classroom course credits were not locked in place by the catalog, providing the program with the ability to adapt to changing conditions.

The motivation behind the external conference requirement goes back to the partnership objective of the program. If the program is to succeed in creating future research partners for the college, it is critical that they develop an understanding of the academic culture. The traditional Ph.D. student undergoes many years of socialization through working within the department that runs his or her program. The DBA residencies, in contrast, were designed both to be short and to emphasize discussions that mainly involve other members of the cohort. Attending academic conferences provides participants with opportunities to observe and interact with research academics in one of their most favored environments. The program has encouraged them to imagine themselves as anthropologists whose goal is to understand the behaviors of a strange tribe.

4. THE FIRST MUMA DBA COHORT

When the Muma DBA program was recruiting its first cohort, its budgeted number of participants was 16, with a catalog limit of 25. Unexpectedly, that limit was reached in early-October 2014, with a substantial number of applicants awaiting processing prior to the 1 November 2014 stated deadline. The decision was then made to raise the cap—based on the expectation of attrition—and 35 applicants were ultimately admitted. By the middle of the first semester, enrollment had stabilized at 25, after 5 requested deferments to 2016 cohort, 2 left for personal reasons, 2 as a result of lost support from their respective employers and 1, after classes had started, as a consequence of the nature of the workload.

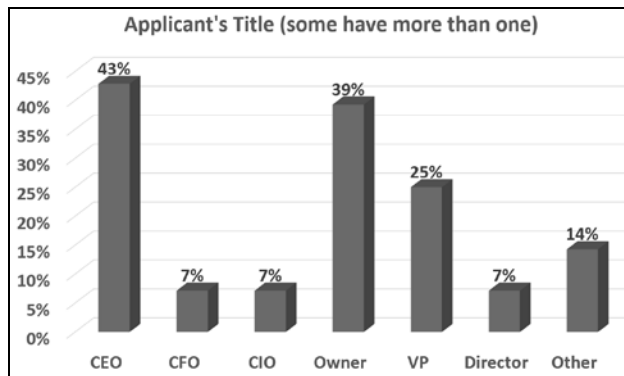


Figure 3: Distribution of Muma DBA 2015 cohort by title

Despite its large size, the quality of the accepted applicants, in terms of experience, was substantially higher than had been anticipated. The median age of the candidates was in the mid-50s, with roughly one quarter women participants. Nearly all the cohort members had master's degrees; a few exceptions were made for individuals having extraordinary experience.

The cohort was quite senior based upon its participants' titles (Figure 3) and represented a broad range of industries (Figure 4). The need for an interdisciplinary approach was underscored by the wide range of participant functional areas, with about 75% coming from finance, management and information technology. Such a breakdown is somewhat misleading, however, since the preponderance of CEOs and other c-suite (e.g., COO, CFO, CTO, CIO) participants meant that most of the cohort members continually needed to problem solve across

functions as part of their daily routine. Even if a functional option was offered to these individuals, they might refuse it.

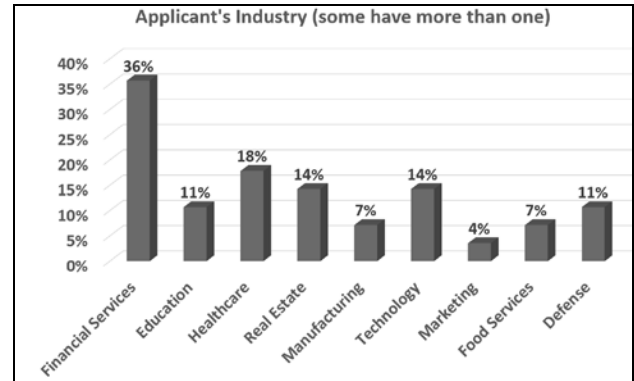


Figure 4: Industry distribution of Muma 2015 DBA cohort

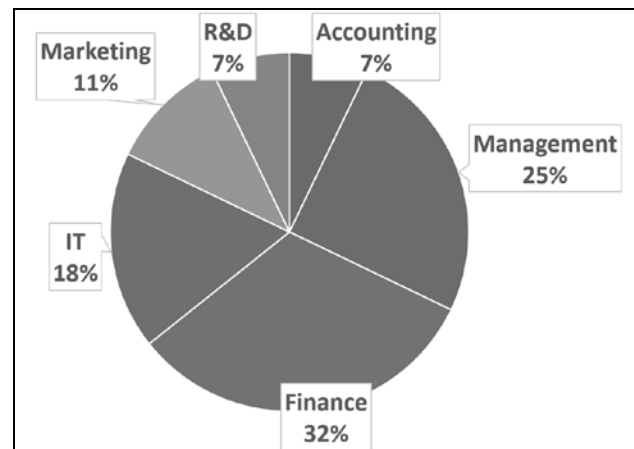


Figure 5: Representation by functional area of the Muma 2015 DBA cohort

5. RISKS

Despite an extraordinarily (and unexpectedly) strong start, the Muma DBA program still faces a number of risks as well as some enticing prospects. We consider the bad news here, saving the good for the conclusions.

Based upon our observation of other programs, as well as a considerable amount of introspection, we believe that the Muma DBA program is vulnerable to risks stemming from both outward failures and short-term success, illustrated in Figure 6.

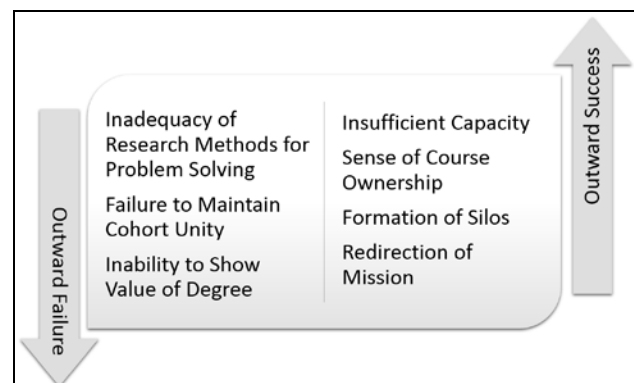


Figure 6: Risks from failure and short-term success

Risks of Failure

In a very real sense, executive doctorates are still in their infancy in the U.S. As a consequence, their ability to deliver different types of value remains to be tested. Are the research methods being taught robust enough to handle the dynamic nature of modern business environments? And, even if they are, are they too abstract or complicated to be convincing to managers who need to base decisions on their recommendations? Central to the value proposition of the degree, these questions are a compelling reason for viewing the entire degree process as a partnership between researchers and the participants rather than an apprenticeship. Both sides need to be invested in finding creative solutions when the methods being taught prove less effective than we researchers expected.

Another potential source of failure is a breakdown of the cohort unity. Doctoral programs in general have a terrible completion rate, with participants frequently falling off pace or out of the program during the dissertation phase. Maintaining continued cohort unity has proven to be key to assuring high completion rates and the Muma DBA approach included mandatory residency and the interactive “issues courses” during the dissertation semesters described in the program design.

Risks of Short-Term Success

In many ways, short-term successes could do more to damage the program than sporadic early failures. We see a number of potential issues:

Insufficient capacity: The Muma DBA program already got a taste of this potential problem during its initial recruiting season when, at one point, the program had admitted one more person than there were seats available around the boardroom table where classes were to be held. The program would also experience the challenge of supporting upwards of 25 dissertations annually in the not too distant future. The admittance problem: many of these individuals are such influential members of their local business communities, and so well qualified that it would have been inconceivable that their state university program would turn them down. But accommodating the needs of late applicants needed to be balanced against capacity constraints if quality (instructional, supervisory, logistical, and even participant interactional) was to be maintained.

Sense of course ownership and formation of silos: A successful program will attract faculty interest in participation. But there is also the risk that once a researcher has taught a course, he or she will treat it as an annuity, assuming that it is his or hers forever. This is a fair description of what tends to happen in regular programs. Similarly, departments may attempt to create silos around courses that they currently instruct—just as they do in regular programs. The flexibility in the program structure was supposed to discourage this type of territoriality. But the sense of course ownership runs deep.

Redirection of Mission: Perhaps the greatest risk of success could be described as a redirection of the program’s mission. At *Case Western Reserve University*, for example, an optional extra year was added, allowing participants to get a Ph.D. that is deemed suitable for academic employment. While this is certainly very flattering to the faculty that observe their students seeking to emulate them, the informing benefits of having working executives serving as a bridge to practice are lost. But, given the quality of the students, the temptation to turn them into replicas of us is always going to be great.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, as shown in Figure 7, the initiation of executive doctoral programs has the potential to produce a dramatic change in our attitudes towards research and research impact. The reason is simple: the participants are actually in a position to exert true impact through their decision making.

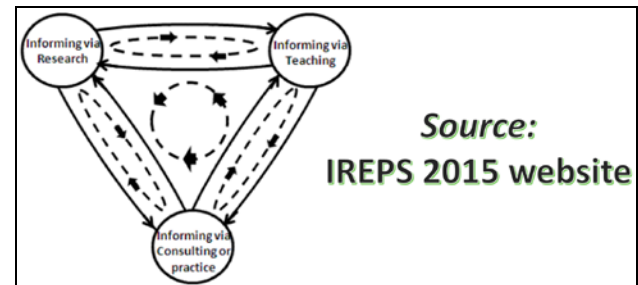


Figure 7: Integrative Impact of Executive Doctorates in Business

Our initial experiences at the Muma COB suggest to us that there is distinct possibility of this actually happening in the future. That someday, perhaps a decade from now, there will literally be hundreds of DBAs in the Tampa Bay area, all of whom are eager to continue their collaboration with the USF Muma COB research faculty.

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