



The Business of Becoming a Ph.D. – The PhD Project Boosts Minority Students in Business Programs

by Mark Blankenship



In the mid-'90s, Jorge Pérez had three dubious letters attached to his name: ABD. After completing his coursework at Florida State University for a Ph.D. in management information systems, he took a teaching job at North Carolina A&T State University. He stayed there several years, until eventually even he assumed that he would never head back to Florida to write his dissertation and finish his degree. He seemed destined to live as an “All But Dissertation” doctoral student.

But in 1996, Pérez heard about the first meeting of the PhD Project’s Information Systems Doctoral Students Association. Since the meeting promised to unite minority students, he decided to attend. He didn’t know that his dissertation chair from Florida State would be at the conference, too. Once Pérez and his advisor reunited, they had a conversation that convinced Pérez to finish his degree. Now a full-fledged doctor, he has been an associate professor of information systems at Georgia’s Kennesaw State University since 1998. “What might have happened had I not gone to that conference?” Pérez asks. “I don’t know. I was rekindled there, so I’ve always felt like that was a big deal.”

Hundreds of others would agree: In the last 15 years, the PhD Project has become a very big deal. Founded in 1994, the project bolsters African-Americans, Hispanic Americans and Native Americans who are pursuing business Ph.D.s, and it claims to have helped almost 1,000 students finish their degrees.

Bernie Milano, PhD Project president and co-founder, says he has long been concerned by the lack of diversity in the business world, and that the PhD Project was founded as a new approach to breaking down those walls. “We were serious about diversity, and we felt like we had to address the fundamentals and do something systemic,” he says. “The idea was that a more diverse business school faculty would attract a more diverse student body, and that students would be more likely to succeed in business school if they had mentors who were more like them.”



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Bernie Milano, founder and president,
The PhD Project

“The endgame,” he adds, “is to have a more diverse corporate community, and a more diverse faculty is the means to that end.”

It makes sense that people of color might feel discouraged from pursuing business in college or on the graduate level, considering how homogenous most business school faculty members and students can be. “If you’re a minority, and you get to college and you see an all-White faculty and a White dean at a business school, it certainly doesn’t seem like a place you want to be,” Milano says. “Without a role model, it’s hard to know that business is even an option. It’s hard to know how to go from where you are to where you think you’d like to be.”

A Survival Network

The PhD Project works to make those role models available. “We’re marketing a career as a professor to people who are in other careers,” Milano says.

The “marketing” begins with minority college students and professionals who express interest in pursuing a Ph.D. in business, whether by contacting the PhD Project directly or by reaching out to one of the many faculty members across the country who are part of its network. Prospective participants apply to attend the project’s annual conference in November, and many are awarded a scholarship to cover travel expenses.

From there, any Hispanic American, African-American or Native American student who gets accepted into a business Ph.D. program is immediately welcomed to the PhD Project’s network. They are connected via online groups and real-world conferences with current Ph.D. students and minority business school faculty and administrators. They are also encouraged to join one of the five discipline-specific Doctoral Students Associations (DSA), which have their own mini-conferences and active online groups. (The DSA has branches for accounting, finance, information systems, management and marketing.)

A support network is crucial for any student enduring the grueling process of getting a Ph.D., but for minority students in business programs, it can be challenging to feel truly included. “Among our students, you can bet there are a lot who are the only minority in their program,” Milano says. “Think about how lonely and isolating that would be. Our network fills that void.”

Pérez, who has remained an active mentor and conference speaker with the PhD Project since earning his degree, says he sees the impact of the project’s support every year. He explains: “Getting a Ph.D. will expose every demon you have inside you. When you encounter those demons, there’s nothing more helpful than connecting with people who have been through what you’ve been through, or who are going through it. I’ve talked to students who say they absolutely could not have made it without the PhD Project.”

To that end, the PhD Project also strives to give students a clear picture of the various hardships and rewards of getting a degree. They don’t want anyone to avoid applying because they mistakenly believe they aren’t qualified, and they don’t want anyone to drop out because they encounter something they weren’t prepared to face. “Ideally, there are very few surprises for them,” Milano says. “We are brutally honest about what they can expect.”

Pérez stresses that the PhD Project doesn’t stop caring about its students once they graduate: “We’re a very tight-knit group in our focused fields, and we use the project’s resources to stay connected.”

The Meaning of a Ph.D.

Getting a Ph.D. is an accomplishment on its own, of course, but it’s also often a tool for influencing and inspiring others. Milano tells a story of a friend and business school professor – a Hispanic American woman – who entered one of her classes and sat in the front row, as though she were a student herself. As the minutes ticked by, her increasingly fidgety students wondered when their professor would arrive, and when she finally stood up and introduced herself, they were audibly surprised. She was not the type of professor they were expecting.

“Eventually, she had to pull some of her female students into a private meeting because they were dominating the class so much that the others weren’t getting a chance to speak,” Milano says. “It’s the exact opposite of the scenario you usually hear about, but these girls were so eager to impress this role model standing in front of the class that they blossomed.”

For Pérez, a Ph.D. seemed like familial destiny. He says, "My father has a Ph.D., and I always thought it was really cool that people called him 'doctor,' even though he didn't wear a stethoscope."

Meanwhile, from the outside, Gastón de los Reyes may seem an unlikely candidate for life in academia. For two and half years, he has been in the Latin American corporate practice division of a large, international New York Law firm, where he has earned a healthy salary and handled complicated problems. As of this semester, however, he is leaving it all behind to pursue a Ph.D. in ethics and legal studies, with a concentration in management, at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School.

"I've always wanted to pursue research questions that might have the ability to affect the role business plays in people's lives," he says, noting that businesses such as credit card and mortgage companies are perpetually involved in ethically delicate situations. "The opportunity to affect how future business leaders relate to their customers is very appealing."

As he starts the journey toward his degree, de los Reyes says working with the PhD Project has already been a boon. "It's nice to meet people who can deepen your motivation to do what you're interested in," he says.

Widening the Beam

Statistically speaking, the PhD Project has enjoyed remarkable success. Along with its nearly 1,000 alums, it currently works with 370 students in 93 schools. (There are roughly 120 universities with doctoral business programs.) But for all its success, the project's dream of a more diverse business and business school community is not fully realized.

According to the project's research, for instance, there are approximately 7,000 business doctoral students in the country. Of those, 246 are African-American, 110 are Hispanic American and 16 are Native American. Of the roughly 26,000 business school faculty members with doctorates, 732 are African-American, 218 are Hispanic American and 31 are Native American.

The numbers get bleaker at the highest levels of administration. Of 1,200 business school deans, five are African-American and three are Hispanic American.

Looking ahead, Milano specifically wants to address the lack of diversity among business school deans, and he says the various doctoral student associations are preparing special meetings for aspiring administrators. A conference on the subject is also being considered.

The value of minority administrators falls under what Milano calls his "flashlight beam metaphor." He says, "We believe a student impacts other students, but it's a narrow beam. Faculty members have a broader beam. If you're a dean, then think of how wide your beam can be. The higher up you are, the more you can affect attitudes, policies and thought processes."

As the PhD Project moves forward, the size of its goal might seem overwhelming. Fortunately, it has already helped create a population of business school doctors who can use their own success as an impetus to keep pushing for diversity. Having enjoyed the network the PhD Project creates, they can become part of a network that keeps the project thriving.