

THE FACULTY

Career Track to Tenure Track

BY KATHERINE S. MANGAN



VANESSA BROWN

Psychelia (front) and Vontoba Terry, who attended a PhD Project conference in November, plan to participate in the program and become business professors. “I can’t wait to get back in the classroom,” says Ms. Terry.

ALTHOUGH THEY are barely into their mid-20s, Vontoba and Psychelia Terry have seen enough of corporate America to think it might be time to head back to business school: not to bolster their resumes with M.B.A.’s, but to leave the corporate world behind.

They’ve flown here from Baton Rouge, La., along with about 360 other recruits from around the country to listen to a sales pitch from the PhD Project, a program created to encourage black, Hispanic, and Native American business professionals to

A nonprofit organization encourages members of minorities to become business-school professors

become doctoral students, and ultimately, business professors. Those groups make up only 760 of the nation’s 26,000 business-school faculty members, say organizers of the PhD Project.

Whether the married couple would be willing to give up their comfortable lifestyle and fast-track careers for four to seven years of paltry pay and late nights in the library remained to be seen.

But after two-and-a-half days of pep talks and a crash course in doctoral studies from current and former Ph.D. students, the Terrys were sold.

“The conference opened my eyes to a whole new world,” says Psychelia, a bubbly 23-year-old sales representative for Whirlpool Corporation. The couple has already planned a timeline for preparing for the GMAT (the Graduate Management



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Admission Test) and applying to doctoral programs.

Her husband, 24-year-old Vontoba, is a personal-injury-claims specialist for Liberty Mutual Insurance, and has worked his way up through several finance-related jobs and internships, beginning in high school. During the conference, he listened to doctoral students describe the rewards of sinking their teeth into cutting-edge research and serving as role models.

“The idea of getting the biggest commission doesn’t excite me,” he says of his decision to change professions within the next few years. “I’d rather be learning and helping teach the next generation of professionals and researchers.”

The Terrys would join a small but growing number of minority Ph.D. students who are changing the face of the business professoriate.

The number of minority business professors has more than doubled since the PhD Project began in 1994, from 294 to 760, according to administrators at the project. The recruiting and networking program, which is supported by corporations, higher-education associations, and universities, has another 417 minority doctoral students in the pipeline who are expected to enter the profession over the next five or six years.

A report from the U.S. Department of Education confirms that black and Hispanic professors are particularly rare in the field of business. In the fall of 2003, black professors made up just 4 percent of full-time business faculty, and Hispanic professors only 2 percent. That compares with 5 percent and 3 percent, respectively, among all disciplines.

Despite the shortage of business-school professors, particularly from minority groups, there are relatively few openings in doctoral programs, and competition is fierce— a source of frustration for both prospective students and the founder of the PhD Project.

Bernard J. Milano, president of the PhD Project and the KPMG Foundation, says he

used to visit “TWI’s— traditionally white institutions”— as head of recruiting for KPMG, the giant tax and audit company. He found that “the front of the class was all white,” as were all of the schools’ top leaders. After consulting with other recruiters who expressed similar frustrations, he decided that the best way to cultivate a more diverse work force would be to expose students to more minority faculty members.

“Diversity in front of the class will diversify the classroom,” he says. The KPMG Foundation, which was created to improve education for future accountants and other financial professionals, became the principal founder and administrator of the PhD Project, which has since spun off as a separate nonprofit association.

ADDITIONAL ATTENTION

Getting students into doctoral programs is the first step; making sure they complete their studies is the next. The life of a doctoral student can be stressful and isolating, but it is particularly hard for someone who is the only minority candidate in the department, or one of only a few, Mr. Milano points out.

The project includes doctoral-student networks in accounting, finance, information systems, management, and marketing. Doctoral students are assigned faculty mentors and encouraged to attend meetings with other minority Ph.D. students. “You know that you will have support from the time you are admitted until you graduate,” he told attendees at the November gathering in Chicago. (The PhD Project paid travel expenses for all of the participants.)

That kind of attention has paid off. About 90 percent of the students who have gone through the PhD Project remain in doctoral programs or have graduated, compared to 70 percent of all business doctoral candidates, according to Mr. Milano. And graduates of the minority-support program are much more likely to end up teaching— 99 percent, versus 67 percent for the general doctoral-student population, he says.

“The project has sensitized schools to provide the support they need to students, many of them midcareer professionals who have been very successful in their careers,” says Nicole Chestang, chief operating officer of the Graduate Management Admission Council, which has given \$1.8-million to the PhD Project since its inception.

Without the project, few minority professionals would consider applying to a doctoral program, she says. “It’s just not on the viewfinder after they leave school. They haven’t had a critical mass of role models that they could turn to when making career transitions, although that’s changing.”

FEWER DEGREES

Minority students are not the only ones in demand as business schools cope with growing enrollments and a shrinking pool of doctorally trained professors. If current trends continue, the nation will face a shortage of 1,100 business doctorates by 2007 and 2,400 by 2013, according to AACSB International: the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, another co-founder of the PhD Project.

Doctoral programs are expensive to run, and since universities rarely hire their own Ph.D. graduates, they are hard to justify in a strictly bottom-line analysis. With the current obsession with national rankings, universities would rather pour money into M.B.A. programs, even if it means shortchanging doctoral offerings. “You’re never measured on the strength of your doctoral programs,” Mr. Milano, the project’s president, says.

Business schools accredited by the AACSB issued 122 doctorates in accounting in 2000 and only 86 four years later; in finance, doctorates dropped from 159 to 109 nationally in the same time period, and in economics, they fell from 124 to 89. There were only two doctorates awarded in business ethics in 2004, and two in electronic business.

At the November meeting, Mr. Milano said that “a school might have hundreds of

applicants, but only a handful of openings.” Because of that, he urged prospective doctoral students to apply to a dozen or more business schools.

“We’re encouraging all of you to quit your jobs,” he said. The audience, which included five employees of his company, KPMG, responded with nervous laughter.

So why would someone want to give up a six-figure salary and the prestige of being near the top of the corporate ladder to pursue a career switch that will take five to seven years? “Universities don’t merge. They don’t move their headquarters. They generally don’t go out of business,” Mr. Milano pointed out.

The pay isn’t too shabby either. Because of the shortage of business-faculty members and the hefty salaries they could

doctoral students. Nearly one quarter of the 100 doctoral students was black.

Mr. Dawkins got his start in teaching by tutoring student athletes while he was pursuing his M.B.A. “They thought I did a good job explaining the concepts, so that planted the seed,” he says.

MAKING A CHANGE

During the conference, several doctoral students explained what brought them back to the classroom. Randy V. Bradley, a fourth-year doctoral student in information systems at Auburn University, said he went to college because his parents told him he had to. “I went back to get my master’s because my wife wanted all these things,” he said. His career as a database analyst afforded him a comfortable lifestyle and a

“How do you walk away from the secretary and the income with all of those zeros and give up the big house for the small apartment? It’s easy— just do it,” she said. The new lifestyle may be draining her budget, but it is feeding her intellectual curiosity, she said.

Several of the attendees said what worried them most, after being away from academe for years, was taking the GMAT— the standardized test required for admission to business doctoral programs.

“What you need is perseverance,” said Terence J. Pitre, a tenure-track assistant professor of accounting at the University of South Carolina’s Moore School of Business. The former Navy officer and accounting executive says the transition wasn’t easy.

“The idea of getting the biggest commission doesn’t excite me. I’d rather be learning and helping teach the next generation of professionals and researchers.”

make in the private sector, a starting assistant professor can earn \$80,000 to \$150,000 for a nine-month academic year, with the highest salaries in finance and accounting.

The project’s annual conference gives business-school administrators an important recruiting edge, says Mark C. Dawkins, director of diversity relations for the University of Georgia’s Terry College of Business. Mr. Dawkins, who identified 25 prospective Ph.D. candidates at the November meeting, plans to invite them to his campus for a meeting in January, during which they will meet with current doctoral students and faculty members and tour the campus and the city of Athens.

“Without the PhD Project, it would be next to impossible to go out and beat the bushes and find them on my own,” he says. The Terry School has also hired a handful of faculty members who graduated from the diversity program.

As a doctoral student at Florida State University in the early 1990s, Mr. Dawkins was part of a team that pitched the idea for the PhD Project to KPMG. He says he was fortunate to be enrolled at a business school headed by a black dean, Melvin T. Stith, who had helped develop one of the nation’s largest and most racially diverse group of

fancy office in a high-rise building, but little intellectual challenge. “I had maxed out professionally.”

Becoming a professor was something he did for himself after hearing about the PhD Project and convincing his reluctant wife that it made sense. “After everything she had thrown at me, in questioning my logic and thought process,” he said, “I figured there was nothing a Ph.D. could throw at me that I couldn’t handle.”

The gamble paid off, and he discovered he had a natural affinity for teaching. For three consecutive years, he was voted the best instructor among the department’s doctoral students.

Maritza Salazar, whose father worked as a migrant laborer and whose mother was a dishwasher, said she will encourage her students to consider business issues in a broader perspective. Ms. Salazar, a second-year doctoral student in management at New York University, says they will consider, for instance, “What does this theory mean for the minority community or the inner-city neighborhood?”

Tonya Williams, a third-year doctoral student in marketing at Northwestern University, said she practiced living on a stipend before taking the plunge and giving up her industry job.

“I took the GMAT so many times,” he said, “that everyone at Sylvan knew me by name.” The first time he sought admission, he said, he was turned down by every school he applied to. Eventually he scored well on the test and got into several schools, receiving his doctorate from Michigan State University in 2004.

Back in Baton Rouge, the Terrys are packing up their belongings and preparing to move to Pasadena, Ca., where Ms. Terry has been promoted to a new sales job with Whirlpool. Mr. Terry is pursuing jobs, possibly in commercial banking. And although their salaries would allow them to buy a house, they are taking the advice of a business dean and renting an apartment so they “won’t go broke” when they trade their briefcases for backpacks, probably within the next few years.

They have already checked out the married-student housing at some of the Southern California business schools they plan to apply to. Says Ms. Terry: “I can’t wait to get back in the classroom. There’s another future out there waiting for me.” ■



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