

Your Turn

By Susan J. Ashford

I Bridge to Practice

One of the ongoing criticisms of today's business schools is that they don't successfully bridge the divide between theory and practice. Closing that gap is not just a good idea; business schools have an inherent mandate to do so. As professional schools, colleges of business are expected both to produce knowledge and to prepare people for practice. They are held to dual standards.

Many schools are already making huge efforts to bridge the divide between theory and practice. For example, at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, one-quarter of the MBA curriculum is devoted to projects that students complete for participating organizations. As cross-disciplinary teams of Michigan faculty oversee these projects, they get a chance to see their ideas at work—and learn what succeeds and what doesn't. At the University of Pennsylvania, the Wharton School supports a multifaceted research center structure in which companies and executives not only fund research, but also interact with faculty extensively. Such interactions allow practitioners to see the value of faculty research and help faculty see where that value falls short. And, of course, faculty at Harvard Business School maintain a close connection with the world of practice by writing case studies.

Indeed, faculty at virtually every business school do have incentives to live both sides of this divide. Their classrooms are full of students who are oriented toward practice; their larger school environment and profession value research. Faculty immersed in practice through active consulting have a pragmatic interest

in the latest ideas as well. In their consulting, they have to sell their ideas on the open marketplace. As teachers in EMBA and executive education programs, they face ambitious managers hungry for knowledge. If these professors don't have something new and relevant to say, they won't be successful in either role.

If faculty have such real incentives to bridge the divide between theory and practice, what's the missing piece? Administration. Deans and top administrators at business schools and universities must lead the way in creating a school culture that nurtures collaboration and rewards very different kinds of efforts.

If deans and administrators really want to construct bridges between academia and the real world, they should consider eight basic building blocks:

1. Welcome faculty who have diverse strengths. The business school has room for faculty who are interested in research, faculty who are interested in practice, and those who are adept at bridging the divide. For instance, Bob Quinn, a Michigan faculty member who focuses on leadership, is immersed in the world of practice. He writes more books than articles, is extensively involved in executive education, and works closely with companies. Yet he also teaches a transformative session for Michigan's research-oriented Ph.D. students. Karl Weick, an academic's academic, also teaches in Michigan's executive education programs. Administrators who resist putting faculty into specific molds will help build diverse and exciting schools.

2. Recognize and encourage the career progression that most faculty follow. Many professors will focus on research early in their careers, and then branch

out into more practical concerns after they've acquired experience and achieved tenure. Junior faculty straight out of Ph.D. programs may think they will never be interested in anything except research, but deans can subtly broaden their interests over time by structuring small opportunities for them to interact with the practical world.

One excellent approach is to have junior faculty take small roles in executive education programs. There, as they encounter practitioners with years of experience, they will get new ideas as well as access to data that they can develop into publishable material. It's ideal if their time in the executive education program is part of their regular course load, not something tacked on to their other responsibilities.

3. Turn the EMBA program into an exchange forum. Like an executive education program, the EMBA attracts working professionals who are trying to solve real problems. Unlike the much shorter executive education programs, EMBA programs usually span one or two years, giving faculty more exposure to practitioners and a better chance to hone their own skills. If young research-oriented faculty are allowed to teach EMBA courses, they will have to think about the practical utility of their research—and if they are teaching the courses as part of their regular academic load, they'll still have time to pursue that research.

4. Actively promote exchanges between professors in both camps—research and practice. Research-oriented faculty, as mentioned, might learn about new industry applications for theoretical knowledge if they participate in executive education programs. Practice-oriented faculty might find

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themselves delighted by well-crafted talks in which research-oriented professors present new ideas and make them accessible. If deans encourage such interactions, they can enrich the thinking of faculty on both sides, while improving the program for students.

5. Foster the notion of faculty development—for junior and senior professors. As I've said, many faculty don't become interested in practice until late in their careers, but at that point, few business school administrators are thinking about ways to mentor them. Deans should consider long-term development strategies for *all* their faculty.

6. Look for translators. Sometimes it's difficult for practitioners to understand the dense research produced by top faculty. The solution is for the school to find mechanisms for putting those thoughts into laymen's terms. Some translators already exist. For instance, Tom Peters interprets the work of Weick, whose research would be mysterious to most practitioners otherwise. Malcolm Gladwell edits basic psychological research into forms that readers find understandable and

attractive. There are other ways for schools to share academic knowledge with the interested public. For example, Wharton rewrites faculty research in laymen's terms and posts the information online for 400,000 subscribers worldwide.

Bringing translators into the mix has two benefits. First, it allows faculty to produce knowledge while still creating an impact on practice. Second, it helps research-oriented academics see that their work really does make a difference in the corporate world.

7. Promote an interdisciplinary approach among faculty. Real-world problems are complex and multifaceted; they aren't confined to disciplinary silos. Schools should encourage faculty to read outside their own literature and talk to colleagues in other disciplines. The University of Michigan's openness among academic units is enhanced by joint appointments across departments, as well as by structured interactions that include having organizational scholars from 11 different schools and colleges come together for a weekly seminar.

Not only should academics interact more with practitioners, but they should also consider theories and findings from other disciplines. To encourage faculty to explore other areas, deans and administrators must recognize not only the importance of interdisciplinary work, but also the greater complexity it presents. They need to design a reward system for faculty engaged in the difficult work of interdisciplinary research.

8. Invent structures to bring theory and practice together. An outstanding example of a theory/practice collaboration is the Marketing Science Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Launched in 1961, the

institute brings together executives from about 70 corporations with researchers from more than 100 universities who determine which topics would be most fruitful for academic research. MSI solicits proposals on these topics and funds related research. The institute, established by a business school dean, is a model other deans can use to create synergies between academia and industry when they are networking in the broader business community.

Despite being portrayed as existing on either side of a theory/practice divide, today's business schools actually offer an ideal venue for building bridges. Deans can lead this effort by taking a new approach to academic expertise and expanding their definition of what it means to be a successful academic. As more schools build cross-disciplinary bridges, more faculty leaders will be willing to cross those bridges. But administrators need to lead the way by creating a collaborative culture.

Deans have a real opportunity to promote the role of business schools today—within the university, the business world, and society. It's also up to them to create the internal systems that will enable and reinforce a good balance of researchers and practitioners among faculty. Over time, such a balance will only make the school stronger and increase the pool and quality of knowledge for everyone, both in academia and in the corporate world. **■**

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