

# What's Behind the Highest Degrees of Executive Leadership? Evidence-Based Decision-Making

PEOPLE PURSUE A PH.D. in business for three reasons, says Toby Joplin, Director of Executive Doctoral Programs at Oklahoma State University. The first is to acquire skills for making better data-driven decisions. The second is a desire to discover best business practices. And the third is that some people are simply interested in academia. "I was one of those guys," says Joplin.

Indeed, C-suite executives are increasingly using empirical evidence to make sound business decisions, which is why they send their best and brightest to DBA programs that foster data skills. Ekin Pellegrini, Director of Executive Education at University of Missouri-St. Louis, believes that business executives are attracted to UMSL's Doctorate program in Business Administration by the opportunity to learn how to interpret academic findings, conduct rigorous scholarly research, and create transformative change in their industries.

Though they are a relatively recent development, executive doctoral programs are attracting people across various industries. OSU's program has graduated four classes since it started six years ago; Joplin is part of that first cohort. UMSL's program is only in its first year, and its inaugural class will graduate in 2020.

What sets these programs apart from a traditional MBA program? They are primarily focused on creating knowledge, rather than consuming it. And that is an important distinction, according to Pellegrini, who says that many students build



on knowledge and skills acquired via previous graduate studies. Don Mueth, a current student at UMSL and the CFO of a St. Louis-based firm, says he sees the program as a way to learn something new. "I know that I am going to be able to take the information and knowledge that I gain and bring it back to our business and hopefully make us a better firm."

These cutting-edge programs are loaded with quantitative and qualitative research-methods courses, the subject area most students want more experience in. "There is new technology, new theories, new trends, new ways of running a business and working with clients," says Mueth. "All of that is new knowledge for us."

Most of these programs aren't what you necessarily expect, explains Tom Totten, an OSU graduate and CEO of an Indianapolis-based company. "The program is very demanding, different than anything I experienced in an industry setting. It is also very rewarding. What you expected coming in is not at all what you will get. It will be better. It was for me." Totten has since launched a new financial product at his firm, which grew out of his dissertation.

The average student brings decades of life and work experience into an executive doctoral program. They're seasoned executives with as much to offer their fellow students and instructors as they receive, making for a multilayered experience, rich and rewarding for all participants. ●



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**Toby Joplin, CPA, PhD**  
Director of Executive Doctoral Programs | Oklahoma State University

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