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MUMA DBA AFTER 10 YEARS¹

“Happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” - Tolstoy

Grandon Gill was stationed at his desk in the administration offices of the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program at the Muma College of Business, which is part of the University of South Florida (USF). Many emails awaited his attention. His immediate concern was not only his daily tasks but also a worry that had begun to burden him: the retention rate in the DBA program.

Beyond his teaching duties as a professor, Grandon was the academic director of the DBA program at USF. Exhibit 1 describes Grandon’s academic identity and outlines the courses he taught. Grandon reviewed the retention numbers and was surprised by the significant drop in numbers during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the new online cohort experienced significant attrition before students even reached graduation. The stakes were substantial, impacting the financial sustainability and credibility of the DBA program.

Completely mindful of the weight of the decision presented to him, Grandon recognized that a more comprehensive approach would be necessary to consider diverse options in addressing the multifaceted challenges of DBA students. Grandon contemplated five clear-cut strategies as potential options to investigate.

The question related to leveraging data analysis for strategic interventions to improve student retention. Option one suggested being more selective in admissions to screen out students who were less likely to complete the DBA program. Option two suggested formal tracking methods, mainly through mentor guidance and early identification of concerns. Option three suggested actively identifying group dynamics to pinpoint struggling students early on. Option four consisted of gathering feedback through focus groups at the end of each semester to better understand the students’ aptitudes. Lastly, option five was to continue collecting and monitoring additional information, which might appear as doing nothing substantial.

Grandon wondered: With retention declining due to the disruption caused by COVID-19 and online cohort attrition, what was the crucial factor in securing the DBA program’s long-term sustainability?

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U.S. DBA Programs

Business has an exciting history compared to other academic disciplines. Before the early 1900s, there were only two business schools in the United States (U.S.): the *Wharton School of Finance at the University of Pennsylvania* and the *Tuck School at Dartmouth University*. Harvard *Business School* first offered the Master of *Business Administration (MBA) degree*. At the beginning of academia, business degrees were viewed as less rigorous than those in liberal arts disciplines, such as economics.

There was a problem with the university's faculty not having terminal degrees, and those who did were primarily in the business field. It was not until the late 1950s, when the Ford and Carnegie foundations issued two influential reports that criticized business education, that a transformative period began. Significant changes were made regarding business education, with an influx of doctoral candidates trained in theoretical and empirical research methods from economics, statistics, and social sciences. Universities revised their academic standards for research, which led to an improved reputation for business scholars, who were viewed as equal to their counterparts in the liberal arts academic community.

Business Ph.D. programs at universities in the U.S. were a route to an academic career. However, some graduates left to pursue different fields, such as management consulting. Those who chose paths other than academia were disappointed by programs because they required more than the individual needed. There was also the issue of programs needing more recognition from the primary business accrediting agency, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), as well as individuals requiring assistance in finding jobs after graduation.

In the U.S., in 2024, the competitive situation consisted of an increased demand for highly trained workers in a constricted labor market across organizations. Unemployment rates were historically low in 54 years; workers had more options and greater bargaining power because employers faced challenges retaining skilled workers (Raimondo, 2023). In the U.S., the competitive situation in doctoral programs in business administration revolved around attracting top-tier postgraduate candidates and faculty. Universities needed faculty members who brought expertise and research funding to the program. Factors influencing retention in DBA programs were mentorship, support services, and access to state-of-the-art research facilities. The need for a conducive academic environment allowed interdisciplinary collaboration and program growth. Doctoral candidates were increasingly sought after by academia and organizations.

Grandon was familiar with the Ph.D. attrition rate, which ranged from approximately 36% to 51% (Young et al., 2024). Based on the Ph.D. attrition rate in the U.S., he recognized the need to prioritize effective retention strategies to ensure the program's longevity.

What is a DBA?

A *Doctor of Business Administration (DBA)* program is an academic program that leads to a doctoral degree designed for seasoned professionals seeking advanced knowledge in business.

Adapted from Gill, T.G. (2014a). Launching the DBA program at USF. *USF Case Study*.

The program focused on academic rigor, research, and contribution to one's original field of business. Executive doctoral degrees were terminal programs that were designed for working professionals. The research approach for an executive doctoral program was the "engaged scholarship" model that focused on topics at the intersection of theory and contemporary business issues (Cola, 2024). DBA programs offered coursework covering many aspects of business, including strategy, entrepreneurship, and research. DBA programs typically target mid-career professionals who already possess significant managerial experience. These individuals often sought to advance their careers to executive positions, transition into consultancy roles, or become instructors in academia.

How does a DBA differ from a Ph.D.?

The DBA and the traditional *Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)* offered different paths for doctoral-level study in business. The U.S. universities accredited by *AACSB International* had initiated a program distinct from the traditional Ph.D.: the *Executive Doctorate in Business (EDB)*. The DBA commonly occurred; these programs shared certain features, although they catered to a different set of needs than a Ph.D. (Gill, 2013). DBA programs served different needs than traditional business Ph.D. programs (see Exhibit 2).

The DBA objectives were for experienced professionals wanting to advance their careers in executive or consulting roles by learning to apply real-world issues to business theory. The Ph.D. targeted scholars and researchers who wanted to contribute to academia through theoretical and empirical research. DBA programs focused on coursework involving leadership and addressing organizational challenges, and Ph.D. programs focused on research methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and independent scholarly work. While the DBA and Ph.D. programs had different characteristics, they also had similarities. Exhibit 3 describes the typical characteristics of the DBA and Ph.D. programs. Both paths offered opportunities for career advancement and added value within business education.

Types of institutions offering DBA programs

Institutions with DBA programs offered a diverse range of services, catering to the needs of business professionals seeking to advance their knowledge in business education. As *U.S. News & World Report* (2024) describes, there are diverse ways:

1. **Traditional.** Institutions offered both on-campus and online DBA programs.
2. **Online.** Institutions offered DBA programs that allowed individuals to work and live in a location different from the university. This allowed the individual to balance other commitments, such as work or personal, like family, and still obtain a degree. Virtual sessions could still be required. This gave a practical application and was geared toward working professionals.
3. **International.** DBA programs offered outside the U.S. provided an individual with a global experience. Accreditation standards and the program's structure varied.
4. **Hybrid.** Universities offered DBA programs that combined online coursework with face-to-face interaction with other individuals in the same cohort.

5. **AACSB International.** It was globally recognized as an accredited university that has met rigorous and high-quality standards, contributing to continuous improvement in business education.

Current U.S. competition

Among U.S. programs, *Georgia State University's Robinson College of Business* offered a DBA that incorporated multiple disciplines to address complex business issues (Georgia State University, 2024; Robinson College of Business, 2024). The multi-disciplinary approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how to solve problems. *Oklahoma State University's Spears School of Business* was designed for working professionals and tailored to incorporate evidence-based research methods (Oklahoma State University, 2024). *Kennesaw State University's Coles College of Business* offered a *Ph.D. in Business Administration*, designed to transition business professionals into advanced leadership roles or careers in academic institutions (Coles College of Business, 2024; Kennesaw State University, 2024). Exhibit 4 shows Georgia State, Oklahoma State, and Kennesaw's DBA Curriculum.

Local competition for DBA programs was within driving distance of Tampa, Florida (see Exhibit 5). The DBA programs at *Rollins College's Crummer Graduate School of Business*, the *University of Tampa's Sykes College of Business Executive Doctor of Business Administration (EDBA)*, and Saint Leo were approximately 35 miles away.

In addition to other DBA programs, Grandon was aware that the Tampa area offered numerous options for pursuing doctoral degrees in business administration. The Tampa campus adopted a holistic approach, considering the entire system of the program, including the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical insights gained from local partnerships, rather than just academic rigor.

Muma DBA Program

The DBA program, such as the one USF offered, was designed for working professionals and tended to be pursued for different reasons (Gill, 2024). USF's DBA program offered rigorous coursework and covered aspects of business administration. Exhibit 6 outlines the structure of the USF DBA Program, including critical features, program costs, tracks offered, duration, and admissions requirements. A significant portion of the DBA program was dedicated to research. Students engaged in independent research projects, often centered on applied research relevant to their current or preexisting careers, where they might have faced challenges within their industry.

The DBA program required a doctoral dissertation, in which individuals undertook innovative investigations under the guidance of faculty advisors. The dissertation added new insights or solutions to real-world issues. Unlike traditional Ph.D. programs, which typically emphasized theoretical research and academic tenure-track careers, DBA programs, such as those at USF, had a practical orientation. USF's DBA program aimed to supply individuals with advanced knowledge and skills directly applied to industry managerial roles.

The curriculum was designed to build upon the breadth of business and understanding that students had previously achieved as successful executives. This was achieved by offering substantive coverage of a wide range of qualitative and quantitative research techniques,

allowing students the flexibility to focus more intensely on personal areas of interest during their dissertation (Gill, 2024). Exhibit 7 displays the calendar for the in-person program, offering insights into an individual's scheduling and timing of the courses. USF's DBA program was structured to accommodate a diverse learning experience that anyone could access at any time.

USF and Muma College of Business

The *Muma College of Business*, formerly the *USF College of Business Administration*, was USF's business school. Established in 1963, it was renamed in tribute to Les Muma, an alumnus and entrepreneur (Muma College of Business, 2024b). According to *USF's Muma College of Business*, more than 8,400 students were enrolled across six schools and three Florida campuses: Tampa, St. Petersburg, and Sarasota. At the time, Gert-Jan de Vreede served as the interim dean, succeeding Moez Limayem. USF Muma offered a wide range of undergraduate majors in business, including Accounting, Advertising, Business Analytics, Information Systems, Hospitality Management, Risk Management, and Supply Chain Management. Muma had six marketable concentrations in compliance and risk management, cybersecurity, data analytics, healthcare analytics, finance, and blue economy. According to the *University of South Florida's (Muma) 2024 Rankings*, it ranked 87th out of 124 in *Best Business Schools* and 53rd out of 269 in *Part-time MBA*. This report appeared in *university rankings* and was published by *U.S. News & World Report* (2024).

The History of USF's DBA Program

USF's DBA program was initiated by Moez Limayem (see Limayem, 2024), the Dean of the College of Business (COB). It was derived from a survey among alumni of the school's *Executive MBA program* (EMBA). The survey revealed a significant interest in a *Doctor of Business Administration* (DBA) at USF. By 2014, there were four similar executive doctoral programs in place. Additionally, AACSB International said there would soon be a shortage of qualified business school educators (Gill, 2014b). In 2014, Grandon got the approval to launch the new DBA program.

The DBA program, designed as a three-year cohort program with a maximum of 25 executives per cohort, offered senior-level business leaders the opportunity to develop rigorous research skills applicable to contemporary business problems (Gill, 2014b).

"This exciting new program also addresses the lifelong learning desires of intellectually curious professionals who already possess advanced degrees in their fields but wish to continue their education to the highest level," said Limayem (Gill, 2014b).

Current situation

Grandon had been a part of Muma's DBA program's history, and he knew that it had a good track record when it came to evolving with the needs of students and the business world. When considering pursuing a DBA in 2024, individuals would weigh various factors to select the best DBA program to suit their needs. When prospective students selected a university, they could choose a DBA program based on their needs, such as location and professional and academic goals. For several reasons, USF distinguished itself among the competitive terrain of DBA programs in Florida at the time as a top-tier selection. USF's DBA program had instructors who had themselves completed the DBA program. Professors in the DBA program had extensive

professional and executive backgrounds that they could bring to a student's knowledge and skills. The program had experienced practitioners who brought knowledge and expertise to the classroom. With educators from diverse backgrounds in academia and industry, USF faculty members offered students invaluable insights and mentorship throughout their DBA journey. USF's DBA approach was interdisciplinary, integrating theory and practice, and allowing students to develop a comprehensive understanding of key business concepts while refining their critical thinking and problem-solving capabilities.

DBA students had access to extensive research and resources and participated in scholarly inquiry. Regarding his perception of the impact of increased competition among universities in Florida offering similar doctoral programs on student retention rates and what USF did better, Grandon responded,

“First, we draw from areas like Miami and West Palm Beach, where competition does not impact retention rates. What impacts our ability to recruit is the highest quality of students. When we first launched, we had a significant advantage: We were the DBA program located in the far southern part of the state, near Tampa Bay. Here, at the 10-year point, we are drawing almost entirely from the greater Tampa Bay area except for our online program, which draws from the country and the world” (Gill, 2024).

Amidst this dual demographic influx, the program remained a guiding principle through faculty collaborations and individual pursuits. Whether students collaborated with faculty on research projects or conducted independent inquiries aligned with their interests, they benefited from a supportive environment that encouraged creativity and exploration. The DBA program encouraged individuals to step out of their comfort zone and enabled them to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world business challenges. USF also allowed their DBAs to have interactive classroom discussions with seasoned professionals such as Matt Mullarkey, DBA program director, who offered students the opportunity to connect with their peers and faculty, enriching their educational experience.

Expanding on USF's commitment to interactive learning experiences, Grandon also hoped that his upcoming retirement would not significantly impact the program. After retirement, Grandon (2024) emphasized that he would be available to answer questions for as long as there were questions to be asked. Grandon would ensure the smooth transition of succession planning and sustainable leadership for the DBA program following his retirement. Grandon stated, “At the discretion of the dean now, will the current interim dean take the position currently, or will they hire a new dean? Once the dean is hired, it will become clearer who will follow me”.

Current Challenges

As the search for the new dean developed, Grandon reflected on ‘the current challenges the DBA program is facing and the need for adaptation and the replacement of outdated practices.’ The transition point from adaptation to replacement of outdated practices raised concerns for Grandon, particularly regarding the effectiveness of these changes and their impact on USF's DBA students' academic experiences and outcomes. Key issues affecting Grandon included retention, economics, retirement, and succession.

Retention

Grandon needed to determine what factors influenced retention in the DBA program at USF, specifically in terms of student retention. So far, Grandon knew that one student had left because he had to complete a multi-million-dollar deal. Another individual stated that he could not obtain his visa in time, and then he abruptly left the program and faculty without providing a reason for his departure. In Exhibit 8, there are additional factors that Grandon could explore, which may contribute to DBA student retention.

Therefore, his priority was to influence retention positively in the DBA program. He recognized this challenge; he had examined other initiatives aimed at fostering collaborative engagement among faculty and students. Grandon capitalized on support from professional organizations and government agencies, as well as local partnerships, such as *Tampa General Hospital (TGH)*, to enhance learning experiences. Additionally, he prioritized faculty support by mentoring students and helping guide them through the rigors of coursework. Grandon adopted a ‘work from home’ mentality, accommodating the diverse needs of students, and offered an online DBA program.

- External stakeholders: Professional organizations and government agencies
- Faculty support: Mentorship
- Additional perspectives: ‘Work from home’ mentality

Professional organizations relevant to business administration had provided DBA students with networking opportunities, such as the monthly DBA social, which Grandon administered. The DBA social provided an atmosphere that allowed current DBA students to network with previous alumni. The DBA social created an additional resource for individuals going through the program. Entities at the local, state, or federal level could have a partnership with the university for research opportunities. DBA students had access to faculty members who were already successful in their work. Students' knowledge and skills from their previous or current work environment could be influential when conducting research within the program.

USF's DBA Alumni network consisted of former students who had graduated from the program, worked in various industries, or had become instructors in the same program. The DBA faculty provided support, networking opportunities, and mentorship to current students. A mentorship program was created to provide faculty support from someone knowledgeable in business fields, such as those of the students. Faculty in the DBA program were leaders and professionals in the business community who had also served as adjunct faculty and advisors to the program, providing students with additional support.

Additional support was provided regarding implementing a ‘work from home’ mentality for DBA students, mostly revolving around the individual's flexibility and adaptability to the program. The program was designed to be completed while the individual worked in their career. The curriculum was designed to foster students' autonomy without being overly controlled by their professors. It involved self-governance, adopted a ‘work from home’ approach, and recognized the evolving dynamics of contemporary work environments. DBA students with essential skills must have demonstrated sufficient discipline in integrating their academic studies with remote work opportunities, enabling them to balance their work and personal lives.

Furthermore, Grandon recognized that the program needed to help students balance real-world demands with academic rigor, thereby strengthening their resilience and adaptability in the business environment. Grandon knew the DBA program had to adapt to modern work practices and accommodate a growing cohort of students to maintain its efficiency and relevance. Grandon had insights into the potential benefits and drawbacks of implementing peer support within the DBA program; he stated, “General comments, there is plenty of evidence that individuals learn effectively when communicating with their peers, so of course, we encourage peer-to-peer interaction throughout the program. Nevertheless, placing the retention burden on the other cohort members might be unfair. It seems like that should be our job”. He acknowledged the need for equitable responsibility allocation within the cohort and the program, and prioritized operational scalability that tailored student support.

Economic

Under Grandon's leadership, the program recognized the need to scale its operations while continuing to support students individually. As the program grew to meet the needs of a multicultural student body, strategic planning and resource allocation became preminent. Grandon envisioned balancing the scale with individualized attention and acknowledged that the program's pivot point was its ability to effectively serve many students while maintaining high standards of academic excellence.

- Faculty salaries: Compensation for administrators and professors
- Operational: Costs associated with facilities
- Technology: Software and IT support for research purposes
- Marketing: Recruitment and expenditure on advertising

Faculty salaries were among the highest in the Muma School of Business compared to other schools throughout USF (Gill, 2024). A significant portion of the DBA program budget was allocated to pay professors and administrators. Providing sufficient compensation to professors and administrators was crucial for attracting top-tier academic talent, ensuring high-quality learning, and delivering adequate support. Moreover, fair and equitable compensation for professors identified their role in the program's education and student support, contributing to the overall sustainability of the DBA program. Operational costs were essential in the DBA program budget because they covered expenses for facilities and maintenance of educational environments, such as classrooms, as well as expenses related to DBA offices.

The DBA program's infrastructure ran smoothly when overhead expenses related to the building and utilities were met. Grandon declared that the program allocated sufficient resources to cover operational costs, creating a supportive academic environment conducive to education and research. The program needed to efficiently manage operational costs to maximize resource allocation and secure the long-term sustainability and success of the DBA program. When securing long-term sustainability, Grandon invested in technology, recognizing that having software and IT support tailored to research purposes was essential. Software applications facilitated data analysis, enabling students and professors to conduct rigorous research and contribute to knowledge development in their respective fields. IT support was utilized for research purposes, enhancing the reliability and accessibility of digital resources. Grandon knew

that by allocating resources to technology, the DBA program could stay modernized with technological advancements and equip students with digital tools, which ensured research excellence. Grandon ensured research excellence with marketing strategies and recruiting when he promoted USF's DBA program.

The DBA program employed various initiatives to attract prospective students, including the DBA website and LinkedIn advertising (LinkedIn. 2024). Exhibit 9 outlines the DBA's LinkedIn page and how it marketed the program's focus on industry findings and decision-making through rigorous research. Marketing expenses on advertising and branding helped raise awareness about the program and what it entailed for the individual. It was held annually at the USF campus in Tampa through targeted outreach events, such as the AMP conference, where academia and practice could meet (The AMP Conference, 2024). The AMP conference offered a scope of informative sessions. Exhibit 10 introduces AMP's platform, which was posted on AMP's website and offered individual collaboration between academics and business professionals. By investing in marketing, the DBA program effectively demonstrated its value proposition, differentiated itself from competitors, and attracted skilled students, thereby contributing to its long-term success.

Retirement and succession

Grandon's retirement in two years would undoubtedly mark a significant transition for the DBA program, affecting its leadership and operational processes. Grandon served as the figurehead at USF; his expertise in program management, academic rigor, and student support had been his central motivation for the program's success over the past ten years. Grandon's program growth and mentorship management style cultivated an educational culture characterized by effective communication and collaboration, positively impacting both faculty and students. Therefore, his retirement would necessitate careful succession strategies to ensure continuity and steadiness for the DBA program.

- Institutional knowledge: Program management in academic affairs
- Strategic direction: Continuing leadership of the program's vision
- Culture: Changes in the program's culture, collaboration, and conformity to academic criteria

Grandon understood the importance of ensuring that his departure did not result in a loss of knowledge of administrative duties and student support systems, such as mentorship. Grandon's retirement posed a challenge in academic affairs because he had accumulated his years of experience and understanding of the program's operational and curriculum development processes. Grandon's experience involved the program's compliance requirements and university protocols, including administering courses on Canvas and adhering to best practices outlined in institutional guidelines.

Moreover, the program could face challenges in adapting to cultural shifts and business norms that Grandon had established to meet academic criteria. It had become imperative for the program to proactively address concerns about attrition by reinforcing its commitment to

academics, collaboration, and community-belonging among students and faculty. By doing so, the program implemented quality assurance and continuous innovation.

Through his analysis and interpretation of the data, Grandon attempted to identify actionable insights to enhance student retention and strengthen the program's resilience in the face of unknown external pressures. Grandon acknowledged the data and the situation regarding the decrease in student retention among the DBA students; he carefully weighed five distinct options, each with its advantages and disadvantages, to formulate a comprehensive approach to improve student retention and continue the program's success.

The Decision

Grandon's assessment of the current retention data revealed decreased attrition rates among students in later cohorts, with the online cohorts having experienced a significant drop-off. This realization of the online cohort's retention challenge presented unique obstacles due to the lack of face-to-face interaction. Regarding Grandon's anticipation of the decision-making process of retention strategies and how it would impact the future growth and success of the DBA program, he said, "It all depended on how effective they were, and if the strategies he would employ were not effective then it could threaten the sustainability of the program and even its survival if they intend to enhance retention. Then our program would continue to hold the position of being one of the most respected and innovative DBA programs in the country".

Grandon acknowledged the critical role played by faculty members like Michele Walpole and Lauren Baumgartner, Assistant Directors of the DBA program at USF, in monitoring student morale; he emphasized the importance of proactive measures to identify and support at-risk students. According to Walpole (2024), her role was to manage all the logistics of running the program, including the university process and individual student support. She provided a prestigious concierge service. Regarding what USF did better versus another DBA program, Michele stated, "We pay our DBA committee, so they are on the student's schedule. DBA programs in the country started with 11 and have now grown to over 40, with several located in Florida. In the first cohort, we initially aimed for 16 graduates but ended up with 26, with only two not completing the program. The next cohort was 35 people, and all graduated," as the program's focus was to increase the online cohort retention rates and secure its future success and long-term survival.

When Grandon examined the data, he observed a significant amount of attrition among students in later cohorts, with attrition in the new online cohorts being particularly pronounced. As of then, his most important concern for retention was the online program, as he observed a significantly higher drop-off rate among these smaller cohorts. Grandon recognized the challenges inherent in understanding the exact reasons behind student attrition, and utilized a data-driven approach to comprehend student outcomes better. He examined the quantitative data sources he had pulled from each student in the cohorts of 2015 to 2024, attempting to shed light on the underlying factors contributing to student dropout. Exhibit 11 displays the quantitative data Grandon compiled, which revealed the decline in attrition of the new online cohort. Grandon explored various choices and implemented five strategic options tailored to the program's progression needs and challenges. He thought to himself...

“First, the question is more scientific than the process we are trying to deal with. Tolstoy’s *Karenina* begins with all happy families being the same and all miserable families being *miserable in their own way*. The same is true with retention. Many of our participants appear to be very happy with the program and the consequences of receiving their DBA. The students who do not finish the program all seem to have different reasons for not completing it, and we are never sure whether these reasons reflect the truth or are simply an attempt to avoid hurting our feelings” (Gill, 2024).

Short-term versus long-term considerations

When Grandon considered these options, he weighed short-term gains against long-term consequences. Grandon was aware of specific strategies, such as Option 1, which aimed to increase selectivity and add a prestige component to the program. However, it went against the DBA program’s broader mission of regional service. An example of increased selectivity would be the incorporation of the GMAT or GRE for more stringent admission requirements to the program. In contrast, approaches like Option 3, which identified struggling individuals within cohort dynamics, could offer a short-term intervention but be too obtrusive. Option 4 focused on initiative feedback through semester-end evaluations and could provide insights in the short term. However, concerns were raised about privacy infringement, which could weaken its original effectiveness over time. Option 5 involved gathering additional data, which could be proactive in the short term; however, in the long term, it could fail to reveal patterns and risked plateauing over time. Grandon balanced these short-term gains with long-term outcomes because he recognized the importance of finding the most effective course of action for the sustainability of the DBA program.

Options being considered

Grandon explored various options for enhancing the DBA program, each with its unique advantages and disadvantages. Balancing immediate gains with the program's long-term objectives was crucial in determining the best approach.

Option 1

The DBA program could be significantly more selective in the admissions process, with the hope of screening out those individuals who might not complete or have a significant risk of non-completion.

Advantage:

It could enhance the perceived selectivity and its associated prestige.

Disadvantage:

The program needed to identify patterns among those who had yet to complete it on time and could not identify those who were least likely to do so. The program recognized that the university's mission was not purely to serve the needs of the region’s elite but rather to serve the needs of the region as a whole.

Option 2

The DBA program could employ more formalized tracking methods during each participant's time in the program, emphasizing the gathering of feedback on each student's progress from their assigned mentors.

Advantage:

Participants could be more open with their mentors than with the programmed staff and could alert the faculty earlier to emerging problems.

Disadvantage:

Only some participants chose to have a mentor, and not all the mentors, or not all the participants, would necessarily like it if the mentor were also a spy.

Option 3

The DBA program could take an active role in identifying each cohort's evolving informal group structure and use that as a tool to identify individuals who were struggling or facing external circumstances that could interfere with their progress.

Advantage:

Most students who had dropped out of the program had initially needed to catch up. If the faculty had caught this earlier, they might have been able to intervene before the problem became too severe to solve.

Disadvantage:

The program's attempts to infiltrate the inner workings of the DBA cohort could easily be considered intrusive and worsen the problem.

Option 4

The DBA program could organize focus groups to get feedback on the program and from students at the end of each semester.

Advantage:

The regular process of student evaluations provided faculty with little helpful information about how the cohort was doing, and it was anonymous, so it provided no information at the individual level. We could detect issues sooner if we were more proactive in gathering information on everyone.

Disadvantage:

As with many other options, this could have been viewed as infringing on each student's privacy or forcing them to disclose confidential information. Moreover, many of the participants who had dropped out had done so for unknown reasons that could not necessarily be predicted when they occurred, such as severe illness or job transfer.

Option 5

The DBA program could continue to monitor a student’s situation and gather additional information that faculty were not compiling, such as assessing the circumstances that precipitated each participant's withdrawal.

Advantage:

The existing data showed no clear pattern, and the disruption caused by COVID-19 would have likely obscured any meaningful findings.

Disadvantage:

Grandon said to himself, “This option was indistinguishable from doing nothing.”

Final thoughts

Under Grandon’s leadership, the DBA program at USF had experienced significant progression and growth over the past decade. Despite facing challenges such as retention, economics, and Grandon’s retirement and succession, the program displayed adaptability and perseverance in the face of these hurdles. Grandon’s commitment to leveraging empirical evidence and finding feasible solutions had propelled the program forward, allowing it to maintain its reputation as one of the most respected DBA programs in the country.

Ten years later, the DBA program’s brand stood for excellence and a testament to transformative leadership, evidence-based decision-making, and an unwavering commitment to student success. USF’s DBA program prioritized retention strategies, closed a gap in personalized advising, and enhanced peer support; the program not only sustained its academic excellence but also established a reputation for cultivating a community of scholars and practitioners. Furthermore, by adopting online education and adapting to changing student preferences, the program has attracted a diverse cohort of students in-state, across the country, and globally.

A glance into the future revealed that the DBA program had remained composed for long-term growth, guided by the principles of academic rigor, creativity, and student-centeredness instilled by Grandon. As it entered its next chapter, the program was prepared to address new challenges and uphold its position as one of the leaders in doctoral education. According to Mullarkey (2024), the program had consistently maintained its pace and moved forward over time. In his opinion, three things had changed compared to ten years ago when the program started:

1. The courses had evolved.
2. The program focused on the specified research methods required for DBA dissertations and the alignment of the dissertation committee faculty with the nature of DBA research dissertations.
3. Due to the growth of other programs, the DBA program transitioned from a national focus to a regional focus on the East Coast.

With a rich academic tradition of faculty and a diverse student body, the DBA program at USF was based on data-driven decision-making and individualized student support. The program’s foundation would continue to shape the future of business and practice for generations.

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Biography



Danielle Bartlett is pursuing her Doctor of Business Administration degree at the *University of South Florida* (USF), with an anticipated graduation in the class of 2026. Her academic journey began with a Bachelor's degree in Interdisciplinary Social Sciences (ISS), and she obtained a *Master of Business Administration* (MBA) from USF. Danielle Bartlett strives to make a significant contribution to the *Muma College of Business* through her doctoral studies.

Exhibit 1: T.G. Gill's Academic Biography and Courses He Teaches

Grandon Gill is a professor in the School of Information Systems and Management and the academic director of the Doctor of Business Administration program. Within the DBA, he teaches various courses, including Informing Science, a second-year publication course, and two research presentation courses in which candidates present their research. At the master's level, he teaches capstone courses in the Online and Executive MBA programs, as well as Advanced Systems Analysis and Design in the MS-BAIS program. He received USF's Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching Award in 2007 and 2013.

Gill's research focus is the transdisciplinary field known as informing science, which aims to synthesize research on informing from various disciplines. He is also passionate about using technology as a teaching tool and has studied distance learning, strategy and practice, alternative course designs, and tools for course development and delivery. His research in these areas has been published in many journals, including *Informing Science*, *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, the *Journal of Information Systems Education*, *eLearn*, and the *Journal of IT Education*. He has also published multiple times in the *MIS Quarterly*, the leading journal in the discipline. He has received several case research grants, including two from the National Science Foundation (\$170,000 and \$300,000), a DoD grant (\$58,000), and a core Fulbright Award. He received the inaugural Zbigniew Gackowski Award for his lifetime contribution to informing science in 2014, a USF Outstanding Faculty award in 2016, and the Ralph Glanville Memorial Award for Excellence in Case Method and Cybersecurity in 2018 (Muma College of Business, 2024a). His contributions to case writing and research were also the focus of a special issue of the *Journal of Management Decision* in 2014.

Gill earned a DBA and an MBA from Harvard Business School, and a bachelor's degree from Harvard College. He joined USF in 2001 from Florida Atlantic University. Before joining academia, he worked as a consultant and president of a small agricultural chemicals firm and served as a nuclear-trained submarine officer in the U.S. Navy.

TEACHING

- ISM 7930 – Informing Science
- ISM 7931 – DBA Publication Course
- GEB 6898 – Analytics and Risk Management
- ISM 6124 – Advanced Systems Analysis and Design
- MAN 6930 – Business Problem Solving
- GEB 7939 – Executive Issues in Business

RECENT RESEARCH

- Gill, T.G., Mullarkey, M. & Satterfield, R. (2018). "Informing on a Rugged Landscape: How Complexity Drives our Preferred Information Sources," *Informing Science*, 21, 1–18.
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- Gill, T.G., (2015). "Concepts and Systems. & Informing Science, Volume 2: Design and Research," *Informing Science Press*, Volume 1
- Gill, T.G., (2015). "Concepts and Systems," Santa Rosa, CA: *Informing Science Press*.

SERVICE

- Editor-in-chief, the Muma Business Review, and the Muma Case Review
- Inaugural president, Informing Science Institute, a 20-year-old research organization that became a non-profit in 2019.
- Editor in chief, *Informing Science: The International Journal of an Emerging Transdisciplinary*
- Editor, *Journal of IT Education*.
- Faculty coach, CA International Case Competition, where USF's 2011 team placed 2nd in the world.

Source: Muma College of Business DBA website

Exhibit 2: Comparing DBA and Ph.D. Programs

Issue	DBA/Executive Doctorate	Ph.D.
Want a career as a full-time tenured academic and researcher	Unlikely to fit	Possible fit—good fit when from a top research school
Want to work while getting the degree	Good fit	Unlikely to fit
Want to develop research skills slanted towards practice	Good fit	Weak fit
Want to develop research skills slanted towards publication	Possible fit—depends on the type of publication	Good fit
Want to learn more about operating a business	Weak fit	Terrible fit
Want a high probability of successful completion in predictable time	Good fit	Weak fit
Uncomfortable with math and statistics	Possible fit—depends on program	Weak fit
Worried about the money	Weak fit	Good short term fit, Terrible long term fit (from ROI perspective)

Source: Gill, T.G. (2014a). Launching the DBA program at USF. *USF Case Study*.

Exhibit 3: Common DBA and Ph.D. Program Characteristics

- Designed for working professionals
- Require substantial work experience (10-15 years)
- Students take classes as a cohort (10-30 students)
- Series of short residencies (2-3 days, on weekends)
- Expect 10-20 hours outside work per week
- Dissertation requirement more flexible than Ph.D.
- Substantial financial commitment (\$75,000-\$150,000 program total)
- Not intended to prepare students for tenure track positions

Source: Gill, T.G. (2014a). Launching the DBA program at USF. *USF Case Study*.

Exhibit 4: Current U.S. Competition: Georgia State, Oklahoma State, and Kennesaw State's DBA Curriculum

Georgia State Curriculum

Semester 1

3 courses | 9 hours

[DBA 9000 – Leadership To Create Human Value \(3 hours\)](#)

[DBA 9020 – Philosophy and Practice of Engaged Scholarship \(3 hours\)](#)

[DBA 9050 – Qualitative Research I \(3 hours\)](#)

Semester 2

3 courses | 9 hours

[DBA 9070 – Qualitative Research II \(3 hours\)](#)

[DBA 9080 – Quantitative Research I \(3 hours\)](#)

[DBA 9140 – Laboratory for Business Driven Research \(3 hours\)](#)

Semester 3

3 courses | 9 hours

[DBA 9030 – Theory and Practice of Managing Organizations \(3 hours\)](#)

[DBA 9100 – Quantitative Research II \(3 hours\)](#)

[DBA 9140 – Laboratory for Business Driven Research \(3 hours\)](#)

Semester 4

3 courses | 9 hours

[DBA 9041 – Theory and Practice of Digital Transformation \(3 hours\)](#)

[DBA 9061 – Business Topics and Theory \(3 hours\)](#)

[DBA 9170 – Dissertation Lab \(3 hours\)](#)

Semester 5

3 courses | 9 hours

[DBA 9110 – Influences and Limitations on Executive Decision-Making \(3 hours\)](#)

[DBA 9170 – Dissertation Lab \(3 hours\)](#)

[DBA 9170 – Dissertation Lab \(3 hours\)](#)

Semester 6

3 courses | 9 hours

[DBA 9120 – Evidence-Based Management \(3 hours\)](#)

[DBA 9150 – Creating and Disseminating Research Knowledge \(3 hours\)](#)

[DBA 9170 – Dissertation Lab \(3 hours\)](#)

Oklahoma State Curriculum

Total Hours: 60

Code

Title

Core Courses

[MGMT 6343](#)

Contemporary Research in Management I

[MGMT 6353](#)

Advanced Methods in Management Research

[BADM 6913](#)

Mixed Methods in Management Research

[BADM 6513](#)

Org Science I: Micro Issues in Business

[BADM 6523](#)

Org Science II: Macro Issues in Business

[MKTG 6100](#)

Advanced Seminar in Marketing

[EEE 6343](#)

Entrepreneurship Processes

[FIN 6660](#)

Seminar in Finance

[MSIS 6300](#)

Contemporary Topics in MSIS Research

[BADM 6713](#)

Theory Building and Scientific Research in Business

[BADM 6533](#)

Creativity, Innovation and Leadership

Hours Subtotal

Electives

Any doctoral level or equivalent course that aligns with a student's individual area of interest. Elective courses must be approved by an advisory board for a minimum of 9 hours.

Hours Subtotal

Thesis

[BADM 6723](#)

Dissertation Design

15 hours from:

[BADM 6000](#)

Research and Thesis

Hours Subtotal

Total Hours

Course List

Kennesaw State Curriculum

Curriculum and Residency Structure for Entering Cohorts

- **Year One Fall (9 credit hours)***
 - Introduction to Research (3 credit hours)
 - Research Methods and Basic Data Analysis (3 credit hours)
 - Discipline Seminar Course (3 credit hours)

* Students attend a one-day orientation at the start of the semester

- **Year One Spring (9 credit hours)**
 - Analysis of Variance Designs (3 credit hours)
 - Qualitative Research Methods (3 credit hours)
 - Discipline Seminar Course (3 credit hours)

- **Year Two Fall (9 credit hours)**
 - Regression Analysis (3 credit hours)
 - Doctoral Directed Study (3 credit hours)
 - Discipline Seminar Course (3 credit hours)

- **Year Two Spring (9 credit hours) ***
 - Advanced Business Research Analysis (3 credit hours)
 - Dissertation Development in Business Administration (3 credit hours)
 - Discipline Seminar Course (3 credit hours)

* Students take the Qualifying Exam this semester. After successful completion, students can defend their dissertation proposals.

- **Year Three Fall (6 credit hours)**
 - Dissertation Research (6 credit hours)

- **Year Three Spring (6 credit hours)**
 - Dissertation Research (6 credit hours)

- **Years Four and Five (only if needed)**

Additional credits are required if students still need to finish their program of study in year three.

Source: Georgia State, Oklahoma State, and Kennesaw State's Websites.

Exhibit 5: Florida Map Outline of the Locations of Nearby University Competitors To USF



- **The map includes:**

- (A) University of Florida's Warrington College of Business
- (B) Florida International University's FIU Business
- (C) Nova Southeastern University's Huizenga College of Business and Entrepreneurship
- (D) St. Thomas University's Gus Machado School of Business
- (E) Lynn University's College of Business and Management
- (F) Florida Institute of Technology's Nathan M. Bisk College of Business.

Source: Case writer slide derived from MapQuest (see MapQuest, 2024).

Exhibit 6: USF's DBA Program: Outline, Structure, and Features

- Expected program duration: 3 years
- Key admissions requirements:
 - Master's degree (requirement may be waived for exceptional professional experience)
 - GPA of 3.0 or above
 - At least 12 years of professional work experience, at least 5 of which must be at a senior managerial, senior technical, or executive level
- Timing: A new cohort launches every January, with rolling applications and admission throughout the year
- Required on-campus Sessions: one weekend per month, January-May, and August-December
- Program cost: \$30,000/year (\$90,000 total) plus \$2500 for initial research workshop
- Degree awarded: Doctor of Business Administration

KEY FEATURES OF OUR PROGRAM

- Multi-disciplinary course offerings include both research methods and areas of strategic focus for the USF Muma College of Business
- Publication courses provide students with structured opportunities to publish different types of research
- Topics for "issues courses" later in the program are selected by students from a list of course proposals
- Students may propose issues courses and even design and co-teach them under faculty direction
- Dissertation requirements are rigorous but also flexible; they may be fulfilled with a traditional thesis, book, major research project, or a portfolio of research-driven activities
- Tuition of \$30,000 per year for three years includes:
 - Meals, required books, and course materials.
 - A \$6,000 budget for approved student research and travel expenses
 - A \$2,000 budget during the final year for research expenses, such as transcription and editing

ALL TRACKS

- Students will complete the three-year program in a cohort with other executives.
- Each semester is divided into two quarters, with a one-month break between semesters.

REGULAR TRACK

- Classes are scheduled for two consecutive days, one weekend each month for six five-month semesters.
- Online activities heavily supplement face-to-face classes between face-to-face sessions.
- The weekend format allows participants to continue with their careers while they master a range of applied research skills.

RESIDENTIAL TRACK

- They are designed for international students attending through an F1 visa and students requiring a fully face-to-face experience.
- Students attend monthly weekend classes with executives on the regular track.

- Between residency sessions, students attend two-night sessions each week facilitated by co-instructors
- Residential track students complete the same assignments and must meet all the requirements as regular track students.

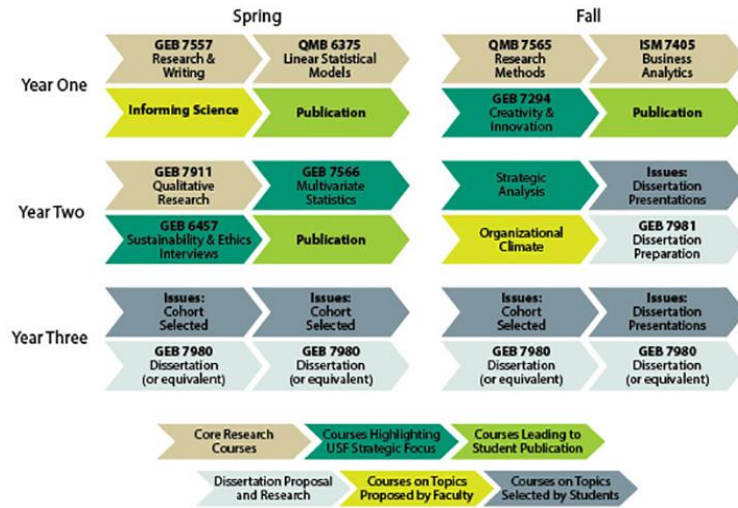
ONLINE PROGRAM

- They are designed for students who cannot attend monthly regular class sessions.
- It has the exact requirements, curriculum, and faculty as the regular program.
- Meets synchronously every other Saturday
- Follows a trimester schedule, with classes meeting spring, summer, and fall

Source: Muma College of Business DBA website

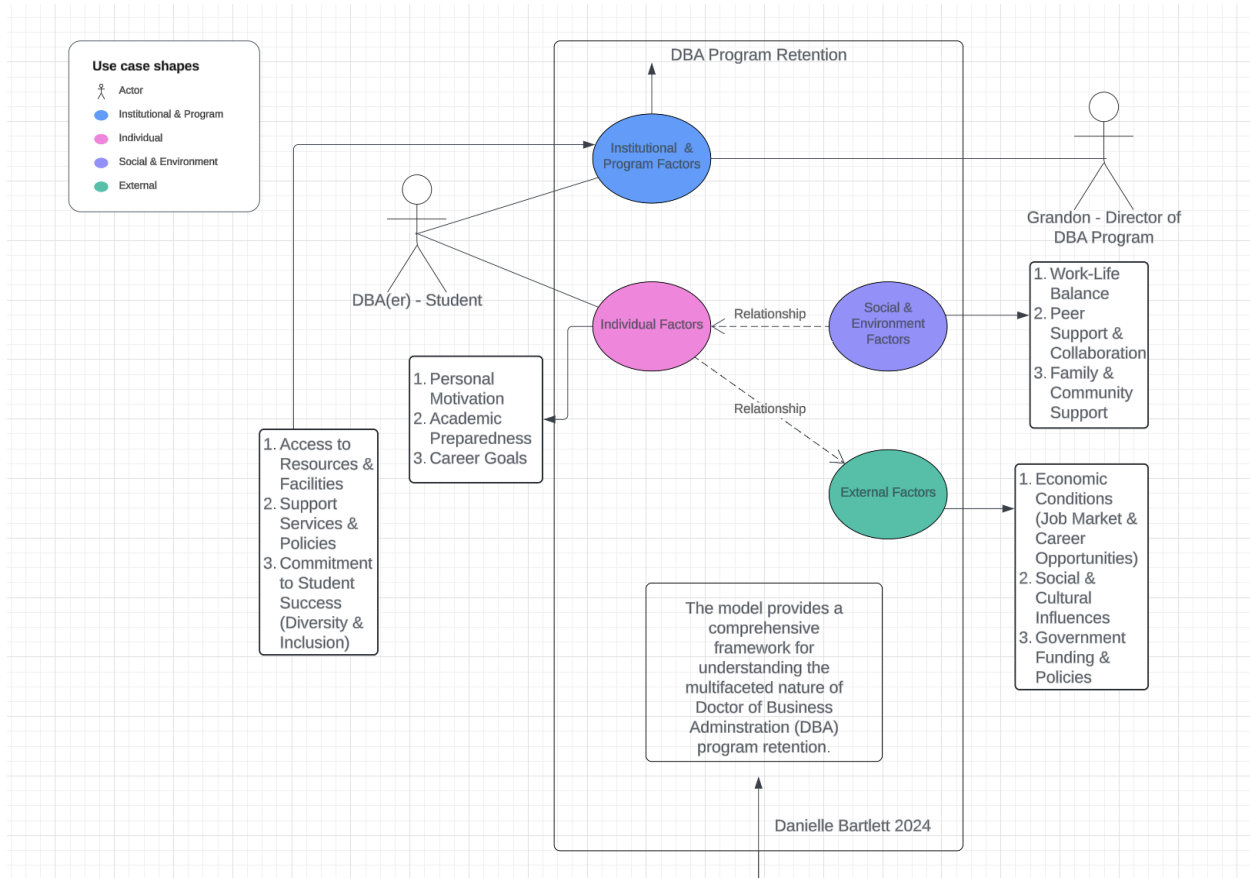
Exhibit 7: USF's DBA Curriculum: In-Person Program

CALENDAR - IN-PERSON PROGRAM



Source: Muma College of Business DBA website

Exhibit 8: Conceptual Model Providing a Comprehensive Framework for Understanding the Multifaceted Nature of a DBA Program Additional Retention Factors (Maybe)



Source: Case writer slide derived from Lucidchart (see Lucidchart, 2024).

Exhibit 9: DBA's LinkedIn Marketing Page



About

The Doctor of Business Administration program offered by the USF Muma College of Business provides graduates with the skills to conduct rigorous research and apply the findings to real-world decision-making in industry and government. The program fosters intellectual growth as students work closely with faculty in seminars, research projects, and other assignments that develop their research skills and ability to communicate their findings to a broad audience, including both practitioners and researchers. It also offers students the opportunity to develop a portfolio of skills, which, combined with the extensive experience they bring to the program, uniquely qualifies them to serve in clinical faculty positions. The curriculum is designed to build upon the breadth of business understanding that students have previously achieved as successful executives. This is achieved by offering substantive coverage of various qualitative and quantitative research techniques and allowing students to focus more intensely on personal areas of interest during their dissertations. The degree conferred is a Doctor of Business Administration, a terminal degree so named to differentiate it from the Ph.D. degree that specifically focuses on preparing students for an academic research career within a specific discipline.

Source: LinkedIn website

Exhibit 10: The AMP Conference: Marketing Platform for Collaboration Between Academics and Business Professionals

Hosted by USF Muma College of Business and Tampa Bay Chamber partners, AMP welcomes scholars seeking to bridge the gap between business research and business practices. Engage with cutting-edge researchers looking to solve business problems and provide meaningful data and analytics to enhance business operations or outcomes. Amplify your company and career!

Entrepreneurs, innovators, creatives, business owners, leaders, and community members can attend the 2024 AMP Conference in person at the UFS Muma College of Business. AMP will bring business minds and academics together to discuss exciting and impactful research and translate it into actionable practice.

2024 Partners



Source: AMP website

Exhibit 11: USF's DBA 2015 – 2024 Cohort Data: Decline in Attrition of New Online Cohort

Cohort Year When Students Started DBA Program	How Many Students Started Program in Their Cohort	Students Who Completed Program On Time	Students Who Finished Late of Completing Program	Students Still in Progress of Completing Program	Students Who Didn't Complete Program	% Completed On Time	% DBA Program Lost
2015	26	20	2		4	77%	15%
2016	37	33	1		3	89%	8%
2017	27	21	1	1	4	78%	15%
2018	30	22	1	3	4	73%	13%
2019	20	17	1	2	0	85%	0%
2020	27	18	2	1	6	67%	22%
2021	25	18	1	1	5	72%	20%
2022	18			17	1	NA	6%
Summer 22' Online Cohort	14			11	3	NA	21%
2023	12			12	0	NA	0%
Summer 23' Online Cohort	10			7	3	NA	30%
2024	23			22	1	NA	4%

Explanation of Data

- COVID-19 occurred during 2018-2023
- The total percentage of the DBA Program Lost was 14%
- The total percentage completed on Time was 78%
- The most significant percentage of the DBA Program loss was in the Summer 23' and 24' Online Cohort.
- *Retention declined due to the disruption caused by COVID-19 and online cohort attrition.*

Source: Case writer slide show