“Students are our products, not our customers.”

Dr. Rajiv Grover, Dean of the University of Memphis Fogelman College of Business and Economics ~ p 26
Financial Aid

Dean Rajiv Grover positions the University of Memphis business school to compete for students, while preparing his students to compete for jobs.

By John Branston
Photography by Larry Kuzniewski

Take note, all you mid-life career changers and college students and graduates looking for jobs. You never know where or when you will find your calling.

Dr. Rajiv Grover was 46 years old when he went to work for a dot-com company called Arzoo in Silicon Valley in 1999. Arzoo, which means “desire” in Hindi, folded in 2001, but the experience was life-changing for Grover, now dean of the Fogelman College of Business and Economics at the University of Memphis.

“I have been in business myself, and that makes a huge difference,” Grover said in an interview at his office in December. “The turning point of my life has been that two-year experience. Prior to that I was a nerd. I was a chaired professor. All I cared about was research, research, research. Only after Silicon Valley did I realize the importance of having these partnerships with businesses. Businesses are moving at lightning speed. Universities are moving really slow. How can we come to a sweet spot?”

Grover’s previous stops in academia include Penn State, Pitt, Georgia, Stanford, Duke, and Johns Hopkins. His office is on Innovation Drive in a building named in honor of Morris Fogelman by his sons, Avron and Robert, who made their fortunes in real estate and development. Grover’s bookshelves are stocked with marketing tomes mixed with popular fare on “ideas having sex” and “the strength of weak ties” that promote cultural and intellectual diversity. The University of Memphis has 547 students who are nonresident aliens, including 148 from India.
Grover’s manner is pleasantly unaffected, and he was eager to talk for more than two hours about his background in India, his vision for the university as it celebrates its 100th anniversary, the value of a college education in a tough job market, and the issue that dominated the local news all that week — the search for a new football coach and athletic director following the team’s disastrous 2-10 season.

I wondered how the focus on football looks to a marketing specialist with a business perspective and an international pedigree.

“I think it’s a damn good business proposition,” he said without hedge or hesitation. “And it’s not just from a dollar perspective. It’s all the other emotional energy that gets monetized by different people in different ways. It is so much part of college life in American that I shudder to think of having universities without athletics.”

The athletic department isn’t the only one that faces some tough opponents. The Fogelman College of Business and Economics, which includes 100 faculty members teaching 2,435 undergraduate majors and 519 students in the MBA program, competes with private schools such as Rhodes and Vanderbilt and public universities like Ole Miss and Tennessee with bigger endowments and traditionally higher ratings. Ten years ago, the business college was in danger of losing its accreditation.
In 2007, Grover was hired as an outsider to bolster the college's reputation and define its niche in a city that fancies itself the cradle of business entrepreneurs but also has one of the poorest urban populations in the United States. His innovations include “holistic” education of students and a “customer-driven MBA program.” If those terms suggest unconventional ways of doing things, that was exactly the point.

“They’ve been a lot of change, the vast majority of it for the better,” said Robert R. Taylor, an associate professor of management who has been at the college since 1983 and worked under several deans. Taylor said Grover has pushed students and faculty to be more involved in the community and vice versa.

“He’s probably the best we have at doing that,” Taylor said.

Holistic education, once the domain of Career Services, means encouraging undergraduate students to take non credit sessions in making speeches, preparing for interviews, business etiquette, personal wellness, dressing for success, and even acting in plays to overcome inhibitions.

To a visitor, business majors look like any other students — partial to jeans, pullovers, and ball caps. A total of 37 students completed all of the “holistic” sessions this year: Grover wants to bump that to 100. Sessions are taught by managers from Memphis companies, such as Amber Hood at First Tennessee.

“Business schools teach you how to do a job but not get a job,” said Hood, a 2004 University of Memphis graduate. “Networking is so uncomfortable but it is so important in the corporate world.”

Like a coach who wants a team of overachievers who aren’t afraid to bloody their noses, Grover wants business students who will impress employers with their scrappiness as well as their skills. He grew up in a country that, two generations ago, was a nation of serfs. He has not forgotten, and he has a soft spot for students who are taking 12 credit hours and working part-time at Subway. Be proud of that! he tells them. Put it on your resume! Differentiate yourself from the other 100 applicants! Make it part of your value proposition! When his daughter comes home from the University of Southern California for Christmas break, he urges her
Grover’s pride and joy is the customer-driven MBA program, where the tuitions of 20 highly qualified students are paid by local employers in exchange for 10 hours of work a week during the school year and 40 hours a week in the summer for their future employer. Course content is customized to meet the needs of employers.

"Those are the values we're trying to instill," he said. "It has been a difficult task, for sure. Primarily because [the business school] was always run as a social organization, with positions being made on friendship ties and community ties. If I'm given a chance, this place is going to be nothing like what it was five years ago and nothing like what it is now. My students are going to be so confident and so pleasant to work with because they will roll up their sleeves and do a yeoman's task as compared to some person who might have gone to Yale and thinks that they cannot do this thing ever."

It isn't clear how much that vision is paying off. The benefactors are clearly happy. Avron Fogelman said fundraising has increased and Grover "is doing everything a dean should do, and we are fortunate to have him." The college’s website has a link to dozens of glowing testimonials from local employers and executives. But it doesn’t have a placement office, and Grover concedes that its placement rate "is not very good" for undergraduate business majors.

"For us, it is a little bit more complicated," he said. "We have a lot of students, probably 50 percent, who are already working. It is difficult to figure out how many are full-time undergrads who will seek full-time employment."

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"We have people who could have gotten into Harvard," he said. "We will never be a Harvard. We will never be a top-50 school. But there are programs with which we can compete with Harvard. For a few selected companies, such as Medtronic, AutoZone, Smith & Nephew, and FedEx, our program will be as competitive as any program."

The customer-driven principle applies to all students. Students, he insists, are the college’s products. Its customers are the businesses that will employ them. To those who might find the distinction crass or offensive, he can be dismissive.

"If I treat you as a product, that means you will get good, high-paying jobs. And if I treat you as a customer, that means I make the registration process easier. It means that my faculty is going to quote unquote, treat you with respect. They're not going to be harsh with you. Blah blah blah. Tell me, do you want to be my customer or do you want to be my product?"

Steve Jobs is his hero — "he knew what customer satisfaction was" — and the Silicon Valley start-up that Grover worked for 10 years ago was mentioned in the same breath as Google in those heady days. Grover has two computers on his desk and obviously knows his way in and around them, but you won't find him on Facebook.

"Social networks have a place in a business program," he said. "In our marketing program we are starting a minor in social networking and commerce. This is the way technology is going, and we need to harness that. I am not on Facebook personally, because I don't think that is good for my career. I am in a government job and have to be responsible to taxpayers in terms of what gets said and how it gets said."

In an age in which a library full of information fits in an electronic device in your shirt pocket, Grover sees no point in closed-book tests.

"Absolutely useless," he scoffed. "How many times has a boss given a subordinate an exercise and said, 'I want you to go and develop this plan but I don't want you to open any book or talk to anybody?' So we tell our students the whole world is their resource, now go solve this particular problem."

At the conclusion of our second interview, I couldn’t resist one more foray into the realm of athletics. It will be decades before a business school or any academic department gets as much publicity (or money) in a year as a football or basketball team gets in a month.

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