

LEADING SOM: DEAN PIUS J. EGBELU

Pius J. Egbelu was named dean of the NJIT School of Management (SOM) in July 2011. He has also been appointed a distinguished professor and holder of the Then & Clark Chair.

Egbelu served previously as dean of the National Science Foundation (NSF) Academy and as dean of engineering and Bert Turner Distinguished Professor at Louisiana State University. Prior to his tenure at LSU, he was chair of the Department of Industrial and Manufacturing Systems Engineering at Iowa State University, program director for production systems and operations research at the NSF, assistant professor and associate professor of industrial and manufacturing engineering at Pennsylvania State University, and assistant professor of industrial engineering and operations research at Syracuse University.

Egbelu has been vice chair of the Academic Coalition for Intelligent Manufacturing Systems and a member of the Federal Aviation Administration Advisory Board for Air Traffic Controller Staffing Standards. He has also served on various advisory boards and committees at the NSF, and on the board of the Louisiana Foundation for Excellence in Science, Technology and Education.

The new dean holds a BS in industrial engineering from Louisiana Tech University, and MS and PhD degrees in industrial engineering and operations research from Virginia Tech. He is a Fellow of the Institute of Industrial Engineers and a licensed engineer in the State of Louisiana.

Dean Egbelu recently shared his thoughts about SOM and the school's potential for the future with Jean Llewellyn, NJIT's executive director of strategic communications.

What influences in your life led you to become an engineer, an industrial engineer?

As a boy growing up in Nigeria, I had the opportunity to take trips to manufacturing plants where I saw raw materials become products. Seeing the stages of the production line intrigued me. Fascinated by that general procedure, I saw industrial engineering as my career path – I was partially right.

Given your education and career experience, what brought you to SOM?

I started as an assistant professor at Syracuse University and eventually became dean of engineering at Louisiana State. Along the way, certain things became clear to me. The close linkage between technology and how it can be managed effectively throughout our lives led me to consider management. Combining the operations manager and the industrial engineer is not unusual. Rather, it is a natural choice.

What distinguishes SOM from other management schools?

The opportunity to study business models at SOM is distinguished by an emphasis on the applications of technology. Here, at every turn, technology supplements the core business background common to all management programs. For example, interdisciplinary links with Newark College of Engineering are very strong. NJIT's multidisciplinary student teams drawn from management, science, engineering, and the liberal arts have an important edge over traditional schools of business.

With all the options available at NJIT, why enroll in SOM?

As I've mentioned, the opportunity to work on interdisciplinary teams is unique and very valuable. It's an advantage our neighboring schools do not have. But technology is just one part of it. There is nothing we do in life that does not require and emphasize business concepts. If someone has a vision of being a manager of any kind, SOM is a natural place to start, the place to see the light.



PHOTO: RICKY KHARAWALA

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What trends are most significant in management education today?

In two words – globalization and technology. The 21st-century world is changing rapidly, at an alarming rate. That is why we must have a “living curriculum.” We need a deeper knowledge of other cultures, which makes study abroad very important for undergraduates, not just for our executive MBA students. We must recognize that we are truly living in a global village.

Yet we must also focus on our role in local development, as many management schools are doing across the country. In New Jersey, this means preparing students to contribute to industries cited in the Strategic Job Growth Plan recently issued by Governor Christie’s office. These include pharmaceuticals, the life sciences, finance, manufacturing and health care. The SOM curriculum must be continually updated to meet the 21st-century needs of our students and New Jersey.

How is SOM partnering with business and industry to the benefit of students?

SOM has many industry partners. Their help, especially through our advisory Board of Visitors, ensures that we have a curriculum designed to meet actual business needs. Our students are challenged with problems that come directly from companies – real-life challenges that can be brutally harsh. Equally important are the coveted internships that our industry partners provide.

Is interest in entrepreneurship growing?

Definitely. There’s a great deal of interest in our technological entrepreneurship program, and courses like New Venture Management and New Venture Finance draw students throughout the campus. They are heavily enrolled.

We teach students how to move from concept to commercialization and to develop realistic business plans. There are also opportunities to work hands-on with experienced entrepreneurs at the NJIT Enterprise Development Center – the EDC – the state’s first and largest business incubator. Having the EDC on campus is a significant asset. It’s a real-world entrepreneurial lab. There aren’t many schools that can boast of what we have at the EDC.

What are the most significant areas of faculty research?

In years to come, I think there will be an increasing focus on practical applications for business development and effective management in a broad range of core areas. Among them are health care, alternative energy, the environment, and the many challenges of succeeding in the global marketplace. Intermodal transportation, finance, and my own area of interest, supply chain management, also come to mind.

How important are strong relationships with SOM alumni?

I’ve come to understand that it is especially difficult to build a strong university when you don’t have strong relationships with alumni and corporate friends, because great universities today are products of partnerships – partnerships between the university, government and the private sector represented by alumni and corporations.

Faculty members engage in research that requires resources that universities alone cannot provide. So the government, corporations and alumni become sources of support. You also need support to hire faculty. The university can only pay so much from state funds. The difference sometimes has to come from endowments set up by alumni and corporations. And who are those who have relationships with corporations and the universities? Alumni.

What are your thoughts about strengthening relationships with alumni?

If you want to have a strong alumni group – people with loyalty to the university – start when they are students. If students feel the education they receive is good, that faculty go the extra mile to help them to succeed, do you know who they will remember when they become successful? Their university. They will always tell you that it is the quality education and mentoring they received that gave them the edge in their careers. They will also mention professors who transformed their lives. Eventually, they will get to the point where they want to give back to the university. To build relationships with alumni in the future, start with today’s students.

But you cannot just go to alumni and tell them, “Give me money.” We have to cultivate relationships. We must stay in contact with alumni and get them involved in campus activities. Otherwise, NJIT disappears from their radar.

Bring alumni back to campus as part of an advisory board. Have alumni reunions, events that bring them back. Ask successful graduates to give presentations and recognize their success with awards. These are things that can trigger new interest in their alma mater, which has given them so much.

Some alumni will even tell you that they met their spouses here. If they are encouraged to return to campus, to become involved, they’re likely to have their children come to NJIT to receive their education. This is how we build relationships with several generations of alumni.

As a new dean, what do you hope to achieve in five years?

SOM, poised for growth, will take its proper place among management schools in the country. My goal is for SOM to be a school that attracts students because of our unique niche programs, most notably the connection between business studies and technology. I hope to see our school become the first choice for applicants, not a back-up alternative. And it will be just as important to continue building SOM’s role in our state’s economic development through realistic recommendations for innovation and feasible solutions for obstacles to growth.

I came to NJIT because I believe the School of Management has the potential to become a great school, which will further strengthen NJIT’s reputation as a great national institution. I want to be part of and contributor to such a program. Our location offers us the benefit of tapping into the breadth of opportunities of this metropolitan area. If there is one school that can make the best use of this breadth of opportunities to benefit students, it is SOM. ■

<http://management.njit.edu>