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CONSTRUCTING VALUE AT THE BOUNDARY: EXECUTIVE DBA GRADUATES' NARRATIVES OF LEGITIMACY AND IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This study examines how Executive Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) graduates construct the value and legitimacy of the degree across professional and academic identity boundaries.
Background	Executive DBA programs have expanded within AACSB-accredited business schools in the United States as part of a broader international growth in professional doctorates in management. While prior research has focused on program design, institutional rationale, and degree differentiation, less is known about how graduates themselves interpret the degree's value and legitimacy after completion.
Methodology	This qualitative study draws on semi-structured interviews with 20 Executive DBA graduates from three AACSB-accredited U.S. institutions. Data were analyzed through an interpretive thematic process involving iterative coding, cross-case comparison, abductive movement between data and theory, and reflexive memoing.
Contribution	The study contributes a graduate-centered perspective to debates about professional doctorates in business by showing that Executive DBA value is constructed as epistemic, identity-based, and relational rather than solely outcome-driven.
Findings	Three themes emerged: (1) *epistemic reorientation* – graduates described "learning to think differently" through disciplined engagement with evidence; (2) *legitimacy and boundary work* – graduates positioned the DBA as distinct from, but not inferior to, the PhD; and (3) *patterned ambivalence* – graduates affirmed strong intrinsic value while acknowledging uneven external recognition and career outcomes.

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Recommendations for Practitioners	Institutions offering Executive DBA programs should clearly articulate intended doctoral outcomes and provide structured post-graduation support to strengthen practitioner-scholar legitimacy.
Recommendations for Researchers	Future research should further examine identity formation and legitimacy negotiation in professional doctorates, particularly through longitudinal and comparative designs.
Impact on Society	By clarifying how experienced professionals integrate scholarly reasoning into practice, this study highlights the potential societal value of practitioner-scholar development in addressing complex organizational challenges.
Future Research	Future research should examine Executive DBA experiences longitudinally, compare programs across national and institutional contexts, and explore how alumni support and labor-market conditions shape post-graduation legitimacy and perceived value.
Keywords	Executive DBA, professional doctorates, practitioner-scholar identity, legitimacy, boundary work, epistemic transformation

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, Executive Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) programs have expanded steadily within U.S. business schools and, more broadly, within an international landscape of professional doctorates designed for experienced practitioners. In business education, this growth has been especially visible among schools accredited by AACSB International, a nonprofit global membership association and accreditor whose standards emphasize strategic management, learner success, thought leadership, societal impact, and evidence of engagement, innovation, and impact (AACSB International, 2020). Although AACSB does not prescribe a particular doctoral model, its emphasis on relevance and impact has created institutional space for doctoral offerings that connect scholarly inquiry with managerial practice. Against this backdrop, Executive DBA programs have increasingly been presented as responses to long-standing critiques of business education, particularly concerns about the relevance, utility, and practical engagement of academic research (Banerjee & Morley, 2013; Gill & Hoppe, 2009).

Despite this growth, the value and legitimacy of the Executive DBA remain contested. Recent work suggests that DBA students and graduates often occupy boundary positions in which professional expertise and academic knowledge are simultaneously mobilized, recognized, and questioned (Foster, 2024; Kearney et al., 2024; Kirk et al., 2025). In academic discourse, the DBA is still frequently defined against the PhD, often as a professional or applied alternative to the traditional research doctorate. Yet such comparisons typically privilege program design, institutional strategy, or credential equivalence over graduates' lived experience. As a result, claims about DBA value often rest on assumptions about career outcomes, market signaling, or institutional benefits rather than on empirical analyses of how graduates themselves make sense of the degree after completing it.

Prior research on professional doctorates in business has made important contributions by clarifying the structural and philosophical distinctions between academic and professional doctoral education. This scholarship has helped legitimate the DBA as a distinct form of doctoral study rather than a deficient version of the PhD, while also showing how DBA programs have taken shape differently across national and institutional contexts (Bareham et al., 2000; Gill & Hoppe, 2009; Jones, 2018; Kortt et al., 2016). At the same time, much of this literature remains institution-centered: it explains why schools launch such programs and how they are designed, but says less about how graduates later interpret what the degree has actually done in their lives and careers.

Research on doctoral education more broadly has increasingly emphasized identity formation, professional socialization, and legitimacy as central outcomes of advanced study. Doctoral degrees do more than certify expertise; they reshape how individuals understand themselves, how others recognize them, and how they position knowledge claims within professional and academic fields (Halse & Mowbray, 2011; Wellington & Sikes, 2006). These dynamics may be especially pronounced for Executive DBA students, who are typically senior-level professionals with substantial managerial experience and established professional identities prior to enrollment. For such participants, doctoral study does not simply initiate an academic identity; it unsettles, layers, and reworks an already accomplished professional self in ways that can be both liminal and demanding (Foster, 2024; Kirk et al., 2025; Liddle, 2025).

This study responds to these gaps by examining how Executive DBA graduates construct the value and legitimacy of the degree through retrospective reflection on their experiences. Here, "executive" refers not simply to a label often used in program marketing, but to a cohort-based, part-time doctoral format designed for experienced working professionals who remain embedded in practice while undertaking doctoral study. Drawing on qualitative interviews with graduates of Executive DBA programs in AACSB-accredited contexts, the study examines how participants narrate epistemic change, professional identity, and boundary positioning within both academic and practitioner communities. Rather than evaluating outcomes in terms of placement or return on investment, the analysis foregrounds graduate meaning-making, attending to the tensions, ambivalences, and contradictions that characterize their accounts.

The study is therefore guided by the following research question:

> *How do Executive DBA graduates construct the value and legitimacy of the degree across professional practice and academic identity boundaries?*

By centering graduate perspectives, this article contributes to scholarship on professional doctorates, practitioner-scholar development, and doctoral identity formation. More specifically, it argues that Executive DBA value is constructed at the boundary between practice and academia: as epistemic transformation, as legitimacy work, and as a lived experience of hybrid identity rather than as a straightforward return on credentials alone. The next section situates this argument within the literature on professional doctorates, accreditation, legitimacy, and boundary work.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMING AND LITERATURE REVIEW

PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATES AND THE EXECUTIVE DBA

Professional doctorates have emerged across multiple disciplines as alternatives to traditional research doctorates, typically designed for individuals whose primary career trajectories lie outside full-time academia. Across fields such as education, psychology, engineering, health, and business, these doctorates have developed unevenly across national systems, but they are commonly associated with applied inquiry, practice relevance, and the integration of research with professional work rather than with disciplinary reproduction alone (Bourner et al., 2001; Fink, 2006; Neumann, 2005; Wildy et al., 2015). This broader international literature is important because debates about the DBA are not uniquely American; they form part of a wider reconsideration of what doctoral-level contribution should look like in professions where knowledge is expected to travel back into practice. Recent scholarship likewise argues that professional doctorates are best understood at the confluence of the workplace, the profession, and the university rather than through a simple academic-versus-professional binary (Dennis et al., 2024).

Within business education, the Doctor of Business Administration represents the most prominent form of professional doctorate. Early scholarship positioned the DBA as a bridge between academic research and managerial practice, responding to criticisms that business schools had become increasingly insular and disconnected from real organizational problems (Banerjee & Morley, 2013; Bareham

et al., 2000). In this tradition, the DBA is not intended to replicate the PhD, but to serve a different function within the research ecosystem: developing research-literate professionals able to translate, mobilize, and sometimes produce knowledge in ways that remain closely tied to practice (Gill & Hoppe, 2009; Jones, 2018). Recent graduate-centered work reinforces this point by showing that the DBA may shape management practice as much through reflective and epistemic change as through formal career moves (Kearney et al., 2024).

Gill and Hoppe's 2009 conceptualization of the business professional doctorate as an "informing channel" remains foundational in this regard. Their argument is that professional doctorates can support sustained, bidirectional knowledge exchange between academia and industry, countering the tendency of both communities to become inward-looking. This framing is especially useful because it treats the DBA as a complementary doctoral form with a distinct audience and knowledge-use logic, rather than as a lesser credential.

Subsequent scholarship has elaborated on this distinction by examining the design of executive doctoral programs, including cohort-based structures, part-time enrollment, interdisciplinary curricula, and dissertation models tailored for professionals who remain in full-time work (Gill & Mullarkey, 2015; Kortt et al., 2016). In this article, the term Executive DBA refers to this specific program form: a doctorate structured for mid- to late-career professionals, many of them senior managers, consultants, founders, or public-sector leaders, who pursue rigorous research training without exiting practice. That distinction matters because not all DBA formats are identical, and the executive label in this study signals both a participant profile and a mode of doctoral engagement rather than a claim that all DBAs are necessarily the same.

AACSB accreditation forms an important part of this institutional context. AACSB is not a governmental regulator, but a global accrediting body and membership association whose standards and review processes exert substantial influence over how business schools define quality, scholarly contribution, and societal impact (AACSB International, 2020). Because its standards ask schools to demonstrate strategic coherence, thought leadership, meaningful engagement, and evidence of impact, they indirectly reward doctoral offerings that can connect scholarship to practice without prescribing a single doctoral template. Executive DBA programs, therefore, sit within a broader accreditation environment that values rigor, relevance, and impact, even as the legitimacy of such degrees remains uneven in local academic labor markets.

Nevertheless, ambiguity persists regarding what the DBA is "for," especially in relation to academic careers. Some programs explicitly distance themselves from PhD pathways, while others acknowledge that graduates may pursue teaching-focused or non-tenure-track academic roles. This ambiguity contributes to continuing debates about legitimacy, equivalence, and credential signaling, and it becomes particularly salient when graduates must explain the meaning of the degree to employers, hiring committees, and professional peers (Kortt et al., 2016; MacLennan et al., 2016, 2018; Scott, 2014).

Value Beyond Outcomes: Identity, Legitimacy, and Boundary Work

Much of the discourse surrounding doctoral education – particularly in business – has focused on outcomes such as placement, promotion, publication productivity, and institutional prestige. While such metrics are salient in some PhD contexts, they are less well suited to capturing the forms of value associated with professional doctorates. Emerging scholarship suggests that advanced professional study often generates symbolic, relational, and identity-based benefits in addition to, or sometimes instead of, direct labor-market returns (Boud et al., 2018; Dennis et al., 2024; Hawkes & Yerrabati, 2018; Kearney et al., 2024). This is one reason the DBA cannot be fully understood through a narrowly instrumental or human-capital lens.

Professional identity theory offers a useful lens for understanding these dynamics. Doctoral study is widely recognized as a process of identity transformation involving the internalization of new epistemic norms, specialized language, and communities of practice. For professional doctorate students, this process is especially complex because scholarly identity is layered onto an existing professional self rather than simply replacing it. The resulting practitioner-scholar identity is therefore hybrid, negotiated, and often situational (Burgess et al., 2011; Foster, 2024; Halse & Mowbray, 2011; Liddle, 2025). Recent DBA research similarly characterizes the degree as an identity crucible that intensifies reflection on who one is becoming rather than merely what one knows (Kirk et al., 2025). Broader doctoral research also underscores that this identity work can be precarious, emotional, and embodied rather than linear or purely cognitive (Blomberg, 2025).

Legitimacy plays a central role in this process. Doctoral credentials confer symbolic capital, signaling expertise, authority, and membership in elite knowledge communities. For professional doctorates, however, legitimacy is often contested rather than automatically granted. Graduates may encounter skepticism from academics who view the DBA as insufficiently rigorous, and from practitioners who are uncertain about the practical utility of doctoral research. Navigating these perceptions requires active boundary work: distinguishing among degree types, justifying the relevance of doctoral work, and positioning oneself strategically across organizational and scholarly settings.

Recent studies of professional doctorates highlight the importance of this boundary work. Graduates frequently resist deficit narratives that define their degrees solely in comparison with the PhD, emphasizing the difference in purpose rather than the inferiority of status. At the same time, this positioning does not eliminate ambivalence. Professional doctorate holders may strongly value the intellectual and personal transformation associated with doctoral study while remaining frustrated by opaque career pathways, uneven recognition, or institutional overpromising (Burgess et al., 2011; Kearney et al., 2024; Servage, 2009). More broadly, recent work on "in-between" identity work suggests that such tensions can be generative rather than merely problematic, because they help actors bridge organizational and epistemic boundaries while preserving difference (Ollila, 2025).

Importantly, such ambivalence should not be interpreted as evidence of failure. Rather, it reflects the unsettled nature of professional doctorates in business and the multiple, sometimes competing, forms of value they generate. Identity development, epistemic confidence, and legitimacy within professional networks may constitute meaningful outcomes even in the absence of dramatic career shifts.

By foregrounding these dimensions, the present study aligns with scholarship that conceptualizes doctoral value as multifaceted and socially constructed. It moves beyond binary debates about equivalence or inferiority to examine how graduates themselves narrate what the DBA has meant in their lives and careers, particularly at the boundary where practitioner credibility and academic legitimacy intersect (Davies et al., 2019; Fenge, 2009).

What We Still Don't Know

Despite increasing attention to professional doctorates in business, significant gaps remain in our understanding of Executive DBA outcomes as experienced by graduates. Recent studies have begun to illuminate DBA identity work and practice development more directly (Kearney et al., 2024; Kirk et al., 2025), yet much of the literature still emphasizes program rationale, institutional benefit, or conceptual distinctions between degree types, often through administrator perspectives, policy analysis, or broad comparisons among doctoral models. Comparatively little research examines how Executive DBA graduates retrospectively interpret the degree after completion, particularly in relation to identity, legitimacy, and value over time.

Moreover, studies that do consider graduate perspectives often focus on motivation at entry or on program experience during enrollment. That pattern mirrors the wider professional doctorate literature, where current work continues to explore why experienced practitioners enter such programs

(e.g., Acton & Flessa, 2025), but leaves under-theorized how graduates later reconcile intrinsic and extrinsic value, how they explain the degree to others, and how they negotiate hybrid status after completion. What remains especially underexplored is how value is constructed at the boundary: not simply whether the degree "works," but how graduates make it intelligible and legitimate across different audiences and institutional settings.

This study addresses these gaps by offering an empirically grounded analysis of Executive DBA graduates' narratives of value and legitimacy. Its contribution is not only to document graduate perceptions, but to show how those perceptions are organized through epistemic transformation, legitimacy work, and patterned ambivalence. The next section explains the interpretive methodology used to examine these narratives.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine how Executive Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) graduates construct the value and legitimacy of the degree following completion. Given the exploratory nature of the research question and the study's focus on meaning-making, identity, and retrospective sensemaking, a qualitative interview approach was most appropriate. Rather than evaluating outcomes through predefined indicators such as career advancement or salary change, the study sought to understand how graduates narrate, interpret, and evaluate their doctoral experience over time.

The research was originally conceived as a multi-stakeholder study including graduates, program administrators, and employers. Following proposal defense and early data collection, the scope was refined to focus on graduates and administrators, with the employer group removed due to feasibility concerns and limited analytic value within the study's scale. As graduates spanned a wide range of industries and professional roles, participants noted that employer perspectives would require a substantially larger, more stratified sample to yield meaningful inferences. Consistent with this feedback, the present article reports findings from the graduate interviews only, with administrator perspectives reserved for separate analysis.

The study was guided by an interpretive epistemological stance. From this perspective, participant accounts are treated not as neutral reports of objective program effects, but as socially situated narratives through which meaning is constructed, negotiated, and justified. This orientation is especially appropriate for questions of identity and legitimacy, where what matters is not only what happened but also how participants make sense of it and for whom. Consistent with this stance, the study aims for analytic insight and transferability rather than statistical generalization or replication in a quantitative sense.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AND SAMPLING STRATEGY

The study focused on Executive DBA programs offered by AACSB-accredited business schools in the United States. To ensure sufficient program maturity and comparability, the inclusion criteria required that programs had been in operation for at least 6 years – approximately twice the typical time-to-degree. This criterion was introduced during the proposal revision process to avoid comparing newly launched programs with long-established ones and to allow graduates adequate post-completion reflection.

From an initial population of eight eligible institutions meeting these criteria, three were selected based on program history, representativeness, and access. Together, the selected programs reflected both long-established Executive DBA offerings and programs associated with the first major wave of expansion in the United States during the mid-2010s. This approach allowed the study to capture graduate perspectives across mature, but not identical, institutional contexts.

The sampling strategy for graduates was purposive and criterion-based. Eligible participants were required to have completed an Executive DBA (or equivalent executive professional doctorate) from one of the selected institutions and to be willing to reflect on their experiences post-completion. Recruitment was conducted through alumni networks, personal contacts, and program referrals.

Participants – Graduate Sample

The final graduate sample consisted of twenty Executive DBA graduates drawn from the three selected institutions. To reduce identifiability, institutional affiliations are not reported. The original target was approximately seven to ten graduates per institution, but final participation varied across sites due to differences in recruitment access and response rates.

The graduate sample was evenly split by gender (10 men and 10 women). The average and median participant age was 55 years. Fourteen participants identified as White or Caucasian, four as Black or African American, and two as Asian. All participants had substantial professional experience prior to entering the DBA program, with an average of 33 years of total work experience and 23 years of management or supervisory experience.

All graduates held at least one graduate degree prior to enrolling in the DBA program; thirteen held an MBA specifically, and four held more than one graduate or professional degree. Dissertation methodologies varied widely: six dissertations employed qualitative methods, five were quantitative, and nine used mixed methods. Twelve graduates reported publishing from or after their dissertations, and thirteen had presented their research at academic or professional conferences.

Graduates represented a broad range of industries, including government, finance, healthcare, technology, performing arts, nonprofit leadership, and higher education. Post-degree career trajectories were similarly diverse. Eleven participants changed industries after graduation, most commonly transitioning into higher education roles, while others remained in industry or moved into consulting or entrepreneurial positions.

Anonymity and Ethical Considerations

Participants were given the option to allow attribution of direct quotations or to request anonymity. While several participants indicated comfort with attribution, others requested anonymization or approval prior to attribution. To ensure consistency and protect confidentiality, all participants were anonymized in reporting. In addition, institutional identities are not reported to reduce the risk of deductive disclosure in a relatively small multi-institutional sample. Graduates are referenced using numeric identifiers (e.g., Graduate 1 – Graduate 20). The study followed IRB-approved protocols for informed consent and data handling.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with Executive DBA graduates. The interview guide was designed to elicit reflective accounts of participants' motivations for entering the doctorate, their experience of doctoral learning, moments of challenge or transformation, perceptions of the degree's value, and post-completion outcomes or disappointments. Interviews remained flexible so that participants could foreground the aspects of the DBA they considered most salient; follow-up probes were used to clarify examples, surface tensions, and explore how participants explained the degree to different audiences. An illustrative summary of the interview domains is provided in the Appendix.

Interviews were conducted individually, recorded with participant consent, and professionally transcribed. Transcripts were subsequently reviewed and corrected for accuracy against the audio record where needed. Interview length typically ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. Data collection proceeded until the interviews yielded sufficient analytic depth and repetition to support the study's interpretive aims. By the later interviews, no substantially new thematic directions were emerging, although this was not treated as a claim of exhaustiveness or representativeness in a statistical sense.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis followed an interpretive thematic approach characterized by iterative movement between participant narratives and relevant conceptual frameworks. The process unfolded in four overlapping phases. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with each participant's narrative arc, with early notes focusing on expressions of value, legitimacy, identity, and tension. Second, initial coding identified recurring concepts and contrasts within and across cases, including references to epistemic change, comparisons with the PhD, perceived recognition, disappointment, and durable personal transformation. Third, codes were compared, clustered, and refined into higher-order themes through constant comparison across cases, with attention to both convergence and divergence. Fourth, the emerging thematic structure was interpreted abductively in dialogue with concepts from the literature on professional identity, legitimacy, and boundary work.

Throughout this process, analytic decisions were documented through memoing and repeated returns to the full transcripts so that themes remained grounded in participants' language rather than imposed mechanically from theory. NVivo was used selectively as an organizational aid during portions of the analysis, particularly to support transcript management, coding organization, and retrieval of excerpts across cases; however, interpretive judgment rather than software determined the coding structure and thematic claims. Particular attention was paid to moments of contradiction – for example, participants simultaneously affirming the DBA's profound value while questioning its market recognition. Such tensions were treated as analytically significant rather than as inconsistencies to be eliminated.

Although the original study included administrator interviews, the present analysis focuses exclusively on graduate narratives. Administrator data informed analytic sensitivity, but were not integrated into the findings reported here.

Several strategies were employed to enhance trustworthiness. The use of a multi-institutional sample increased analytic breadth and reduced overreliance on a single program context. Thick description and extensive use of participant quotations support transparency and allow readers to assess interpretive credibility. Cross-case comparison was used to identify convergent and divergent patterns, and analytic memos documented how codes were refined into themes. These strategies do not eliminate subjectivity; rather, they make the interpretive process more visible.

Several limitations were also recognized from the outset. The sample was purposive rather than representative and was confined to graduates of AACSB-accredited Executive DBA programs in the United States. The data are retrospective and self-reported, so they reflect how participants currently narrate their experience rather than a direct measure of program effect. For an interpretive study, however, these features are not defects to be overcome so much as conditions of the inquiry: the goal is to understand how graduates construct meaning, not to estimate population-level outcomes.

Reflexively, the researcher brought prior experience with doctoral education to the study, which informed both access and analytic interpretation. Rather than treating this positionality as bias to be removed, it was used as a resource for asking informed follow-up questions while also requiring conscious attention to assumptions brought to the data. The findings that follow are therefore offered as co-constructed, theoretically informed interpretations of graduate meaning-making rather than as a final or exhaustive account.

FINDINGS

The findings are organized around three interpretive themes that together explain how graduates construct Executive DBA value and legitimacy. Table 1 provides a concise thematic overview before the richer narrative analysis that follows.

Table 1. Concise thematic overview

Theme	Core interpretive claim	Illustrative emphasis in participant accounts
Theme 1: Epistemic reorientation	The DBA was valued as a durable change in how graduates reason, question, and use evidence.	Research literacy, disciplined problem framing, and confidence in evidentiary argument.
Theme 2: Legitimacy and boundary work	Graduates framed the DBA as distinct from, rather than inferior to, the PhD and actively negotiated recognition across audiences.	Difference without inferiority, procedural legitimacy, and hybrid positioning.
Theme 3: Ambivalent value	Graduates strongly affirmed intrinsic value while acknowledging uneven market recognition and post-degree outcomes.	Intellectual payoff, contingent external returns, and recalibrated expectations over time.

Theme 1: "Learning to Think Differently": The DBA as Epistemic Reorientation

Across interviews, graduates consistently described the Executive DBA as fundamentally altering how they think rather than merely what they know. Participants rarely framed the degree in terms of content acquisition or technical skill development. Instead, they emphasized an epistemic shift characterized by disciplined reasoning, research literacy, and a heightened awareness of evidentiary standards. This transformation was frequently described as enduring, transferable, and central to the value of the degree, regardless of subsequent career outcomes.

Graduates contrasted their DBA experience with prior graduate education – most commonly MBAs – by emphasizing the move from consuming knowledge to producing and interrogating it. As one graduate explained: "The biggest change wasn't learning new theories. It was learning how to question things properly. You stop relying on intuition or experience alone and start asking, 'What's the evidence? How do I know this?' That changes how you approach everything." (Graduate 7)

This shift was often framed as learning to slow down thinking processes that had previously been shaped by executive decision-making environments. Several participants described moving away from rapid, action-oriented judgment toward more deliberate problem framing. Graduate 12 noted that the DBA required unlearning habits cultivated through decades of leadership experience: "In industry, you're rewarded for decisiveness. In the program, decisiveness without justification doesn't count. You have to show your logic, your sources, your assumptions. That was uncomfortable at first, but it's probably the most valuable thing I took away." Rather than perceiving this as a constraint, graduates overwhelmingly described the demand for rigor as intellectually liberating. Learning to operate within formal research conventions provided tools to articulate complex ideas with greater precision and credibility. Graduate 3, who had extensive consulting experience prior to enrollment, described the change succinctly: "Before, I had opinions backed by experience. After the DBA, I had arguments backed by evidence. That distinction matters – especially when you're trying to convince people who don't already agree with you."

Importantly, participants did not restrict this epistemic transformation to academic contexts. Many described applying research-informed thinking directly to professional practice, including strategic planning, organizational diagnosis, and policy development. Graduate 15 explained that the DBA reshaped how they approached workplace problems: "I don't jump straight to solutions anymore. I spend more time defining the problem – what kind of problem it actually is, what assumptions are built into it. That's straight out of the research training." This orientation toward problem framing rather than problem solving was repeatedly cited as a distinguishing feature of the DBA. Graduates

described learning to tolerate ambiguity and complexity, resisting pressure to produce immediate answers in favor of more robust analysis. For some, this represented a profound shift in professional identity. Graduate 1 reflected: "You start to see yourself less as the person with the answer and more as the person who can figure out the answer responsibly. That's a different role, and it carries a different kind of authority."

Several participants explicitly linked this epistemic reorientation to the legitimacy they associated with doctoral status. Mastery of research conventions – particularly writing, citation, and methodological reasoning – was described as granting access to academic and policy conversations that had previously felt closed. Graduate 9 remarked: "Once you understand how research arguments are constructed, you can participate in those conversations with confidence. You're not guessing what counts anymore – you know." Notably, this sense of epistemic confidence did not depend on publishing or pursuing academic careers. Graduates who remained in industry articulated similar shifts in how they evaluated claims, engaged consultants, or assessed organizational data. Graduate 18, who did not transition into academia, emphasized that the change was internal rather than role-dependent: "Even if I never set foot in a classroom again, the way I read reports, the way I question data – that's permanent. You can't unlearn it."

While participants overwhelmingly valued this transformation, several acknowledged that it came at a cost. The process of learning to think differently was described as demanding, frustrating, and at times destabilizing, particularly for seasoned executives accustomed to professional mastery. Graduate 6 noted: "You go from being the expert in the room to being told your writing isn't good enough, your argument isn't tight enough. That's humbling. But it's also what makes the change real."

Taken together, these accounts position the Executive DBA as an experience of epistemic reorientation rather than credential acquisition. Graduates consistently framed the program as reshaping their relationship to knowledge, evidence, and authority – outcomes that persisted regardless of career trajectory. This theme provides a foundation for understanding subsequent findings related to legitimacy and value, as the ability to "think differently" emerged as a prerequisite for how graduates positioned themselves between academic and practitioner communities.

Theme 2: "Not a PhD – and Not Trying to Be": Legitimacy and Boundary Work

While graduates consistently emphasized epistemic transformation as a core outcome of the Executive DBA, they were equally explicit in defining what the degree was not. Across interviews, participants drew clear distinctions between the DBA and the PhD, rejecting hierarchical comparisons that positioned the DBA as a lesser credential. Instead, graduates engaged in active boundary work, articulating difference in purpose, audience, and legitimacy logic rather than equivalence or inferiority.

Participants did not deny the prestige traditionally associated with the PhD. Many acknowledged the PhD's central role in academic socialization and disciplinary reproduction. However, they resisted framing the DBA as an alternative pathway to the same endpoint. Graduate 5, who had extensive experience interacting with academic researchers prior to enrolling, explained: "I never saw the DBA as a shortcut or a replacement for a PhD. It's solving a different problem. If your goal is to be a career academic, the PhD makes sense. If your goal is to do research that speaks to practice, that's not what most PhDs are optimized for." This distinction was frequently articulated in terms of fit rather than rank. Graduates emphasized that the DBA was designed for professionals already embedded in practice, whose legitimacy was grounded in experience rather than early-career scholarly apprenticeship. Graduate 14 reflected:

"By the time you're in your fifties, you're not trying to become someone else. You're trying to add a layer to who you already are. The DBA did that. A PhD would have required me to step out of practice completely, and that wasn't the point."

Boundary work was especially visible in how graduates described interactions with academic gatekeepers. Several participants reported encountering skepticism or confusion about the DBA within higher education contexts, particularly during hiring processes or conference participation. Rather than internalizing these reactions as evidence of deficiency, graduates often reframed them as institutional inertia or misunderstanding. Graduate 9 noted: "Sometimes people don't know what to do with you because you don't fit the mold. That doesn't mean the degree lacks rigor – it means the system wasn't built for this kind of hybrid." Importantly, legitimacy was not framed as uniformly denied. Graduates described moments of recognition that were tied less to degree title and more to demonstrated scholarly competence. Mastery of research conventions – introduced in Theme 1 – functioned as a legitimizing resource that allowed graduates to navigate academic spaces with confidence. Graduate 11 explained: "Once you're speaking the same language – methods, theory, citations – the label matters less. People pay attention to whether you know what you're doing."

This emphasis on procedural legitimacy – understanding how knowledge is produced and evaluated – enabled graduates to resist deficit narratives while acknowledging structural barriers. Several participants drew distinctions between legitimacy in teaching-oriented academic roles and in tenure-track research positions, expressing realistic expectations rather than resentment. Graduate 4, who transitioned into higher education administration, observed: "I was never under the illusion that the DBA would put me on a tenure track at an R1. But that's not the only legitimate role in academia, and it shouldn't be treated like it is."

Graduates also engaged in boundary work through comparisons with professional doctorates in other fields, particularly the Ed.D. Participants noted that while professional doctorates in education have become widely accepted, business professional doctorates continue to face skepticism. This discrepancy was attributed to disciplinary culture rather than inherent differences in rigor. Graduate 2 commented: "No one questions an Ed.D. anymore, but the DBA still has to explain itself. That tells you more about business schools than about the degree."

At the same time, graduates acknowledged that ambiguity surrounding the DBA's identity created practical challenges. Inconsistent program naming (e.g., DBA, DM, Executive Doctorate) and variation in institutional messaging contributed to confusion in the marketplace. Some participants expressed frustration that institutions benefited from program revenue without fully advocating for graduate legitimacy post-completion. Graduate 17 stated: "The school was happy to enroll us, but once you graduate, you're kind of on your own, explaining what the degree is. That gap affects how the DBA is perceived." Despite these challenges, graduates did not express a desire for the DBA to be rebranded as a PhD or made equivalent in name. Instead, they called for clearer articulation of the DBA's distinct purpose and audience. Legitimacy, in this sense, was not understood as assimilation into existing academic hierarchies but as recognition of an alternative scholarly role. Graduate 1 summarized this position: "The DBA doesn't need to be a PhD to be legitimate. It needs to be understood on its own terms. That's the work that still hasn't been done."

Collectively, these accounts illustrate how Executive DBA graduates actively negotiate legitimacy through boundary work that emphasizes difference without inferiority. By framing the DBA as a distinct professional doctorate aligned with practice-oriented scholarship, graduates resist simplistic hierarchies while acknowledging structural constraints. This positioning sets the stage for the final theme, which explores how such legitimacy work intersects with ambivalence about outcomes and perceived value.

Theme 3: "Worth It, But Not What Was Promised": Ambivalence in Perceived Value

While graduates consistently articulated epistemic transformation and engaged in active legitimacy work, their assessments of the Executive DBA's overall value were rarely unqualified. Instead, participants expressed a patterned ambivalence: strong affirmation of the degree's intrinsic and identity-based value alongside uneven – or at times disappointing – extrinsic outcomes. This coexistence of

satisfaction and critique was not framed as a contradiction but as a realistic appraisal of what the DBA delivered relative to expectations shaped by institutional messaging and broader doctoral norms.

Many graduates stated unequivocally that they would pursue the DBA again, even when acknowledging that the degree did not produce the career outcomes they initially anticipated. Graduate 8 articulated this duality succinctly: "Intellectually, it was absolutely worth it. Career-wise, it didn't open doors the way I thought it might. Both of those things can be true." This sentiment recurred across interviews, suggesting that graduates evaluated value across multiple dimensions rather than through a single outcome metric. Personal fulfillment, intellectual growth, and identity validation were frequently cited as durable returns on investment. At the same time, participants expressed frustration when institutional narratives – particularly around academic opportunities – did not align with post-graduation realities.

Graduates who pursued academic roles after completion described mixed experiences navigating the labor market. Several reported successes in securing teaching or non-tenure-track positions, yet emphasized that these outcomes required persistence, networking, and, in some cases, recalibration of expectations. Graduate 10 noted: "The degree didn't place me anywhere. It qualified me to compete. Everything after that was still on me." Others described discovering belatedly that institutional constraints – such as hiring preferences for PhD credentials or disciplinary fit – limited the DBA's signaling power. This realization was often accompanied by a sense that such constraints had not been fully transparent during recruitment. Graduate 16 reflected: "I don't think the school misled us intentionally, but they definitely emphasized the upside more than the barriers. You only really understand the boundaries once you hit them."

For graduates who remained in industry, ambivalence manifested differently. While many reported applying research-informed thinking to professional practice, few observed direct financial or promotional returns attributable solely to the DBA. Some noted that employers struggled to interpret the degree's relevance, particularly outside academic or consulting contexts. Graduate 13 explained: "People respect the effort, but they don't always know what to do with the credential. It doesn't map cleanly onto corporate ladders." Importantly, participants did not uniformly attribute these limitations to deficiencies in the program itself. Instead, they often located the problem in broader structural misalignment between professional doctorates and existing labor-market categories. The DBA was described as occupying an "in-between" space – highly valued by those who completed it, yet insufficiently institutionalized to guarantee predictable returns. Graduate 19 captured this tension: "It changes you more than it changes how the market sees you. That's not nothing – but it's not what everyone expects going in."

Cost considerations further complicated assessments of value. Several participants noted the substantial financial investment required for Executive DBA programs and questioned whether institutions adequately addressed post-graduation support relative to tuition levels. Graduate 6 expressed this concern pointedly: "You're paying executive-level tuition, but once you graduate, the relationship thins out quickly. If schools want these programs to succeed long-term, that's an area they need to rethink." Despite these critiques, graduates rarely framed their experiences in terms of regret. Instead, they emphasized recalibration – adjusting expectations to align with the degree's actual, rather than implied, benefits. Over time, many reported that the value of the DBA became clearer, particularly as they continued to draw on research skills and epistemic confidence in new contexts. Graduate 1 observed: "It's not a degree that pays off immediately in obvious ways. The payoff is slower and more internal – but it compounds." This temporal dimension of value was especially salient among graduates who had completed their degrees several years prior to the interview. Retrospective reflection allowed participants to integrate initial disappointment with longer-term appreciation, reframing value as cumulative rather than transactional. Graduate 5 summarized this evolution: "If I had judged it in the first year after graduation, I might have been harsher. Looking back now, I see how much it reshaped my trajectory – even if it didn't do so in a straight line."

Taken together, these accounts underscore the ambivalent nature of Executive DBA value as experienced by graduates. The degree was widely regarded as intellectually and personally transformative, yet its external recognition and material payoff were inconsistent and contingent. Rather than diminishing the significance of the DBA, this ambivalence highlights the complexity of professional doctoral education situated between academic and practitioner worlds. Graduates' narratives suggest that the DBA's value lies less in guaranteed outcomes than in the durable capacities and identities it enables – benefits that resist simple measurement but remain deeply consequential.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how Executive DBA graduates construct the value and legitimacy of the degree through retrospective reflection. Rather than treating value as self-evident or reducible to placement, promotion, or return on investment, the analysis shows that graduates construct value at the boundary between practice and academia. Across the three themes, the DBA emerged as a site of epistemic transformation, identity work, and legitimacy negotiation, with benefits that were real but not evenly recognized.

This perspective helps clarify why the Executive DBA can appear simultaneously successful and unsettled. Successful, because graduates described durable changes in how they think, argue, and position themselves as credible knowledge actors; unsettled, because those gains did not automatically translate into stable recognition across institutional settings. In what follows, the discussion reconnects these findings to the paper's conceptual framing and highlights their theoretical and practical implications.

EPISTEMIC REORIENTATION AS IDENTITY WORK

The first theme shows that graduates valued the DBA not mainly as a repository of new content, but as an epistemic reorientation: a disciplined change in how they frame problems, evaluate evidence, and justify claims. This finding extends prior accounts of the professional doctorate as a vehicle for research literacy and applied inquiry by demonstrating how such learning is experienced as a lasting shift in self-understanding rather than as a discrete skill set (Boud et al., 2018; Gill & Hoppe, 2009; Kearney et al., 2024). In this sense, the Executive DBA does not simply add doctoral techniques to an executive career; it reconstitutes what counts as competent professional judgment.

Read through the lens of professional identity theory, this matters because graduates did not describe themselves as becoming "more educated" in a generic sense. They described becoming different kinds of knowers – more reflexive, more evidentially disciplined, and less comfortable with unsupported certainty. This resonates with research showing that doctoral study reshapes identity through new epistemic norms and communities of practice, and that the process can be both liminal and precarious (Blomberg, 2025; Halse & Mowbray, 2011; Kirk et al., 2025; Liddle, 2025). The present study adds that, for experienced executives, this identity work is often layered onto an already established professional self, making the process especially consequential and occasionally disorienting.

Theoretically, then, the findings suggest that Executive DBA value is not exhausted by instrumental outcomes. Much of what participants valued most was internal, durable, and difficult to capture through conventional metrics. The degree's contribution was therefore less about possessing a credential than about inhabiting a different relationship to evidence, authority, and responsible action. This sharpens the paper's central claim that DBA value is epistemic before it is merely economic.

LEGITIMACY AT THE BOUNDARY

The second theme illuminates how legitimacy is actively negotiated rather than automatically conferred. Graduates repeatedly resisted deficit framings of the DBA as a lesser PhD, instead engaging in boundary work that emphasized the difference of purpose, audience, and contribution. This supports

prior scholarship arguing that professional doctorates should be understood on their own terms rather than evaluated solely against academic doctorate norms (Dennis et al., 2024; Fink, 2006; Lester, 2004; Scott et al., 2004). The present study contributes by showing how this argument is enacted in everyday graduate talk: through distinctions between translation and disciplinary reproduction, practice engagement and academic apprenticeship, and fit rather than rank.

At the same time, participants' accounts reveal that hybrid legitimacy is fragile. Recognition depended less on degree title alone than on demonstrated command of scholarly procedures – method, citation, argument, and theoretical framing. In other words, legitimacy was often procedural before it was categorical. This finding refines the literature on boundary work by showing that Executive DBA graduates do not merely defend the degree abstractly; they mobilize research competence as a practical resource for crossing skeptical institutional boundaries. That is an important contribution because it suggests a specific executive form of doctoral boundary work in which prior professional authority and newly acquired scholarly authority must be held together rather than one substituted for the other. In this respect, the findings align with broader work on "in-between identity work," which shows that actors at organizational boundaries do not simply resolve tensions; they use them to sustain knowledge exchange and legitimacy across domains (Ollila, 2025).

The findings also complicate simple assumptions about post-degree destinations. Graduates did not generally seek wholesale assimilation into traditional research-university career tracks. Many instead sought teaching-oriented, consulting, advisory, leadership, or translational roles in which practitioner and scholarly forms of legitimacy could be combined. This reinforces the argument that practitioner-scholar identity should be treated as a designed outcome of Executive DBA study rather than as a secondary by-product (Foster, 2024; Liddle, 2025; Messenger, 2023).

Ambivalence Beyond Human-Capital Accounts

The third theme is analytically important because it positions ambivalence not as evidence of failure, but as a structurally intelligible outcome. Graduates frequently held together two judgments that might appear contradictory: that the DBA was profoundly worth doing and that it did not always deliver the external recognition or career mobility implicitly promised. Read narrowly through a human-capital lens, such ambivalence might appear as dissatisfaction. Read through the present study's framework, however, this ambivalence reflects the unsettled status of a degree whose value is distributed across symbolic, epistemic, identity-based, and sometimes material registers.

This finding aligns with research suggesting that the impact of professional doctorates is often cumulative, emergent, and context-dependent rather than immediate and uniform (Boud et al., 2018; Kearney et al., 2024). It also helps explain why retrospective distance mattered in participants' accounts: over time, earlier disappointment could be reinterpreted in light of deeper changes in confidence, authority, and professional trajectory. The contribution here is to show that ambivalence is not peripheral noise around the "real" value of the degree; it is part of the way value is made sense of when a credential occupies an in-between institutional space.

Recognizing this ambivalence also reconnects the findings to broader legitimacy debates. If professional doctorates in business remain less intelligible than some analogous doctorates in other fields, then graduates' mixed experiences are not simply personal miscalculations. They are symptoms of an ecosystem in which the degree's purposes are partly understood, partly marketized, and only unevenly institutionalized. That insight is consistent with recent arguments that professional doctorates operate across overlapping knowledge terrains rather than within a settled academic/professional division (Dennis et al., 2024), and it moves the discussion from asking whether the DBA is legitimate in the abstract to asking how legitimacy is socially produced, withheld, and negotiated after graduation.

Implications for Institutions and Theory

Several implications follow. For theory, the study suggests that Executive DBA value should be conceptualized as a boundary phenomenon: it is produced through the interaction of epistemic change, identity work, and contested recognition. This is more precise than describing the degree as simply "applied" or "practice oriented." For institutions, the findings suggest that schools should articulate their intended doctoral outcomes with greater candor, especially regarding likely post-graduation pathways and the distinction between doctoral legitimacy and automatic labor-market rewards.

More concretely, institutions can better support graduates in at least four ways: by clarifying the distinctive role of the Executive DBA during recruitment; by making transparent the kinds of academic and non-academic roles for which graduates are and are not typically competitive; by sustaining alumni-facing scholarly communities after graduation; and by offering translational legitimacy support, such as mentoring, publication workshops, conference pathways, and clearer employer-facing explanations of what the degree signifies. Such measures would not eliminate structural ambiguity, but they could reduce the extent to which graduates must individually perform all legitimacy work on behalf of the credential.

For prospective students, the findings underline the importance of fit. The Executive DBA appears especially valuable for experienced professionals seeking intellectual transformation, enhanced research capability, and a practitioner-scholar identity – not for those expecting a simple, guaranteed exchange of tuition for career advancement. For researchers, the study reinforces the need to evaluate professional doctorates with concepts broad enough to capture temporality, identity, and legitimacy alongside outcomes. This, in turn, may help move the literature beyond repetitive PhD-versus-DBA comparisons toward more substantive analysis of what professional doctorates actually do.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research

This study examined how Executive Doctor of Business Administration graduates construct the value and legitimacy of the degree through retrospective reflection. By centering graduate narratives rather than institutional intent or labor-market metrics alone, the article offers a more precise account of DBA value as epistemic, identity-based, and relational – yet also contingent and uneven. In doing so, it contributes to scholarship on professional doctorates by showing that value is constructed at the boundary between practitioner credibility and academic legitimacy rather than secured once and for all by credential possession.

The paper's principal theoretical contribution is to show how three processes travel together in graduates' accounts: epistemic reorientation, legitimacy and boundary work, and patterned ambivalence. Graduates described the DBA as changing how they think and act with evidence; they also described having to explain, defend, and position the degree across different audiences. Far from undermining the degree's significance, their ambivalence about external returns clarifies the unsettled institutional terrain in which Executive DBA value is made meaningful.

These conclusions also carry practical implications. Business schools that offer Executive DBAs should be clearer about intended outcomes, more realistic about post-degree pathways, and more intentional in supporting graduates after completion. Doing so would help shift the legitimacy work from being an individual burden to a shared institutional responsibility. For prospective students, the findings suggest that the degree is best understood as a rigorous, developmental, and identity-forming undertaking whose benefits may be substantial but are unlikely to be uniformly immediate or easily measurable.

The study is nevertheless bounded by its design. The sample was purposive, U.S.-based, and limited to graduates from AACSB-accredited programs; the accounts are retrospective and therefore shaped by memory, reinterpretation, and current positioning. These are not reasons to dismiss the findings,

but reasons to read them as situated interpretations of meaning rather than as population claims. Future research could usefully follow candidates longitudinally from entry through post-completion, compare Executive DBA programs across national systems, and examine how institutional narratives, alumni support, and labor-market structures shape graduates' longer-term legitimacy trajectories.

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APPENDIX. GRADUATE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The graduate interview protocol was designed to support a semi-structured interview format. A common set of demographic items and core interview questions was used across interviews to ensure consistency, while allowing flexibility for follow-up prompts and elaboration based on participants' responses. The protocol was intended to elicit graduates' reflections on their motivations for pursuing the Executive DBA, their experiences during the program, and their perceptions of the degree's value and outcomes after completion.

Demographic and Background Information

Participants were asked to provide the following background information:

1. Age, gender, ethnicity, and year of DBA completion
2. Industry prior to the degree and current industry
3. Position prior to the degree and current position
4. Whether they changed employers after completing the degree
5. Total years of work experience
6. Total years of management experience
7. Prior academic degrees earned
8. Primary funding method for the DBA
9. Dissertation topic
10. Dissertation methodology or research approach
11. Whether they had published from the dissertation or related work
12. Whether they had presented their research at academic or professional conferences

Core Interview Questions

The following core questions guided the interviews:

1. Why did you pursue a DBA?
2. Did obtaining the degree achieve your intended outcome?
3. How would you compare your actual experience of the program with what you had anticipated before enrolling?
4. How did you decide on the school you attended?
5. What was your favorite part of the program?
6. What was the most useful part of the program?
7. What, if anything, would you change about the program?
8. If you could go back in time, would you choose to pursue the degree again? Why or why not?

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