

# Dr. Bendapudi Returns to Her Jayhawk Roots

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November 2011

Lawrence Business Magazine.com

Dr. Neeli Bendapudi, the new Dean of the University of Kansas School of Business, leans forward and emphatically taps her office table with her forefinger. She squints her eyes and slightly lowers her head. "This," she says with the passion of a preacher and the seriousness of a judge, "is the University of My American Dream."

And with that, a broad smile graces her face; she sits back in her chair and gazes out of her office window at the passing students.

"The University of Kansas has been very good to my family," she says. "I am so thrilled to be able to return the favor."

At a young age, her father introduced Dr. Bendapudi to the University of Kansas. Though her father's passion for KU was strong, it had little to do with the Jayhawk basketball team. When Dr. Bendapudi was 5 years old, her father left their home in India to begin work on a doctorate at KU on the American Playwright Arthur Miller.

"When you're a child, anywhere your parents go is like a mystical place," Bendapudi says. "My father was in the mystical land of Kansas. He would tell us all about this beautiful place called Lawrence and send us these great pictures of things called Jayhawks. I was five or six and already enamored with KU."

Her appreciation for KU was instilled almost as early as Bendapudi had set her career goals.

"Teaching and academics are always what I've wanted to do," she says with a laugh. "When other kids were playing and maybe getting a little rowdy, I was always the one to bring everybody back to focus on learning. I'm sure my sisters will confirm that." Neeli & sisters

After earning her undergraduate degree and MBA from Andhra University in India, Bendapudi, along with husband Venkat, moved to Lawrence to begin work on her doctorate (she graduated in 1994).

Lawrence welcomed her with some very unexpected challenges. "I had always been told how flat Kansas is," she says. "After a few hours walking around campus I thought 'Wow, if this is flat, I don't need to see the rest of the state.' Of all the things my father mentioned about KU, the hills were not one of them."

Bendapudi's primary research focus is on how customers evaluate which service providers and organizations are best able to meet their needs and when they merit long-term relationships. The second area of interest has to do with how organizations can effectively communicate their ability to meet customer needs. Her research has been published in the Journal of Academic Medicine, Harvard Business Review and Journal of Marketing, among others. Bendapudi is so respected in the field, she was asked to give a TED lecture on the topic.

Originally published at: <http://wellcommons.com/groups/wellness/2010/jul/9/ku-hospital-orthopedic-on/>

After a time as an assistant professor of marketing at Texas A&M University, Bendapudi started at Ohio State University. She began as an assistant professor in 1996, before becoming an associate professor in 2002 and earning full professorship in 2008. While at Ohio State, Bendapudi founded and ran the Initiative for Managing Services, a center within the Fisher College of Business representing a consortium of companies that partner with the college on teaching, research and outreach regarding service management.

"Neeli is missed," says Dr. Stephen Mangum, Senior Associate Dean at the Fisher College of Business. "She was one of our most respected faculty members, most popular instructors and most friendly co-workers. I can't think of a University teaching award she didn't win. She published often and really invested herself in her work. Not only that, but her connections with the business world are invaluable. The Business School at Kansas is lucky to have her, that's for sure. I don't think they could have found someone more qualified or passionate for the position."

Of all the candidates for the position, something about Bendapudi stood out. "In addition to being an outstanding researcher, teacher and administrator, Neeli brings a bold vision for the School of Business," James P. Guthrie, search committee co-chair and business professor says. "Her understanding of what it will take to move the school forward is based upon her unique blend of business and academic experiences. And as a KU alumna, she brings an obvious love for the university and a familiarity with the state's business climate that will benefit the school, its programs and its graduates."

#### Neeli Family

The opportunity for Bendapudi to return to Lawrence was completely unexpected.

"I can't speak highly enough about my time at Ohio State," Bendapudi says. "The faculty, the Provost, the President and the students at Ohio State are absolutely fabulous. Honestly, I hadn't ever considered leaving. Ohio State felt like home. KU was the only other university at which I could ever imagine working. When the search committee at KU contacted me, I was shocked and absolutely thrilled. Ohio made every effort to keep me. But I told them, 'KU is home.'"

Bendapudi has three very simple goals for the Business School. "This must be a great place to learn, a great place to work and a great place to invest," she says. "All three are directly tied to the others. That said, we cannot concentrate on only one or two. We, as a school, must accomplish all three goals if we are going to continue to be a great university and serve our students."

Students, without question, must be the main focus of everyone at the university, according to Bendapudi. If KU is a business, the student body is the consumer. As a dean, Bendapudi feels a great responsibility to ensure the experience of her customers is second-to-none.

"KU is already a fantastic place to get an education," Bendapudi says. "My job is to make it even better for our students. I think we, as an administration, can't forget that the students pay our salary. I mean let's face it: their tuition dollars are how we make a living. We are here to serve them."

Bendapudi has clearly put a lot of thought into how to attract and keep the best students and her business acumen is apparent when relating her ideas. "We have to evaluate the value of an education from our Business School in respect to the burdens," Bendapudi says. "We have to let students know we offer three things: security, esteem and justice. Students can be secure that they made the right decision to enroll at KU. They will feel respected and fairly treated by their professors. And finally, they will leave with a degree that serves them in the future. If those benefits outweigh the financial and time burden of attending KU, we will succeed."

Providing security, esteem and justice to students are all nice points, but Bendapudi points to a more tangible measuring stick. "Job placement," she says definitively. "The market speaks; there's no way around it. If our graduates find quality, challenging work in their fields, then we have succeeded as a business school. I recently met with the parent of an incoming freshman and he said something that really struck a chord with me. He said 'The set of letters I care most about after my child's name when she graduates aren't MBA or Ph.D. It's JOB.' That articulates my point exactly. Our graduates must be able to compete for the best jobs."

Bendapudi believes KU must also be a great place to work. That, she says, means ensuring faculty understand both the opportunity and responsibility of working for a world-class university. Too many professors, Bendapudi says, take a laissez faire attitude toward teaching.

"The faculty here is, really and truly, fantastic," Bendapudi says with an excitement that can't be faked. "They understand that if they aren't excited to be here teaching, they can't expect their students to be excited. I mean really, what's in it for a student with an instructor who isn't engaged? Our faculty must remain engaged, energetic and excited to be here. It's my responsibility to make sure that happens."

Being stuck on campus without venturing into the business world may not be the best way to teach business, Bendapudi argues. She values "real world" experience for faculty. After all, if you haven't done it, how can you teach it, she asks.

Bendapudi has served as Executive Vice President and Chief Customer Officer of Huntington National Bank and has consulted for dozens of the world's largest companies, including Cessna and Proctor & Gamble. Bendapudi is a Leadership Foundation Fellow of the International Women's Forum, one of 27 women selected worldwide.

Bendapudi says faculty must feel satisfied and appreciated in their positions, but remain challenged. "Being happy and comfortable is okay," Bendapudi says. "But being complacent is not. We must always be ready for a challenge."

Business involves the transfer of currency from one party to another. Having alumni of the School of Business send in their currency is not a concept missed by Bendapudi. She took over the reins in August and hit the ground running. Much of the past four months has been spent traveling the country glad-handing alumni and school donors. If the Business School remains a good investment, Bendapudi is convinced, donors will continue to be generous with their currency.

"I haven't had a bad trip yet," Bendapudi says. "Our alumni are so proud of their involvement with the school and very excited about the future. Once a Jayhawk, always a Jayhawk."

When she refers to alumni of the school being among the most accomplished and distinguished people in the business world," she says it with a sincere smile. She's been on the job a short while, but it is apparent Bendapudi feels a sense of ownership and responsibility for the Business School.

"My father, my sisters, my husband and I all have degrees from KU," Bendapudi says with pride. "I know how fortunate I am to be in this position, and I plan to make the most of it."