How This Modern Professor Remains Connected to His Roots

DePaul University’s Jim Mourey applauds The PhD Project for its commitment to diversity, particularly first-generation college graduates such as himself

By Audarshia Townsend

In the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, Jim Mourey wrote a murder-mystery novel. Locked down with a “shelter in place” order in May, he was restless, so he wrote the 250-page book in a week. For the average person, that undertaking might seem impossible, but for those who know — and admire — Dr. James Mourey, it’s totally in character.

He’s the college professor, after all, who convinced the esteemed DePaul University in Chicago to allow him to teach his marketing class through improv comedy, a lifetime passion of his.

He also launched a video series called “Streetwalker,” in which students hit the streets of downtown Chicago, interviewing random people about various products, all in the name of market research.
While that's on hold for now, this semester he's been virtually engaging his students with entertaining, yet educational videos in lieu of in-person lectures, occasionally slipping into different characters to keep his students guessing. In one, he dons a French accent, smokes a fake cigarette, and wears a beret. In another, he's a typical hipster whose cool, aloof demeanor jumps off the screen.

This man loves his job. He dubbed himself "The Modern Marketer," after all. But if you asked Mourey 15 years ago if he'd considered academia, he'd likely look at you sideways, which is exactly what happened on his graduation day from the undergraduate marketing program at Washington University in St. Louis when a professor asked him to consider pursuing a doctorate degree.

“I thought you had to get a master’s degree before getting a Ph.D,” recalls Mourey, who is currently an associate professor in the marketing department at DePaul. “So, my response was that I had to first work on getting a master’s, then work as a manager, then get a Ph.D later in life.” He quickly learned that most schools look to recruit students right out of undergrad for Ph.D programs. He also found out that some schools even frown upon students having a master’s degree because they may decide to go back into the industry instead of staying in academia.

His decision to enter a doctoral program was sealed only a few months later when he was recruited for The PhD Project, a nonprofit organization serving as a support network for BIPOC doctoral candidates. Its mission is to increase the diversity of business school faculty, who, in turn, help mentor and educate the next generation of leaders. Each year, The PhD Project hosts a three-day, annual conference for potential doctoral students; it's where they network with one another as well as business school representatives, professors, and sponsor organizations. Usually held in Chicago, this year’s event has been adapted virtually and occurs Nov. 18-20, with applications to be accepted through Oct. 19.

The program is designed for BIPOC candidates, which is why Mourey, who is half Spanish, was recruited. Originally from Belleville, Ill., he grew up in a household where higher education was vital among his siblings even though both his parents attained only a high school education.

“When you have parents who didn’t have the same opportunities you had, and you are aware of it, you feel pretty terrible not to take advantage of the opportunities when they are made available,” continues Mourey, who was the 1,176th professor to earn his Ph.D through the program when he graduated from the University of Michigan in 2005. According to the 2018 U.S. Census, Hispanics, ages 18 years and older, made up only 4.3 percent of doctoral degrees received.

For Mourey, it’s important to do his part to give back, which is why he’s an enthusiastic advocate of The PhD Project. “Without those resources, you’re flying blind,” he insists. “You have no idea. No one ever explains how a Ph.D works. The trajectory, none of that is clear, especially in my family where we were just glad to be graduating from college.”

Being involved in The PhD Project also influenced his decision on where he would teach after graduating. The program’s participating universities include business programs at Ivy Leagues such as Columbia, Harvard Business School and Yale as well as the likes of DePaul, New York University and Howard. Mourey says he chose DePaul because of its diverse population.

“There is a lot of diversity in the student population, and it was noticeable,” he recalls. “That was not just race or ethnic diversity, but also religious identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status — across the spectrum of any subculture we have.” When he was told there were also a lot of first-generation students at DePaul, he knew he was making the right decision. “Just that part of being one, I knew this was the right thing to do. This is an opportunity to do what was done for me at [The PhD Project].”

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