

The Manage-A-Bull Podcast: How does the UB Full-Time MBA program create future business leaders?

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Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Hi, I'm Vish Gopalakrishnan, and this is Manage-A-Bull Podcast where we have in-depth conversations with students, faculty, staff and alumni, to give you a comprehensive picture into the life at University at Buffalo School of Management. In today's episode, we speak with Caroline Soh, a student in UBs full-time MBA program from Buffalo, New York. In our conversation, we talk about her love for baking and how the UB MBA program has helped her develop her entrepreneurial and leadership skills. Caroline, welcome to the show.

Caroline Soh:

Hi, Vish. Thank you so much for having me on. I'm very excited to share some of my personal experiences with the UB Bulls podcast. And yeah, let's get started.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Hey, I believe congratulations are in order, aren't they? You were recently voted as the president of the Graduate Management Association.

Caroline Soh:

Yeah. Thank you so much, Vish. That's correct, yes. I served on GMA in my first year, and I wanted to bring continuity to the program through a run for president. I'm super thankful for the support of our peers, and I hope to make decisions that are going to lead to the betterment of the UB MBA's program.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Hey, congratulations. And I'm sure this is going to be a start of many great things to come. Since we are on the topic, why don't you tell us a little bit about GMA?

Caroline Soh:

Yeah, I'd love to. The Graduate Management Association is the student governing body of the MBA

program. Our goal is to improve the student experience for students in the MBA. So last year, we did this by facilitating social and community engagement events, and it was a really great way to begin. But it's really important to me and to the student body to host more inclusive events going into next year, I'd like to put professional development seminars, health and wellness events, and more community service events on the calendar.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

And you mentioned that this is just an evolution of the role that you've had with the GMA. You've been involved since day one of arriving at the MBA program. Why do you think it's important for students to take on extracurricular opportunities while in the MBA program?

Caroline Soh:

I truly think that there's so much value to be gained through extracurricular involvement. First, it opens up your circle to peers that you otherwise may not have had the chance to work with, especially because in the first year, it can feel a little bit like you're being siloed to your corporate champions team and to the people in your class section. So it just gives you the chance to meet other people and work with others in the program. Also, participation really increases your chances of being seen and noticed from industry professionals. I've had excellent exposure to professionals at Deloitte and Accenture through my engagement in the MBA consulting group, and I've expanded my professional network because of this face time. And lastly, it provides you with the chance to put words into action. So you learn a lot about leadership and continuous improvement in the classroom. But participation in extracurriculars will provide you with the space and the opportunity to step outside of your comfort zone and be actionable.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. I couldn't agree more. Clubs and associations are absolutely a great way to network with peers and also with local businesses, since a lot of clubs and associations do events and seminars, et cetera, with local businesses. And it's a great way to learn about yourself. And you mentioned leadership ability also. There are of course more concrete interventions designed to help students unlock their full leadership potentials, as part of the course curriculum. Have you explored any of those too?

Caroline Soh:

I have, yeah. So currently I'm taking Leader Core right now. LeaderCORE is an excellent program offered here at UB. It's actually one of the differentiators that sets UB apart from other MBA programs. I'm enrolled in part one. And so far, I'm gaining really valuable insight from the self-reflection logs followed by ongoing conversations with my mentor. There are definitely other in-class opportunities to take lead on. In the fall semester of the first year, you work extensively with your corporate champions teams. Essentially, you're consulting on a case and coming up with the optimal solution. And I found myself exercising leadership skills every day with my team and with professors and in the classroom.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. LeaderCORE is certainly a great program, especially for young people looking to explore their leadership potential. Expanding further on your interest in leadership, why do you think it's important to develop these soft skills, especially in an increasingly quantitative and numbers driven world?

Caroline Soh:

So one of the most valuable takeaways from Tim Maynes' organizational behavior course here at UB is that there's a huge difference between leaders and managers. Leadership skills can be practiced at any level regardless of the title that you have. And a good leader is able to bring out the best qualities in his or her team members. And a good leader can mobilize a group of people to work together towards achieving a shared goal. This ultimately leads to high levels of trust and solid working relationships, resulting in increased efficiency and productivity of the firm. And great leadership is also proven to reduce employee turnover, which over time becomes incredibly costly and damaging to a firm. Leaders act as motivational tools by showing the right path and bringing confidence to the team.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

So I'm sure those skills come in handy when trying to run your own business too. Tell us a bit more about your entrepreneurship venture.

Caroline Soh:

Yeah, absolutely. So I started Heart and Soul Home Bakery when I moved back to Buffalo during the pandemic. I'd been living in Boston for seven years, which is very culturally diverse and has a plethora of multinational food offerings available. I had access to food from all over the world just at the front of my door. So when I moved back to Buffalo, the first thing I did was Google the nearest Korean bakery, and I

got results that showed the nearest bakery was 70 miles away, either in Rochester or across the border. And you know what? I just saw this as an opening in the market, and I knew that I wanted to take my passion for pastry and connect it, my hometown with my Korean-American heritage, by bringing these East Asian pastries to the Buffalo, New York area. And I found it very valuable to have this chance to workshop my bakery alongside my studies because I have my own experiential learning in the form of small business. So an example of this is I just use an activity based costing method, which we learned about in managerial accounting, to identify which activities in the business we're adding value and which we're not. And this type of accounting is something that I hadn't even considered doing before class, with Dr. [inaudible 00:06:57] this semester.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

And that's a great way to connect what you learn in class with actually running a business. And it's certainly an interesting idea, to say the least. And as someone who has tasted some of these delicious pastries, I can certainly vouch for your baking ability.

Caroline Soh:

Thank you.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

But running, or in this case, starting and building momentum for business isn't easy. It requires a lot in terms of resources and help. What are some of the ways in which UB has helped give wings to your ideas?

Caroline Soh:

Yeah, there's a huge wealth of knowledge and connections available at UB through the MBA program. The professors and staff are all incredibly knowledgeable, and I found always willing to extend their time to students, to have professional conversations with them, even if it's not about the class material. Bob Neubert, for example, he teaches an introductory course into entrepreneurship. And he's always extending his time to aspiring entrepreneurs to help them carve out ideas and provide mentorship to these students. I've also noticed that the alumni of the UB MBA really speak volumes about the program. When I was seeking out an internship this past spring, every UB alum I connected with was willing to have an informational call with me, share their knowledge and resources about their company,

solely because I was a UB MBA, and they were extending themselves to me through this connection.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right, and you mentioned professors. They are an incredible source of not just knowledge, but also experience. A lot of our professors have deep connections with the industry and also do consulting and research projects for big companies. So they clearly have great insights that they can provide to students. And this is something that has been a consistent theme in the conversations I've had with other students who have their own mentors also, where the entrepreneurship class, for example, comes up many times. Let's focus on classes a little bit more. You've just finished your two semesters, your first year in the MBA program. What have been some of your favorite classes and why?

Caroline Soh:

So this may also be a recurring theme from students that you speak to, but data modeling with Dianna Cichocki, easily one of the most challenging courses, but the best course I think that I'll come out of this program taking. This course is one that you must take I think if you want to be a competitive candidate in the job market in the coming years. Every organization that I spoke with while searching for an internship was very interested in the data modeling skills that I was learning. And honestly, I believe it helped me stand out as a candidate and secure the internship that I'll have this summer. I also want to give credit to Dianna Cichocki, who is an incredible instructor. She truly gives all her time to her students and really puts an emphasis on wanting her students to learn and understand the material, more than just get the material done and just get an A.

So I think that's definitely something to be noted. I also mentioned it earlier, but I personally really enjoyed organizational behavior with Tim Maynes. I think of it as mixing business management with psychology. It's of course, essentially on the study of how people interact with groups. And you learn all about you make businesses operate more effectively while conquering organizational issues that arise.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. And starting next semester, you'll be able to select courses that help you concentrate in a field of your choice. What areas are you interested in and why?

Caroline Soh:

I'm interested in taking courses in finance and data sciences. My primary reason for enrolling in an MBA

program is to build out my quantitative skillset. So I've spent my whole life working in the hospitality industry, which I thoroughly enjoyed. But as I pivot into a different field, I'd like to use data and information to drive decisions that are really going to be impactful to the organization that I hope to work at.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

And I think UB is a great place for quantitatively inclined learning. Dianna's class for data modeling is definitely one. Couple of students have talked about the finance course offered by Professor Perry. Technically challenging in a field that a lot of students didn't have a background in, but he makes a very complicated subject easy for a lot of people to understand, and he's an interesting character, to say the least. He's very famous and beloved by the students too. So yeah-

Caroline Soh:

I agree.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Those classes often get talked about a lot. And of course, Professor Neubert's entrepreneurship class and the techniques he teaches us, in terms of how to go about actually putting a plan in place for a business idea that you might have. Great resources for sure. Looking back to a year ago, how has the UB MBA program helped you grow both as a person and also as a leader?

Caroline Soh:

The MBA has provided me with all these opportunities to hone different skills like my communication skills, time and team management skills and problem-solving skills. And it's provided me the space to develop relationships with mentors, professors and peers who have helped me address leadership struggles I've faced, been there to provide a fresh set of eyes and advice when I've been stuck on a complicated problem. And they've also been there to nudge me along into my own self-reflection on my decisions and actions. And this level of introspection has actually allowed me to grow beyond what I thought was possible for a young leader.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

So are these new developments ... When you started considering schools for pursuing an MBA, were these the growth areas you were interested in? What surprised you the most about yourself in the past year?

Caroline Soh:

Yeah, I think what surprised me the most was how interested I became in quantitative problem solving. Before I started, I really didn't think I'd ever have an interest in data science. I'm not naturally strong in math or even great with computer programming or technology. But I found such a keen interest in the subject due to my interaction with the professors and with the great course material. It's been inspiring to see how much potential I can unlock just through data modeling. And yeah, I hope my pursuit in these relevant course materials help me to hold a position in that field after graduation.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

And I think that's the best thing that an MBA program that is as intense as ours offers. It's not just the growth that you expected. It's also finding avenues and areas that you never thought you would have a strong inclination towards. I can speak for myself. Finance wasn't something that I ever had any interest in. But now if I look at the courses that I'm taking, they're mostly finance courses. I am a marketing person, I have a marketing background. So that's definitely an interesting thing to learn about yourself as part of the coursework. What would be your advice to our listeners who are also considering their options for which MBA program to apply to or attend?

Caroline Soh:

I think the best advice I can give is to tell aspiring students to reach out to current students and alumni of their desired MBA program, because these are the people who were exactly in your same shoes, and these are the people who are going to be the most honest with you about their experience. Don't be afraid to ask pressing questions. These people don't work for the school, aren't associated. It's not going to get back to the university. The MBA program or the program that you choose, it's for you and you alone, so you deserve to get the most out of it. And you want to have all the information so that you can make the best decision that will lead to the best fit. I actually had an extremely positive experience with the UB MBA ambassadors when I was applied to UB last year. I had a really great conversation with a current student, and it actually really influenced me in my decision to attend UB. So I would definitely say reach out to students and alumni.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

And what advice would you have for students who are starting their first semester with us in the MBA program? I'm sure that'll be different than the ones who are applying.

Caroline Soh:

First and foremost, congratulations on your acceptance into B school. There's a really a new and exciting journey of personal and professional growth ahead. I have five tips for those preparing for their first semester. That would be to push yourself outside of your comfort zone to connect with your peers, network with a purpose, manage your time effectively, look after your physical health, and most importantly, prioritize your mental health. It's too easy to get caught up in busy days, day in and day out. But to consistently produce high performance and avoid burnout, you really need to put your own wellbeing first. So take care of you.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. And you mentioned network with purpose. Would you mind-expanding a little bit more on that?

Caroline Soh:

Yeah, so I think you're always told, "Network, network, network." But be intentional in the connections that you're forging. Don't just say, "Hi", or send an email to send an email. There should be intent and purpose behind that. And I think that also involves the implication of just thinking a couple steps ahead. You also never know where you may end up, especially because Buffalo's a small town. You don't know if, hey, this person that you met at the networking event two years ago, now you're working with them in the office. So I would just say be prepared to always network with a purpose, be intentional, and make sure that you maintain positive connections.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

I think those are great advice. Caroline, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today. This has been a very insightful conversation. If our listeners want to follow your journey, where can they find you?

Caroline Soh:

Yeah. Well, thank you so much for having me, Vish. I hope our listeners found value in our conversation. Please feel free to reach out to me with any questions, or if you'd just like to talk, you can reach me at cnsoh@buffalo.edu or at LinkedIn, [linkedin.com/carolinesoh](https://www.linkedin.com/company/carolinesoh).

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Great. And I'm sure a lot of our listeners would find that very useful. Caroline, thank you and I hope you're have a great day. Thank you for listening to Manage-A-Bull Podcast produced by the Office of Strategic Marketing and Enrollment Management, University at Buffalo. For more information on our programs and offerings, visit management.buffalo.edu. If you would like to be featured on the podcast or would you like to share comments and suggestions, please write to us at gopalak2@buffalo.edu. That's G-O-P-A-L-A-K-2 @buffalo.edu. Thank you, and we will see you in the next one.