

Transcript of Podcast featuring Catherine Scrivo Baker

Podcast was recorded on 3/8/2022

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Hi, I'm Vish Gopalakrishnan and this is the 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's School of Management. In today's episode, we speak with Catherine Baker, a student in UB's full-time MBA program from Buffalo, New York. In our conversation, we talk about her first two semesters in the MBA program, her summer internship experience with M&T Bank, and discussed some tips and tricks for balancing family and school work. Catherine, welcome to the show.

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Hi, Vish. I'm excited to be here today.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Hey, this is going to be a great conversation, I can tell. But before we begin the interview, I wanted to ask you about a very interesting background information that we discovered about you in our research for the podcast. As an undergrad, you majored in art history. That's fascinating. Tell me, how did you decide on art history as your undergraduate area of focus?

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Well, I didn't arrive at it immediately. It's not like I left high school and decided to study art history. It really kind of culminated a number of things that I really enjoy. Growing up or, well still, my father is an artist and he was an elementary school art teacher for 32 years in Buffalo. Maybe it's 33, I don't know, but very long time. So, there was always an emphasis on art and creativity in my house, when we traveled, we went to museums. So, art was always central in my life.

And when I went to start working on my undergraduate degree, I really wasn't sure what I wanted to focus on. And I loved ... after a year or two in taking some general GE requirements, I kind of coupled art and creativity and research and history and found that to be a really interesting discipline. I often got a little bit teased, I think, for deciding to do art history. Often friends and family questioned the usefulness of that degree, and I don't think that they're wrong, I just followed my passion and it worked out for me.

So, after I graduated, I ended up getting a summer internship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and that led into a full-time job. And after that, I moved back to Buffalo and worked at the Albright-Knox. So yeah, I think that's ...

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

That's a fascinating-

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

... nice summation.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Yeah, that's a fascinating turn of events. What's interesting is just the influence that parents have on us growing up and giving us a sense of where we want to end up in our lives. I do wish that more people appreciated art. As a marketing man myself, I think there's tremendous value in exploring our artistic tendencies, and not a lot of people spend the time exploring that aspect of themselves. It certainly opens your mind to new ideas, it makes the world a lot more interesting. So, thanks for sharing that, that's an interesting turn of events. So, moving on to your experience with us in the UB MBA program, let's start at the beginning. So, what made you decide to move from a passion, which is art history, art in general, to business, to an MBA?

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Yeah, so I graduated from my undergrad in 2011, and I guess I started my MBA in 2021, so a full decade between the two. And I had ideas about graduate school a year or two after starting to work at the Met, but I also got married during that time and became a mom. And I like to say that I chose motherhood instead of grad school at that point in my life, because I was actually studying for the GRE and LSAT when I found out I was pregnant. So, pivoted into the role of mother and am so happy that I was able to do that. I am also happy that I was able to continue my career within museums, like after moving back to Buffalo. Museums aren't always the easiest place to find a job, they're pretty competitive, so was lucky in that respect. But after a few years of working for a small nonprofit, I had kind of hit a ceiling in terms of my career.

There wasn't really another role for me to move into, and this corresponded directly with COVID hitting, and I think we all ... the one good thing about COVID was it was a pause and we were able to reevaluate

what we're doing and where we wanted to go. So while grad school was always a goal for me, I took a long time to decide what that looked like, and I found the MBA program at UB and it just seemed like a great fit for the skills that I had kind of gained in my work within museums, specifically information management and operations, but also would be able to, I don't know, develop some other skills that I was hoping to work on.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. Just let's focus on the skills a little bit more here. For so many of the students that I speak with who are pursuing an MBA or NMS, personal growth seems to be a prominent motivator to taking that huge leap, leaving work for a full-time MBA especially. You mentioned skills were important, obviously developing something like that, you had hit a ceiling in your previous job, so you wanted to kind of transition a little bit. If I asked you to list maybe two or three specific things that you wanted to focus on during your time as an MBA student, what would those be?

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Yeah, absolutely. So, I think just my knowledge of general business practices was lacking and understanding the research, the existing bodies of research that have gone into that, different theories of management and leadership and leadership was another goal of mine. I've always felt naturally inclined to act as a leader, but I wasn't really able to do that in that job. So, I really wanted to gain more leadership skills, which I think we'll talk a little bit more about when we touch on LeaderCORE. But I also was very interested in, and this is something that I think, I don't know if it's necessarily unique to UB, but they definitely have a great program, I really wanted to learn more about data analysis and that's one of my concentrations, and I've been able to take a number of classes at this point that have been helpful in building those specific skills that are so desirable in the workforce today.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. So, you made the choice to pursue a full-time MBA and it is a full-time MBA, it's called that for a reason, but it would've been a hard choice to make, leaving or at least cutting back on what seemed like a full career up till that point. Was there ever a moment of doubt in making that decision?

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Of course. I think that it's a leap, you have to have faith in yourself, and I think everybody still struggles with self-doubt and wonders if the decisions that they made are the correct ones. But I think that having that belief in yourself was what really ... what word am I looking for? A parachute maybe, believing in myself was kind of a parachute in the sense that I knew that I could do this and it was a different path, but it was an exciting new one.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. And to complicate things further, as if it already wasn't a difficult decision to make, that required a lot of faith in yourself and kind of investing in a version of yourself that you don't even know exists, a future version of yourself, there was the other aspect of being a mom and being a working professional already, that complicated that decision a little bit more, a little further. Would you mind sharing if and how being a mother factored into your decision, if at all?

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Yeah, I mean, it definitely factored into my decision and it was a big part of juggling the first year of the MBA program I would say. Obviously, like I said before, I chose motherhood before grad school and I'm happy that I did that. I'm happy that my daughter's able to witness me going through this period of time in my life. I really value education, and I'm a firm believer that parents show their children their values every day. And I think that this hard work, she knows that I'm up late at night in my office working, so I think her seeing that is really important.

But the tactical aspect of it is definitely a challenge, and one that I would encourage those students looking to pursue a full-time MBA with children or even a part-time MBA with children, is to have childcare lined up, whether that's with your partner, your family, a third party, it's really important to know that you're not going to be available sometimes to make dinner, to put them to bed. It's about finding that balance and everybody has a different balance, but knowing that you're definitely going to be in some wobbly times and to prepare.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

I think you hit it out of the park when you said that it's important to have an understanding partner, it's definitely important to have an understanding family because you're going to need help, right?

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Yes.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

An MBA is not easy, it is extremely taxing on your time, so it certainly helps to have a network of people around you who are there to help you through the ups and downs of the program, and there will be many. So, you applied to the program, walk us through the application process, particularly the essay part of the application.

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Yeah, absolutely. I found the program and I decided to apply relatively quickly. I think I found it early in January of 2021, and I think the first deadline was February. So, I applied in about one month's time, which felt very exciting, but it feels like maybe I rushed into it a bit. I'm happy with my decision nonetheless. Anyways, so let me think about this question. Do you want me to talk about the essay first or do you want me to talk about my process?

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Anything you like.

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Okay. So, I think the process of applying was not hard, and I have to say that throughout every step of the process, I spoke with an MBA student ambassador, which was such a great resource to have before I wrote my essay, before I had my interview. After I got into the program, I reached out to different student ambassadors and got some of the best advice and also encouragement to keep going, to make this leap, to see how worthwhile it really is. And specifically, for the essays, I mean, I love writing and it was fun for me to sit down and put my hopes and dreams onto paper and send them off.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. The application process can seem complicated, it can even be intimidating for a lot of students because how often do we actually take the time to sit through and articulate in what 200, 300 words, what it is that we see ourselves doing? Where is it that we are planning to go with our lives? What are our values? And I think the exercise of going through that, even in general, even if you weren't applying

to an MBA program, is definitely a worthwhile thing to do. I can speak for myself, I was very surprised by my ambition and the goals that I had for myself that I had never taken the time to put down on a piece of paper. So, the process of writing an application and an essay and the process of talking to students who are going through the process themselves or had gone through it earlier, certainly puts a lot of things in perspective, and it certainly helps you put a great application forward.

So that's great advice. Definitely talk to people who are in the program, definitely reach out to student ambassadors because they know what it's like. They have gone through it just a year earlier, so they certainly know the ins and out outside the process. So, you apply, and you get into the program. Let's focus on the first two semesters in the MBA program. What have been some of your favorite classes and why?

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Yeah. I think organizational behavior was my favorite class the first semester, with Dr. Timothy Maynes. He really was able to ... first of all, he's a wonderful educator and he knows how to keep students engaged and interested. But for me, from almost a decade's long period of work experience, full-time work experience, it was really validating to see that people have studied some of the behaviors and issues that I had seen thus far. So that was the most fascinating part about that class. I also really enjoyed foundations of entrepreneurship with Robert Neubert. I personally someday would love to own my own business, though I have about a million business ideas, so we'll see which one takes flight. But just setting that foundation of how to write a business plan, how to create a pitch, where to even pitch something like that was very interesting. I also was able to take data modeling, which just changes the way you think about information, and that was a very excellent class, though a lot of work.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. Even as an experienced working professional, as somebody who, as you said, 10 years of work experience, having seen the ins and outs of how an organization works, one of the things that

experienced professionals definitely bring in is that they've worked with a lot of teams. Teamwork is something that a lot of us have experienced in the past before coming to the program. Now, a unique aspect of the UB MBA experience is the high degree of emphasis that is put on teamwork. Students are divided into teams of four to six students each, and work very closely with their teammates on all projects, especially in the first semester. The interesting thing is that students come from very different backgrounds, and all of them have unique skillsets, but also unique works and working styles. Who did you have in your team, and what was that experience of working so closely with a group of four or five people, what was that like?

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Yeah, it was great to jump right into the program with kind of a group of buddies, that was really helpful, just people to sit next to when you don't know anybody else or while you're still meeting everybody else. My group was very unique, we had one student who came from the engineering school at UB, and he was also in the military, so working in the, I think it was National Guard, every couple weeks he needed to go to base, so that was interesting. We also had a doctor, older students, couple years older than me who had a number of different medical degrees and had decided to add an MBA onto his resume. And then we also had a young woman who had just graduated with her undergraduate degree in business from UB. And so wild variety of skillsets, wild variety of work experience, but all of those different perspectives I think help shape the teamwork that you do and I'm going to leave it there.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Perhaps it's fate that we're talking about teamwork and my phone decides to go off in the background with the Justice League theme as my ringtone.

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Oh, perfect.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

That's very fitting. Apologies for that, I've turned it off. I should have done that earlier. Now, teamwork is one aspect in which the UB MBA program is so unique, but the other aspect of the UB MBA program that's quite different is the fastidious focus on leadership development. There are a number of interventions available to students for honing their leadership abilities, but the one that stands out, and

you had mentioned this earlier too, is LeaderCORE, which is this selective program that takes place over several semesters, to help students become better leaders. Tell us about your experience in LeaderCORE so far.

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Yeah, absolutely. So, I applied to LeaderCORE early in the semester my first year and was accepted to the program, but the class and the content didn't really start until the second semester. LeaderCORE has been a great experience for me because one of the main central tenets of the program is reflection and keeping a log of all that you do. And there are a number of competencies that they emphasize within the program, such as teamwork, organization, blanking on other aspects.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

I remember results orientation was one of them, strategic thinking is the other one, there are a few more. And students can pick and choose which track they want to become proficient in.

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Exactly. So, there's an expectation that you are working on yourself and reflecting on the experiences that you take, to become proficient in various areas. So specifically, one that I wanted to work on is strategy and developing that framework for success moving forward into the future, but also kind of planning and understanding the road ahead before just jumping right in. So that has been an excellent part of LeaderCORE. UB has a Center for Leadership, it's CLOE, what is CLOE? Center for Leadership and ...

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Organizational Effectiveness.

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

And Organizational Effectiveness, thank you. So, we actually work with the ... what's his name?

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Jim Lemoine, right?

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Jim Lemoine.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Yeah, I think we're thinking about the same person. Yeah.

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Yes, sorry. So UB has the Center for Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness, and the head of that program is Dr. Jim Lemoine, and he came in a number of times throughout the semester and gave us specific talks about teamwork, process, problem solving, all sorts of meaty topics that we dug into and learned a little bit more about ourselves in the process. So, I'm happy with my choice to be part of LeaderCORE, I'm a little nervous, coming up we have to do a ropes course, and I'm not the most athletic person, so I keep meaning to start training for that or doing something. Anyway, so looking forward to that. But I think the best part of it is how well it was received on my resume. LeaderCORE is a highly respected program, especially in the Western New York area, and employers recognize it coming from UB MBAs. So, it helped me stand out in my application process for summer internships.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. And speaking of internships, you were one of the students who got an internship over the summer with a very prestigious organization and a very well-known organization in Western New York. How was the experience of the internship search for you? Any suggestions for students on conducting a successful internship search? Wow, I am slurring my words. And if you could talk to us a little bit about your experience with M&T Bank over the summer, that'll be great too.

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Yeah, absolutely. So, my internship search, I think started the first day of the MBA, talking to people, networking, hearing about second year's most recent experiences interning. So, I knew that there were a lot of options. And the M&T Summer Executive Associate Program is fairly competitive, and I wasn't sure if I would even qualify or whatnot, but one of our administrators, Erin O'Brien, really pushed me to do it and encouraged me to apply. And I also worked with the Career Resource Center on preparing for that interview. So, they were amazing, they helped me tailor my resume to the position specifically, they

helped me do a mock interview and work through different questions that they already knew would be asked, because previous students have also been part of this program.

And they also helped connect me with internal stakeholders here at M&T. So, employees who came from UB, and so maybe not employees, stakeholders I should say. They helped me connect with UB alumni that currently work at M&T Bank, and that was extremely helpful to gain their perspective. I don't think I would've gotten this internship if I hadn't sought the help of the Career Resource Center, and I can't say nicer things about them because they were so supportive and just bend over backwards to offer help in this process.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. And how has the experience been so far with M&T?

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

The experience has been amazing. I really love this program, I've got to learn about a whole new industry. I mean, I come from art museums and this is a financial institution. I would've never thought I would ever work for a bank, but I don't have nicer things to say about this organization. Not only are the people warm and welcoming, but they all also come from a variety of different backgrounds. I've actually met a couple people who either studied a humanities in their undergraduate degree, or I even met somebody who used to work at the Smithsonian Institution. So, it's been really interesting to see how, despite not having a background in finance, there are roles for you in large organizations like this.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Wow. And that's certainly very encouraging to a lot of students who are looking to get into finance, which is such a hard industry to get into in the first place, to know that there are so many resources available and help available to tailor your resume, to prepare for interviews, to seek those opportunities. Doors really are open, it's just up to you to put in the effort and walk through them. So, finished your summer internship, now that you have embarked on your second year, and finally year in the program, you have the chance to select courses that help you concentrate in a certain field. And you had mentioned that organizational behavior was something you enjoyed, data analytics was the other thing. What are the areas that you are thinking about pursuing in your second year and why?

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Yeah, I'm definitely going into furthering my analytics skills. I'm taking a predictive analytics class this fall. I'm also taking a project management class. I have done project management before, but I think it'll be really interesting to see how it's framed in a classroom setting and to learn from somebody much more experienced than myself. I'm also working with Dr. Maynes as a second-year mentor. So, like we had mentioned earlier, all the groups, all the first year MBA groups are actually paired with a second-year mentor that helps them work through maybe some rough patches or just helps them with the program and what to expect in general. But that's also a class, so it'll be specific and direct experience managing people and mentoring. So, I'm really looking forward to those. I'm also finishing at LeaderCORE, or well, taking the second course of LeaderCORE this semester. And I can't think of my last course, but to be honest, I think I might be changing it up.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Well, that's the benefit of an MBA, you can pick and choose the path that you want to go to, and there's so many options.

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Yeah, so many options, and I'm going to sound like a big nerd here, but there are so many more courses I wish I could stay and take, but they just won't fit in.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. And I think that's a very common sentiment with a lot of students, FOMO is real, especially in the MBA. So, it's been a year in, you've had so many wonderful experiences. Looking back to a year ago when you were applying to the program, how has the MBA program helped you grow both as a person and as a leader?

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Yeah, absolutely. I think that, first of all, as somebody who was feeling stuck in their present career, the MBA program really helped define some new horizons for me and see that there are so many different possibilities out there. And like you said, the doors are open, you just have to take advantage of them and put the work in to get through them. So that was one way. I also think the teamwork aspect was really helpful. I was definitely an independent contributor in my former role, and so just learning the power of teams and how much more work you can accomplish and you can elevate work by cross

collaboration and leaning in on different people's skills and perspectives. And I think also in terms of leadership, it's not necessarily something to react to. Do you know what I mean? I think that I've really, excuse me, I've learned about, I think, observing before acting and fitting that into strategy as well, understanding the situation that you're in before making a plan forward.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. Yeah. Circling back to the idea of strategy in LeaderCORE too, just thinking through a situation, thinking through two or three steps ahead before embarking on a new project, for example. Final question, what would be your advice to our listeners who are also considering options for which MBA program to apply to or attend, doesn't matter if they end up applying to UB, but what's your main advice to our listeners?

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Reach out to the program and speak with somebody, speak with a student, if possible. They are going to give you the most, it might not be the best advice, but it's advice from people who are in your role or in the role you're about to be in, and it will give you a good perspective on what to expect, both in the application process, but then also within your first year. So, if you are accepted, I spoke with a student ambassador just to kind of understand what the program was going to be like more holistically. So, speak with somebody.

I would also recommend, I think UB kind of sent out a reading list ahead of the MBA, and I would say check out some of those books. One specifically that stands out to me, it was the Art of Learning, I'm forgetting the author's name, but that was recommended and it was really helpful in kind of reframing, or as an adult going back to school and understanding maybe we've all, with life experiences, we've gained different perspectives and how to look at learning. Maybe 10 years ago I would've been a very different student than I am now, so I think that's important as well.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. I think that was great advice, and I think there's a lot of gems in the conversation we've had today. Catherine, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us and sharing your experiences. If our listeners want to follow your journey, where can they find you?

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Yeah, absolutely. I am on LinkedIn, you can find me there, Catherine Scrivo Baker. I'm also an MBA student ambassador, so please feel free to make an appointment with me and come talk to me if you never need to.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Wonderful. Catherine, this has been a wonderful experience. Thank you.

Catherine Scrivo Baker:

Thank you, Vish. It was so nice chatting with you today.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

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