

Transcript of Podcast featuring Sydney Merritt

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Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Hi, I'm Vish Gopalakrishnan and this is the Manageable 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 Sydney Merritt, an MS in accounting student from Rochester, New York. In our conversation, we talk about her experience in the MS accounting program, her extracurricular experience, and her views on how students can aim to achieve more than just a degree during their time at UB. Sydney, welcome to the show.

Sydney Merritt:

Thanks, Vish. Thanks so much for having me. Looking forward to a great conversation.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Yeah, I think this is going to be great and very informative. But before we get into the interview, I wanted to ask you an interesting thing we learned about you during our research for this podcast. During your undergraduate here at UB, you were a member and later the president of the Business Information Honor Society, Beta Alpha Psi. For those of us who don't know, what is Beta Alpha Psi?

Sydney Merritt:

Sure. So exactly what you said before, Business Information Honor Society. And I think on the surface, that's exactly what it is. But for me, in my experience, it was a community for me. I joined when I was a sophomore, so I didn't know too many people on campus. UB can be a very big place sometimes, so Beta gave me a sense of belonging, community, and I found really like-minded people where I was able to be myself and learn and grow alongside these people. And from being a sophomore onward to then my senior year, you're right, I was leader, president of Beta Alpha Psi, and that is one of the best things that I ever did for myself. It was a lot of work and I learned so much about myself, about how to lead people, how to communicate with people on a variety of levels, whether it be student to student or student to fully grown professionals that are not necessarily in accounting, and really event coordination. It was an incredible ride. Highly, highly recommend anyone to join Beta Alpha Psi, especially if you're accounting. Definitely it's worth it.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Wow, that's absolutely incredible. It's always nice to hear from people who have done more than just classwork and coursework, so that's a great experience and thanks for sharing. But it's not the only organization you've been a part of during your time at UB. Currently you are a full-time student in the UB MS accounting program, but are also an active member of several organizations including the School of Management's Diversity and Inclusion Committee. Tell us a bit more about the DE&I committee and your role with them.

Sydney Merritt:

Absolutely. Sure. I joined, let's see, I want to say that was junior year. So we were still primarily virtual at the time, just given the pandemic, and this was a new initiative that rolled out after the protests and just the social justice movement that was happening back in the summer of 2020. This was a part of the School of Management's response to that issue. And so, I got in the kind of the founding year and I was a part of a subcommittee of this called Inclusive Conversations. And again, I'm so thankful and grateful that I was in the position that I was in to be a part of that.

We had exactly what it sounds like, inclusive conversations about a whole wide range of issues. And it was conversations not just with students. And I think that's what really was a huge value proposition of being in that position is we had conversations with the dean, with other professors, with faculty, and it was an incredible opportunity to really just have open, productive conversations. And that was my primary role with them. Now, just like you said, I'm a full-time student in the MSA program. It's a pretty demanding program, so I've had to take a couple of steps back, but I've just been a part of just event coordination, backend stuff, and the DE&I committee is still doing incredible work. They just had the multicultural mixer, I want to say two weeks ago, and really they're striving to just further the conversation on a wide range of social justice issues.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. So am I correct in understanding that it is a student committee? It is run by students and it is for students, and it is a platform by which student voices, especially minority student voices of diverse backgrounds, can be represented at the university level?

Sydney Merritt:

That is correct, yes. We do have faculty guidance, but really there's two graduate assistants that are the

primary driving leaders of this. And it's really empowering, especially for myself who's a minority, to feel like I have that space and to feel like I have a place to have my voice be heard.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. It is an incredible committee and they do a lot of excellent work that I know of. So thank you for kind of your service on it essentially, because it is a voluntary position. It's not a paid thing. So now, let's go back a few years because I want to understand your history a little bit better before UB and before you started your undergraduate at UB. Tell us about who you were before and what goals you had for yourself before starting your higher education journey.

Sydney Merritt:

This question, I love this question honestly. I think that truthfully, I didn't really know who I was before I came to school, and I think that was a major part of the driving force for me of pursuing higher education. Going back to high school me, I was not super academically inclined. That was not my primary focus. I was kind of lost, didn't know what I wanted to do with my life necessarily. I had a big grand picture of being some high powered lawyer and getting to ride through corporate America and make a ton of money, but honestly, at my core, what were my values? What kind of citizen did I want to be in this world? I didn't know. And so that was really the primary motivator for me. It was just, who am I? What are my values? And how am I going to make a difference in this world? And I'm very thankful to be able to say that 18 year old me to now, we've gotten closer to figuring out what it is that I'm looking for.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

And that's such a unique journey in the sense that, it's not unique in the sense that having a sense of self discovery is often the reason why a lot of people choose higher education, because it's like, I don't know where I'm going, so I'm just going to go to college and figure it out. But what's unique about it is that a lot of people don't actually end up doing that. A lot of people continue to struggle for a long time. So it's really heartening to see that you've kind of discovered what your voice is, what your values are. But also you mentioned citizenship.

That is such an interesting perspective to take. How do you become a better individual who can contribute and give back to society and the community that we are a part of? That's truly inspiring. So wanted to discover your values, wanted to understand who you were, you apply to UB, you get into the undergraduate program. I think you started off not with accounting and started off with a different major in mind, different ideas in mind. You mentioned lawyer, so perhaps that is what you started with. But I'm curious about it. I'm sure you get asked this question a lot. Why accounting?

Sydney Merritt:

Yep. That's honestly the age-old question. And you're right, when I first came here, I was double majoring in communications and psychology on the pre-law track. I was going to be a corporate attorney. That was absolutely that or nothing. But then, it was a combination of, that's not to say that I've given up entirely on law, but that is not what aligns with my skill sets and what I'd like to do right now. So when I was trying to figure out, okay, if not communications and psychology to go to law school, what do I do? And I had a conversation with my internship supervisor. At the time, I was doing an internship with a local law firm in high school, and I had a conversation with friends, family, and just trying to figure out what should I do? And I landed on accounting from a lot of just conversations around how can I use my skills?

And then from there, I changed my major here at UB and I got into a freshman seminar course. And it wasn't specifically for accounting. My recitation underneath that seminar was for accounting. I had a really awesome professor who entirely sold me on the major. And I think ultimately, I liked the idea of using problem solving, using critical thinking and all of those skills in accounting where it was something that was tangible. Not to say that there's always a perfect solution and answer, but I wanted to be able to use the critical thinking skills in a manner that it was something that was stable, something that I felt like I could be good at. And accounting gave me that. I wanted stability, but I also didn't want to feel like I was trapped in something. For a long time, I was thinking finance. But finance, you can only really stick in finance.

You can't go from finance into accounting or really into a whole lot of other things. Accounting for me is, I'm looking at it right now as a stepping stone. It gives me a broad range of options, which I know when you think of accounting, you don't think, oh, you can do a million things. But you really can. And I could talk for hours about all the things you can do with accounting. But I wanted to give myself a solid foundation so that 10 years down the line, if I want to change my career, I have the ability to do that.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Wow. So you've stuck with accounting for most of your academic career. So you've moved into it your sophomore year, your second year, right, as an undergrad, and then continued through, decided to pursue a master's degree in accounting. You've already touched upon a few things like critical thinking and personal development. But from a self-development perspective, how would you say the experience has shaped you as a person, of being not just a student, but being a student studying accounting at UB?

Sydney Merritt:

I think that with accounting, because we're exposed to so many different industries, so many different types of companies, every business, they got to keep the books somehow. So yes, we're understanding the language of business and the numbers, but we're also understanding the reasoning behind decisions that management makes. So absolutely the critical thinking skills and the problem solving that I already mentioned before. But I think also just understanding how companies, the decisions that they're making are affecting their balance sheets and being able to zoom out a little bit to see the bigger picture. One excellent example of this is ESG reporting. Okay? We're seeing a huge, huge rise in corporations that are understanding that it's about more than just their profits. People in society today, they care also, what kind of impact are you having on the rest of the world? And I think because I was in a position of I'm looking at the numbers and I'm seeing how management's decisions are affecting those numbers, and I'm able to see what is the market's or what is the consumer's behavior and their opinions? How is that influencing management?

I think all of that allowed me to understand just how much of an impact us as consumers are able to have at times. I was able to understand the other part of ESG is a lot of times that social aspect, the volunteering and the time commitments that corporations will make to other organizations. I was able to see a little bit more, even in corporate America, which is not always known for giving back to others, I was able to see that aspect of it and it impacted me to want to also be able to say, okay, yes, I'm a part of corporate America, but I'm also able to provide service, give my time to other organizations.

It's not just all corporate America, nothing else. I can kind of split myself a little bit and I can have an impact in those social justice movements that I really care about and be a part of corporate America. And I think that being in accounting, I was able to gain a wider perspective in a sense. So yeah, the critical thinking, the problem solving, but really, I think it just gave me greater perspective on this world and society as a whole.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

If I could summarize, the favorite thing that you said to me as part of that answer was how it gave you a broader perspective. Oftentimes, people have the sense that, okay, corporate America is either just bad or they're going to be nonprofit and they're all about service. I think developing a much more comprehensive understanding of how business functions work and how they integrate, using accounting as a lens, using money as a lens, definitely allows for more broader interpretation of where the impact is happening and where we can drive the impact better. Because you're able to see how the money is flowing and what the shifting priorities of the companies are.

So that's a great perspective to share. Now, a full-time degree of any kind is a very long commitment for many people, and perhaps that's why students think long and hard about what is it that they're looking for in their ideal program? What do they want to get out of it? I'm sure you also had a long list of requirements, and I'm talking in particular about your decision to pursue master's in accounting, of what you were looking for. What was your criteria and how did the UB MS accounting program fit that requirement?

Sydney Merritt:

Absolutely. You're entirely right, and I think sometimes people don't realize how much of a commitment they're making until they're in the middle of it. And I think for me, as I was going in and I was transitioning from undergrad into my MS, I knew that what had helped me so much in undergrad was the people that I was around as well as just understanding the big picture goal that I had, which was at the time becoming a certified public accountant, so getting my CPA certification. And those two are still major, major requirements for me. And the UB MSA program had exactly both of those things. I already knew from being in the undergrad, the faculty, the students that I was around, I really enjoyed that community that I had, as well as just how the program is structured. UB is very unique in that you're not just getting your master's in accounting here. For example, I am specifically focusing in internal audit and risk management.

So there's different tracks that you can fall under. You have tax, you have data analytics, you have external audit, all of those things. That's very rare. Not every school has the accreditation to be able to do that. So I knew I wanted to be able to focus on being prepared for the CPA exam, but also to focus a little bit more on the areas of accounting that I'm actually interested in. So I took some fraud classes, I took some IT audit classes, just things that were more specialized, so I wasn't just continuing to get a more broad high level education. And UB really fit that criteria. It was really the combination of the

professors, the students, and just how this program is organized, that it was a perfect fit for me.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. The high degree of customizability for the different tracks that you're interested in while meeting that base requirement of, is it going to help me clear the CPA exam? It is certainly a reason that we hear a lot in this program from other students in the MSA program. But the UB accounting, especially the master's program, is known to be quite rigorous. It's not everybody's cup of tea, right? How is the in-class experience different from your undergrad experience with UB?

Sydney Merritt:

Sure, yeah. And it honestly just plays right off of my previous point that in the undergrad, they're giving you an excellent foundation. You learn so much about accounting and you absolutely could start your career with that knowledge base, and I think you would have an excellent opportunity with that information. But the master's program takes it to the next level. Again, yes, it's a little bit more rigorous, a little bit more demanding, but you're also just specializing a little bit more. So I'm not a huge tax person. I don't really enjoy tax that much. I only took one of those classes. I was able to really narrow in and focus on the areas that I think I want to experience in my career. So I think that that's the main difference. Also, just in the master's program, even outside of the academic portion of it, you are treated more as a young professional than as a student.

So they understand, okay, a lot of us are getting ready to go into the workforce. We're studying for our certification. And they treat us less as students that need their hands held and need us to be walked through the syllabus. They treat us more as coming into the workplace and we are here. There's a certain level of expectation. And I think that just having the opportunity to adjust to that before actually going out into the workforce, that's another just huge value add of the master's program here, that you get that experience of being treated like a young professional.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. So those are the ways in which they're different. The rigor is different, and one program treats you more like a professional who's ready to go into the workforce and the other one is focused a little bit more on just the fundamentals of accounting, just giving you the necessary tools so that if you didn't want to pursue a master's immediately, you could still go into the workforce. In what ways are the programs complementary to each other than?

Sydney Merritt:

So I think this is kind of an obvious one, but because you have your foundation here, because you have your foundation in UB, and then I continued to build upon that foundation in UB, they know what I know. They know what I have learned, what I haven't learned. They know what areas have been emphasized more than others. And I think also what's really nice about the accounting and law department here, the professors talk to each other and say, okay, what units are you covering right now? How can I make it so that these students, they're really emphasizing one area?

And so, you can take what you're learning in your IT audit class and you can also apply it to your data analytics class right now. So I think the coordination I've seen has been really, really nice, that they understand comprehensively what is my knowledge base and what are the areas that we can supplement that a little bit? So I think, yeah, they're absolutely complementary to one another, but it's really, it's kind of broad. It's difficult to give exact specifics, but the professors here, I think the main thing is just they know what we don't know and how to supplement it.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. In class learning is obviously an important component of the learning experience for a lot of students, right? But becoming a better individual, a more well-rounded manager, leader, is also a recurring theme when graduate students are asked about their choice of pursuing a master's degree. From your experience in the MS accounting program, why is it important for students, especially those in accounting, to focus on developing their leadership skills beyond the technical knowledge of spreadsheets and understanding how to do a journal, et cetera? Apart from the technical aspects of accounting, why is it important for students to go beyond that to develop their leadership skills?

Sydney Merritt:

Yeah, absolutely. College is so much more than a degree, so much more than the technical skills that you're going to learn. It really is, I think for me, the main thing is I'm going to go out into the workforce, I'm going to be a part of a team. And especially in accounting, the way that it's organized, for me, for example, the firm that I'm going into, I'll be an associate, so I'm like the lowest rung on this ladder. So there's not a whole ton of leadership for me to do directly, but above me, I have a senior associate, I have a manager. And the goal is ideally to progress through the ranks and eventually become that manager, become that senior, become that partner even if you really want to go all the way through. The way that accounting is designed is there's a very systematic flow through your position.

So as I'm going from associate to senior associate, I'm going to have the next class of people that are coming in and are going to be associates. And they're going to be looking to me to give them advice and guidance, just like I will be looking to my senior and asking, okay, these are the questions that I have. How can I become a better employee? How can I become a better teammate? All of those things. Because accounting isn't just sitting in a cubicle by yourself and filling out your spreadsheet. It really is very team oriented. You're all working towards one goal, especially in audit. You need to understand that leadership and team dynamic so that you can be the best team player you possibly can be. So yes, the technical aspects are great, but if you don't have the interpersonal skills, if you don't have the communication skills to be an effective team member, you're harming yourself and you're harming your team, and it's going to be a lot more difficult to find success in the accounting field.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Just from this conversation alone and also from some of the conversations we've had before the interview, it's clear to me that when you decided to pursue higher education, it was with the notion that you wanted something more than just a degree, right? More than just the technical knowledge and understanding it. It was almost a journey in self-discovery. You were trying to figure out who you were. Tell us why that was important to you and why it should be important to other students also.

Sydney Merritt:

Yeah, honestly, it's difficult when you are an 18, 19 something year old, you're a 20 something year old, to have that perspective. But school is such a small portion of your life, and this is something that I'm still trying to remind myself of and keep it top of mind, because sometimes you really get so focused on just the school things and I need to do well in school. But it's such a small fraction of your life. There's going to be a whole bunch of years where you're not a student. You are a friend, you are a family member, you are a leader, you are a coworker, you are on the board of some organization. Whatever it might be. There is so much more to life than school. And I feel like, again, we kind of get bogged down in thinking it's just all about school.

But because I was able to recognize and identify, I want more than just the academics. I want to have a long successful life where I feel like I made a difference in this world. For me, that's just something inherent in who I am that I want to change my small corner of the world in whatever positive way that I'm able to. And so, I knew that I could use college as a tool for learning what is my place in this world and how can I make those small changes? How can I make a difference in even one person's life? So I

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think understanding life is so much more than just school, that was what really, really made this so important to me.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. Life is absolutely so much more than school and academics. So can you tell us how UB was able to provide you with resources you needed to have a much more fulfilling experience as a student here beyond academics?

Sydney Merritt:

Yeah, absolutely. A part of it, honestly, is the connections. Especially in the school of management, I've been able to foster excellent relationships with a lot of the faculty and staff that are here and beyond just, okay, well, I don't know how I'm going to pass this class, or I don't know how I'm going to get a job. I've really formed mentoring relationships with a lot of these people because I went out of my way to say, I understand you know a lot more than I do. I want to learn from you. I want to understand how you were successful. And I think first has to be the relationships and just the amount of time and willingness that the professors here will put in and invest in you is incredible. It is almost unmatched, honestly. I think that they really are supportive, and as much as you are willing to invest in yourself, as much as you are willing to put in time and energy into the relationship, they will give back to you as well.

So absolutely the relationships and even just the financial aid resources. I wanted to be able to go to Costa Rica for a global programs trip. And I talked with a professor and they said, okay, here's some scholarship opportunities for you to look into. Here's some grants that you can look into, and there's a plethora of resources in the school of management that if you want to do something, look into the WOW funds, look into the scholarships that are available online, especially in the accounting and law department. We have an incredible alumni base that gives so much time and money back to us. Look into this. They really do care and want to work to set us up for success. So really just the relationships with professors, the alumni, and just even if it comes down to the financial resources, there's plenty around.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. Speaking of professors, what have been some of your favorite classes in the program so far?

Sydney Merritt:

Yeah, I think, let's see. For classes, I'm going to contradict myself a little bit. I am not a tax person at all. However, I'm very, very, very grateful for the tax class that I took in the MSA program last fall. I am currently studying for the tax portion of the CPA exam, and I know without a doubt in my mind, this professor knew how the CPA exam was set up. They knew just what we were going to be facing before we even knew. So many of us have said, wow, they really took the time and put in the time and energy to make sure that we were set up for success on this exam. So now I feel so much more comfortable that it's not all brand new. So I'd say the tax class that I took is probably one of my favorites.

And then, the audit class that I took in the fall as well. That was unique in that we had two professors actually for that class. And our professor, one of them was an executive in residence. I feel like us as students, we don't hear that title too many times, but essentially it just means they were somebody that came from the industry and they have excellent experience. In his case, he was a former partner for KPMG, and so he was able to bring that real life experience and bring it to life. So we weren't just looking at a textbook and saying, oh, it'll be like this I hope. He was telling us real stories of what life was like, and I think it was just so nice to see it not in an academic setting. It was really, really interesting to get the real world experience from him.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. You mentioned real world experience, but you've also mentioned a lot of resources and things that are available beyond classes. And obviously we started the conversation talking about some of the organizations that you've been a part of. What have been a few ways in which you've been able to enhance your experience in the accounting program beyond the classroom?

Sydney Merritt:

Yeah. I think I mentioned before that I was just in Costa Rica over spring break. I went with the global programs team. It wasn't specifically focused in accounting. It was focused on social innovation and entrepreneurial leadership. But I was able to use the skills that I've learned in accounting, like the problem solving and the critical thinking, in some of the projects that we were working on. And it was so nice to see just how those skills are transferrable across all of business and really all of life. But it was nice to bring that aspect. I was one of the few accounting majors that went on that trip, so it was nice to just coordinate with a lot of differently minded people. I think accounting, you tend to think of very similar people, all very type A and numbers and whatever, but it was just nice to, yeah, yeah, it was really nice to just see a different side of business.

So absolutely global trips like that. But I also volunteer with Buffalo Collegiate Charter School, and so, they're a Title One school here local in Buffalo, and they were just an organization that I fell in love with in undergrad, and I never really looked back. I was able to do a lot of, just more so organization and just organization and helping on the back end. So I worked with students a lot, but I was able to actually work with the school's headmaster and the school secretary, and just a lot of the people behind the scenes that make that school run. I was able to share a little bit of my perspective as a student and as somebody in accounting to share kind of the strategic mindset a little bit. So I think those two have had the biggest impact on me during the accounting program.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Well, you have had an extremely busy student life, if I say so myself. You've done so much. You've been involved in so many activities, internships and organizations, and obviously academics. Now that your long history with UB is coming to an end like history that started before the pandemic, through the pandemic, and now after the pandemic. What's next for Sydney?

Sydney Merritt:

Yeah, I can't believe it's coming to an end already. It feels like it was just yesterday, and it feels like a long time ago. All at the exact same time. I will be going back to Rochester. Like you said earlier, that's my hometown. And I'll be joining PricewaterhouseCoopers in their external audit department. I actually am really, really grateful. I was able to intern with them, and so I was able to advocate a little bit more for what areas I was interested in. So I'll be focusing a lot more on nonprofits and universities in the external audit department. So I'm really, really excited to be jumping into that sector.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Yeah. And we are proud to have you soon as an alumni of the School of Management. Sydney, this has been a great conversation and there's a lot of gems in here to inspire people to do more than just coursework and classwork. So this would be my final question. What would be your advice to our listeners, especially those who are interested in the MS accounting program, who are considering different programs perhaps, on why UB might be a really good fit for them?

Sydney Merritt:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think this kind of applies in general, but figure out what is your why? Why are

you coming here? And if it's because I don't know what I'm looking for, that's okay. That was my reason too. But figure out what it is that you want at the end of this, and then chase after that goal with everything that you have. Sometimes that goal is going to change. That's okay. But come into it knowing what you want out of it in the end. Just even if it's in the abstract, have a general idea and a goal that you can almost put your hands on and say, even when it gets really tough, that's what I'm working towards.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Yeah, I think that's great advice. Just staying curious about who you are. It's easy to be curious about other people and other things and programs, but just staying curious about who you are and being active and concerted in your effort to that self discovery is definitely a key learning for a lot of really well performing, high performing individuals that we have had on this show before. Sydney, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today and sharing your experiences. As I said, there's a lot of great insights in there that our listeners would benefit from. If our listeners wanted to continue to follow your journey, where can they find you?

Sydney Merritt:

Sure. Well, first, thank you so much for having me. I really do appreciate it. And in terms of following my journey, you can check me out on LinkedIn. It's just my name, Sydney Merritt.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Okay, perfect. Sydney, thank you so much. And thank you for listening to the Manageable podcast, produced by the Office of Strategic Marketing and Enrollment Management at the 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 you would 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. Hope you have a great day and we will see you in the next one.