

## Balancing Academics and Athletics: A Conversation with Alexia Hecico

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Patrick Lageraaen:

Welcome to another episode of the UB School of Management podcast. My name is Patrick Lageraaen and I'm your host. Today's guest is Alexia Hecico. She did her undergrad in business administration at UB and is currently an MSBA grad student at the School of Management. In addition to this, she's a member of the Women's Cross-Country and Track and Field teams at UB. We talk about her academic and athletic experience, extracurricular experiences at UB, and how she's able to manage all of these commitments. All right, Alexia, thanks for being here.

Alexia Hecico:

Thanks for having me.

Patrick Lageraaen:

So I've been really excited for this conversation just because I really don't know all that much about how athletics and academics mix, so I'm hoping you can shed some light on that. So to start us off, can you just introduce yourself and what your role here is at UB?

Alexia Hecico:

So my name is Alexia Hecico. I'm an international student from Romania, and I'm also part of the track and field and cross-country teams here. I did my undergrad in business administration with a concentration in marketing, and I'm now pursuing my master's in business analytics.

Patrick Lageraaen:

And you went right into this master's program after undergrad?

Alexia Hecico:

Yes. I finished my undergrad in May of 2023, and then I came back right after.

Patrick Lageraaen:

You said you're from Romania, when did you come to the US?

Alexia Hecico:

I came here in 2019 right after I graduated high school.

Patrick Lageraaen:

So right away you had the summer break and then came right here?

Alexia Hecico:

There wasn't even a summer break or the entirety of it because for track we had to be here at the beginning of August, get all set and figure out practice times and competition.

Patrick Lageraaen:

How'd you decide on UB? I mean, looking at the United States from the outside, there's a huge plethora of schools. Why UB? How did you make that decision?

Alexia Hecico:

It's actually a funny story, or at least it's funny for me because I never dreamed about coming to the United States until maybe my junior year in high school and my team. So I did munch running for four years and my team and I won the team title for the World Munch Running Championships, and one of the US coaches, his name is Paul Schneer. He actually came up to me and he asked me, "Would you ever want to study in the United States?" And I said, "Yes, that would actually be amazing. I am definitely considering it."

And then my mom kept getting emails or messages on Facebook from different schools trying to recruit me. And for me it was always really important to go to a school that was higher up in terms of academics and I think Buffalo was definitely the right choice for me.

Patrick Lageraaen:

So you are in high school, you're an athlete in high school, then you come to college and obviously you have this change in academics, and then you also have this change to college athletics. What was that transition like?

Alexia Hecico:

I feel like it was definitely learning a new lifestyle and learning how to be a completely new person, which sometimes it messes up with your brain a little bit because you're switching your language, you're switching everything that you know and you're used to. But for me, I've always been someone that was really good at planning out what I have to do, and I was always really passionate about my academics as well as my athletics. So coming here was just making sure that everything that I'm doing, I'm putting 100% in.

Patrick Lageraen:

So you started athletics straightaway freshman year here at UB. What is that time commitment like? I mean, are you thrown right into heavy athletics? How's that?

Alexia Hecico:

Yes. You don't really have time to get adjusted to a new school or a new place, again, a new lifestyle. Because right when you come in, you go into either preseason or a competition, and our days usually look like six or seven A.M., you have to wake up, you have to go to your first lift or your first practice. You get out of there, you go to rehab for at least an hour trying to make sure that you don't get injured, preventing all of that.

Then you go into classes, which most of the time we try to schedule in a way that they don't overlap with our practice times. Then you most likely will have a second practice or a second lift and another rehab session and then going back home, finishing your schoolwork.

Patrick Lageraen:

So what was that like moving into higher grade levels, like junior and senior year where you had more difficult classes?

Alexia Hecico:

I didn't really struggle with it because in my opinion, at least, the Romanian school system is a little bit harder in terms of, let's say math, which is something that I've always loved. So my junior and senior year, I've really had more math classes and I felt like I was just cruising through them because it was always something that I've enjoyed doing.

But it really all comes back to making sure that you schedule everything and that you allow yourself just a little bit of recovery in between practice and classes so that you can give your 100%.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Right. Just curious, when it comes to athletics and you show up day one, is there an evaluation period? How do they decide what sort of times you should be hitting and what your goals are for that side of things?

Alexia Hecico:

So from what I know, at least, whenever you come in for track especially, there are multiple websites where you can see the times that that person has been running or how they have been performing before coming here. And then obviously you have your time with your coach to discuss training plans, what is best for you, how do you think you should approach the next competition?

And I think it's such a good teamwork to have your coach know and understand where you're coming from and what works for you. So I think as long as that person knows that you're giving everything during practice time, you can re-evaluate during competition and then just adjust from there.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Did that goal change? Was it like a moving target as you went through your years?

Alexia Hecico:

Yes, I would say so, especially because in high school everything is so different. You're younger, you have more energy, you have more time to recover, and it's high school. Your classes are not as hard as being in college. So I'd say you have to be very honest with yourself on what you can do and what you can achieve and also under understanding what are you looking for?

Are you looking to go pro? Are you looking to make it to the Olympics? Or are you looking to be a part of your team and support them and give everything that you can to help your team grow or just be a team player? It's really important to figure out what your goal is.

Patrick Lageraaen:

So coming back to the academic side of things, you were the teaching assistant for MGG 215 Career Connections. When was this? Was this during undergrad?

Alexia Hecico:

Yes, this was, I believe, my junior and senior years.

Patrick Lageraaen:

And what'd you take away from this? What was that like?

Alexia Hecico:

That was such a wonderful experience for me. Working under Caitlin Rush was phenomenal. I talked to her a bunch of times about this. I think I grew so much as a person and developed more communication skills and also just connecting with people on a better level because I came in being so shy and so scared to mess up since English is not my first language, and I was terrified of speaking in public.

And now after those two years working with her and the rest of the MGG team, I feel like I can go into any room knowing that I'm just doing my best and I'm here to learn and I'm here to help someone.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Did you have the opportunity to teach any recitations or anything?

Alexia Hecico:

Yes. I was part of the lectures and the recitations.

Patrick Lageraaen:

What'd you do in that?

Alexia Hecico:

Basically for recitations, you're trying to go into a deeper understanding of the material that the professor would cover during class, and then especially try to teach your students that the connection that they're building with their other classmates is going to help them in the future. Because there's always going to be a job where you have to work in teams. There's always going to be someone that is going to help you make it further, but you have to know how to talk to people.

Patrick Lageraaen:

That's an interesting example of a class to teach when English is your second language. Just from my perspective, it seems like a lot of those concepts would be very abstract, so that would really stretch your vocabulary.

Alexia Hecico:

I would say so. Coming in, sometimes you just use the same words over and over again, and then you go into a new field and you learn this whole new vocabulary and learning how to communicate properly with different people. It's so different talking to students that you're actually supposed to teach or going into practice and just talking to your teammates.

Patrick Lageraen:

And then real quick, while we're on the subject of languages, what's your history? Because you've learned a couple languages.

Alexia Hecico:

Yes. So I was born and raised in Romania. So my first language, obviously is Romanian, but I spent, I want to say, two years in Montreal where I did my kindergarten in French. So theoretically speaking, that would be my second language. However, I went back home, forgot all of my French because I was so shy to practice with my dad, and then moved into studying German during school and a little bit of kindergarten.

And then during just competing and running and having the opportunity to travel with my mom, which she was also a runner, and going to training camps with her, I just picked up on Italian because she would go to Italy for summers. So as of right now, I would say I'm fluent in Romanian, English and Italian and can speak a little bit of French and German.

Patrick Lageraen:

Wow, that's very impressive. Coming back to your grad degree, how'd you decide you wanted to go to grad school? Why not just stop after the bachelor's degree?

Alexia Hecico:

I think I'm someone who will always love to learn something new, and not just that I love doing it, but there's always so much more and I'm just a curious person. So I've always loved both reading but also numbers. So for me, it was never a matter of, "Oh, I'm only going to do one of those." So in my opinion, doing business administration and marketing, it's more learning how to work with people, building that communication style and learning how to properly listen, how to interact with them.

But the business analytics part, it's more I'm here to get a better understanding of how to fix a problem, how to look more analytically at it and see the numbers and the actual solutions that I can come up with.

Patrick Lageraen:

So did you know you wanted to go into a field that required business analytics or was that just an interest of yours and you're hoping to find a job for you along the way?

Alexia Hecico:

I've always genuinely just loved numbers, understanding that behind every problem there's a solution. But I wouldn't say that business analytics has always been my first choice. For a little while was considering going to law school because that's also something that I've dreamed about my whole life. Just being able to help people and really solving the mystery, really that's all law is about.

So I think since that dream wasn't necessarily something that I could accomplish in just one year, I was like, "What's the closest thing to solving those problems, those mysteries?" And I feel like business analytics is exactly that, going into more than just the appearance and seeing what the issue is behind.

Patrick Lageraen:

Data storytelling. Have you had any classes with [inaudible 00:11:55] ?

Alexia Hecico:

Yes, I did in my undergrad.

Patrick Lageraen:

Awesome. That's great. So you've had many roles at UB. One of your other ones is working at the marketing department for the athletics department.

Alexia Hecico:

Yes.

Patrick Lageraen:

What do you do there?

Alexia Hecico:

So as an intern, we work directly with in-game promotions, the social media posts, and trying to engage with the audience because it's so important for us to build a culture where the students at UB know that we have such an amazing athletic program that they can enjoy for free, especially in undergrad. And genuinely for me, I just want to share the love of my sport with different people. So I go into work every day trying to come up with new ideas for promotions.

For example, we had game changer for a basketball game and they were trying to figure out new products that they can give away to students that are coming in, and they were trying to spread a little bit more than just the T-shirts, the free tote bags. And I said, "How about we give students what bottles?" We always say, "Oh, stay hydrated." So why not come up with something that's exactly that?

Patrick Lageraen:

Good idea. It seems like the perfect role for you. It merges your two areas, which is business and athletics. How much of what goes into that role would you say you're leveraging from your experience on the track team and how much of it from your undergrad and marketing?

Alexia Hecico:

I would say 50/50. You have to understand where you're coming from and really take advantage of your background and the things that you've been through. Because for me, I don't think I could ever understand sports at the level that I'm understanding them now, if I wasn't hands-on in that, and then undergrad was such an amazing experience. Like I said, I don't think I could ever have the confidence to walk into an interview and speak about myself and promote myself and my skills if it wasn't for MGG 215 and everything that I did there.

Patrick Lageraen:

I can speak to that because I'm a TA for an undergrad class MGQ 301, and my public speaking skills have increased a thousand times. It was torture the first time, but 100% worth.

Alexia Hecico:

It gets you out of your comfort zone for sure.

Patrick Lageraen:

The benefits of it. So one of your other roles is working as an academic performance specialist with the athletic department. What is this?

Alexia Hecico:

So in our athletic department, what we want to do is ensure that every student athlete has someone that can guide them and help them manage their classes, their schoolwork, and also their practice times. Because most times you as an athlete, you don't feel comfortable enough to go tell your coaches, "I'm struggling with this," or "I'm tired after practice." So having someone that just works directly with you, but it's not necessarily someone that is superior to you is there for you. I always make sure that I have my students come in, we talk about their personal lives first and make sure that they're fine.

They're ready to tackle everything that they have to do. And only after that really go into, "Hey, this is the schoolwork that you have due for the end of the week. How do you think we can manage it? What do you want to start working on first? What do you need help with?" Because it's so hard to walk away from practice and remember everything else that you have to do. So having someone there that reminds you of those tiny things that are due, it's so essential and just being successful.

Patrick Lageraen:

So is this an ongoing process or are you trying to coach yourself out of a job, almost? Like teach people how to be self-sufficient and manage these two things?

Alexia Hecico:

We definitely want them to walk away after a semester or a full academic year and be able to do those things for themselves. But the reality is a lot of them just enjoy the company of having someone sit with them and it motivates you to do more. It motivates you to come in and do your work and then go home and actually relax for the end of the day.

Patrick Lageraen:

What do you find that student athletes typically struggle with?

Alexia Hecico:

I would say is remembering that you're more than your sport and really balancing your social life and your athletic career because you would have those hard practices or games that didn't go the way that

you wanted to. So it's hard sometimes to step away from that and focus on anything else because we all love what we're doing. We're taking athletics to a level that we really... It really is our job. So I think that's definitely something that we struggle with.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Do you ever have students going out and doing extra workouts on their own even though they may not supposed to?

Alexia Hecico:

Yes. I'm also one of those people. That you'll tell me, "You have one day off a week, I want you to go roll out, stretch, just enjoy a day off." And I would be at home, just my thoughts racing and the only thing that I want to do is go outside and run.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Because that's what you think is making you progress.

Alexia Hecico:

But it's such a fine line between improving and just getting yourself injured.

Patrick Lageraaen:

And over training.

Alexia Hecico:

You have to really just be 100% honest with yourself and understanding, "Okay, am I getting better or am I just being stupid?"

Patrick Lageraaen:

Are there any sports that you see students struggling with more than others?

Alexia Hecico:

I have the privilege of working with students from all kinds of sports. I have been working with wrestlers, volleyball players, football players, basketball players, and also I'm friends with at least one person on every single team that we have, and we all talk about it all the time. At the end of the day, our sports

might be different, but what is really behind it is our love for what we're doing. So no, I say we all struggle in the same ways is can we be better and how much more work can I put in to get there?

Patrick Lageraaen:

What about the time commitments though? Are all the sports pretty similar? Are there standards for that?

Alexia Hecico:

Yes. I would say we all train or an alumni almost 24/7. It's a running joke that we live there. None of us really have time to go back home.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Well, you come to Jacob's sometimes. [inaudible 00:18:24]

Alexia Hecico:

You'll go to classes, but outside of that, you're at alumni.

Patrick Lageraaen:

So coming back to your high school experience, you led the national Romanian team to a world championship.

Alexia Hecico:

Yes.

Patrick Lageraaen:

What was that like?

Alexia Hecico:

It was, I think one of the best experiences of my life. To put it into a perspective, I was maybe 17 or 18. And to this day, whenever I hear a national anthem, I just start crying because it brings me back to that, but it goes to more than just, "Oh, I did that." It's about we as a collective, as a team. We all worked together and we were in training camps for months in a row away from our families, away from our

friends, doing absolutely nothing but training for the whole day, working towards the same goal. And I think for me, that's something that just inspires me to try to work harder every day.

Patrick Lageraaen:

So that happened while you were the team captain of the team. What does it take to be a team captain? What are you actually doing?

Alexia Hecico:

Most people would think it's just, "Oh, you're one of the best performers on the team, and that's all it takes." But for me, I think it's the ability to inspire your team mates to put in the work when they don't want to or when they're struggling with it, or even reminding yourself that, "Hey, I'm really tired today. I don't want to do this, but I have a team behind me that counts on me. So I have to be there for them, and I know that they will do the same thing for me."

Patrick Lageraaen:

Interesting how you talk about how it helps you as well. It's not just you helping the team, it's them supporting you.

Alexia Hecico:

Well, it's really you're doing it for them, but they're also doing it for you. It's never just one person that is winning. It's kind of like a relationship. The problem is never just on one side and it takes more than one person to make it better.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Is it usually just the most passionate person on the team or the best performer?

Alexia Hecico:

There's something that my parents used to say or remind me all the time. They said, "You can have all the talent in the world, but it's always going to be the person that is willing to put in more work that is going to out stand you."

Patrick Lageraaen:

Right. And I'm sure that dedication to the craft, which is running, is contagious. And that's the whole point why they've made you the team captain?

Alexia Hecico:

I think so. I was always the person that was getting out a door and being ready to run, but I will make sure that even when I'm exhausted, I'm cracking a joke so that all of us can just have fun with it. At the end of the day, we're not doing it for the results. We're doing it because we love it.

Patrick Lageraen:

So is the team captain more of a liaison for the coach, one who can relate to the teammates better?

Alexia Hecico:

I wouldn't put it that way. I think it's more who has the ability to motivate the others when they cannot motivate themselves.

Patrick Lageraen:

So when the coach fails, the team captain's there?

Alexia Hecico:

You have to step up and you need to understand that sometimes you also will not have the answers. So you have to make sure that you allow your teammates to step up if they can do so. The team captain is not a role that you're given and that's it. You're the only team captain that can be. Your teammates are also there, and sometimes they will know more than you do, but that's when you are learning from them and then you're putting into practice later.

Patrick Lageraen:

Right. Well, it just comes back to what we learned in the school of management, which is that being a manager doesn't mean you know the most, you're not the most technically knowledgeable person in the room, but you know how to manage people. you know how to motivate them and leverage what they know.

Alexia Hecico:

See, I never thought about, "Oh, this person is my boss." I thought, "This person is my leader, is someone that will work side by side with me and I will learn from and that hopefully someday I can return that."

Patrick Lageraen:

So one of the other things that you did during summers, I'm assuming during high school, is you worked as a coach for your family's running club. What's that like? Who were you coaching?

Alexia Hecico:

So my mom has been a coach for, I want to say at least 10 years now, and she was my coach during high school. My mom and my dad have been coaching me for that period, and it was an amazing experience. But right now she has a running club and she coaches anyone from kids that are 6-year-old to adults who want to either just stay healthy or find their passion or are competitive runners or triathletes. So really anyone.

Patrick Lageraen:

Where are your parents now?

Alexia Hecico:

My dad passed away a few months before I came to college my freshman year, and then my mom is still at home in Romania.

Patrick Lageraen:

What did you do as a coach? Obviously you helped your mom.

Alexia Hecico:

Initially it started more as I wanted my mom to be able to take a break sometimes and enjoy her life because I realized that she's doing so much for me, it must not be easy, especially as a single parent. So it started more as me taking her spot, but I figured that the kids actually enjoy just being there with me, and especially the ones that want to pursue running as a more serious job to say so, are looking up to me to learn what does it take to get to more than just running in your hometown?

So I would really just try to talk to them and make them understand that, "Hey, this is what it takes to go to a professional level." But also remind them every day that your sport is not just your job. It's something that you've always loved doing. Because really, if you love what you do, you never have to work.

Patrick Lageraen:

And if you stop loving it, what's the point?

Alexia Hecico:

Well, I don't think you ever stop loving it. You maybe stop loving competing, but you never stop loving the sport. I think the sport is always part of your life.

Patrick Lageraen:

So when you're a technically good runner and you can perform well, that's a very different thing than coaching running.

Alexia Hecico:

Yes.

Patrick Lageraen:

What was it like learning how to coach somebody from the outside perspective?

Alexia Hecico:

I'll be so honest. It's so hard sometimes to sit down and not only talk about yourself and your experience and try to understand that it might be similar, but your experience with a sport might be completely different than mine and I have to be here and give you advice on what you need, not what I wanted to hear during that time. It being able to forget what you want and just be there for that person that is trying to learn, that is trying to grow.

Patrick Lageraen:

But the technical knowledge of should they be pushing themselves further right now or should they be dialing it back? Where does that come from? Is that from your own experience?

Alexia Hecico:

No, it's really at the end of the day, they have to be honest with themselves. I think that's something that my mom and I have always talked about, and we've been really, really lucky to just have that trust as a coach and athlete, because your coach can give you a workout and you want to deliver those times. You want to run the distances, but at the end of the day, if you cannot, you need to understand is it because it's too fast?

Is it because I'm tired or there's something else going on in my life? You cannot perform at your best on your own. You need a coach, but also your coach wouldn't be the best coach if it wasn't for the athlete.

Patrick Lageraen:

What's an example of value that a coach could provide?

Alexia Hecico:

What do you mean exactly?

Patrick Lageraen:

So if I'm running just for my own benefit, I'm training for a race, why would I want a coach there with me instead of just trying to train myself?

Alexia Hecico:

I think it's because as much as you love what you're doing, there's still going to be days when you get tired. You need someone who's there to explain to you, "Hey, yeah, today is okay for you to just take it slow." But most importantly is because you wouldn't... If you're dealing with a sickness or anything medical, you wouldn't treat it yourself. You would go to someone that has knowledge in that field. You want to build a house, would you do it to yourself or would you hire an architect?

Patrick Lageraen:

Hire somebody. Also, there's kind of a conflict of interest there. If you're tired and you don't want to run, it's tough to push yourself. Or if you really want to win, but you're on the edge of an injury, you may push yourself too far. So you need that outside...

Alexia Hecico:

So you need someone,

Patrick Lageraen:

Right. So you're in your last year or only year of your MSBA program. It's spring semester. So your tenure at UB is kind of coming to an end. What's next? What's your plan?

Alexia Hecico:

As of right now, my plan is to stay in the United States, find a job, and then build a life here. But there's always been that side of me that... I love my home country and I love everything that it's offered me because really, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the national team, if it wasn't for my parents. So maybe one day I would want to go back and just give back everything that the country has given me.

Patrick Lageraen:

What sort of job are you looking for?

Alexia Hecico:

I would love to stay in sports. I've been in sports my whole life.

Patrick Lageraen:

Sports analytics.

Alexia Hecico:

I would do sports analytics. I would do sports analytics, sports marketing, sports management, anything.

Patrick Lageraen:

I'm sure there's quite a few of those jobs around now. Have you looked into any sort of opportunities in that field?

Alexia Hecico:

Yes, I did. I'm on every single website that I can find, trying to figure out a job. And if it's in the NCAA, that would be phenomenal.

Patrick Lageraen:

So to wrap up, I'd love to give you an opportunity just to speak to our listeners who are UB students and also quite a few prospective students. So speaking to those athletes out there who are maybe considering going to school or maybe considering doing a graduate degree, what would you say to them?

Alexia Hecico:

I would say remember to do what you love and that I'm referring to academics, because you never want to go into the field that you're not passionate about, but also not trying to be rude. Remember that your sport might come to an end one day, so you want to go into something and you want to focus on your academic career just as much as you're focusing on your athletic one.

Patrick Lageraen:

So setting yourself up for future success, even though you're enjoying the athletics now.

Alexia Hecico:

Think about the long-term plan, not just about the now.

Patrick Lageraen:

Right. I'm sure that's probably hard for a lot of people when they're so passionate about their sport.

Alexia Hecico:

Yes. It was hard for me for a long time, but you have to do what you have to do.

Patrick Lageraen:

It's true. And then what about international students because you have these dual perspectives. What would you say to them?

Alexia Hecico:

I would say understand that you will be homesick, but it's never too late to find a new home. And it's never about where you want to go at the end of the day. It's about building a community in the place that you are now and helping it grow as much as you can. Leave a place better than you find it.

Patrick Lageraen:

What do you think about UB for international students?

Alexia Hecico:

I've had such a lovely time here. I've met people from across the world, whether it's Canada, Germany, Italy, even Australia. You learn so much about different countries and you grow yourself as... You as a person just grow so much because you learn about cultures that you've never heard about before.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Well, you really don't hear much about the athletic department and especially how it ties into academics. So I really enjoyed this conversation, so thanks so much for your time.

Alexia Hecico:

Thank you for having me.

Patrick Lageraaen:

I hope you enjoyed this episode. Again, my guest was Alexia Hecico, MSBA student in the School of Management and athlete on the UB Women Cross-Country and Track and Field teams. I'm your host, Patrick Lageraaen, and thank you for listening.