

## Behind the Scenes: Supporting the Full-time MBA Program

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Patrick Lageraen:

Welcome to another episode of the UB School of Management, Manage-A-Bull Podcast. I'm your host, Patrick Lageraen. Today our guest is Julia Braun. She's the associate director of student services in the School of Management, specifically serving as the academic advisor to the full-time MBA program. We talked to her about her role, the role of the Graduate Program's Office, and how much work actually goes into supporting a graduate program. Julia Braun, thanks for being here.

Julia Braun:

Thank you for having me.

Patrick Lageraen:

So I've been really excited to have this conversation, which is why I asked you to come in today. I think a lot of the MBA students are really impressed with how polished and how put together the program is, but I'm really interested to see what goes into it on the back end. So good way to start would be, tell us about your role in the GPO and how did you get to that position?

Julia Braun:

Okay, great. Well, thank you. So my role in the Graduate Program's Office, I am the Associate Director of Student Services, and in my role, I serve as the academic advisor for the full-time MBA program. My role in the Graduate Program's Office is multifaceted, so I coordinate the programming for MBA Advantage, which is our orientation program. I coordinate the Corporate Champions program, and my favorite part of the role is student-focused and it's helping students to get through the MBA program and remove barriers to success, making sure that they're successful in their journey.

A little bit about how I got here. So you think about that image of your trajectory not being a straight line, and it's got a lot of curves and twists and things. And so I think that it's important to share a little bit about my background, what brought me here, because it also impacts the way that I help and serve my students.

A little bit about my background, and I think it's important to note that I identify as a first-generation student. For anyone out there who might identify as the same, that's someone whose parents didn't go to a university. My parents don't have a bachelor's degree or attended college. And so for me, this journey was something new for me. I was lucky enough, I have a sister. So we went through this together, we're 16 months apart, so the two of us kind of had each other to navigate this experience with. So what made the most sense for us is right after high school applying at the community college, Erie Community College is where I went and applied for business studies. And while I was there, I was introduced to courses like sociology and psychology, and I loved those. So I finished my business degree program and then went on to SUNY Fredonia for my Bachelor's in Sociology.

And anyone who's ever been a transfer student knows what that's like. Going into a school as a junior and doing two years there.

Patrick Lageraen:

Re-learning everything at a new school.

Julia Braun:

Right. A new space, and then trying to get adjusted to students who've already been there for their freshman year and sophomore year, and you're coming in as a junior, so that's an experience. And so finishing that program, starting into the world of work, right, is every undergrad who finishes school next steps. So you start sending out your resume and your cover letter to all places. And being a first-in-family, my parents didn't have a circle of friends with professional careers. So again, there wasn't anyone to really introduce me. So just navigating where to send your resume out. And that's where I landed in education. I had friends, a group of friends that had moved to Philadelphia and I thought, "How cool would that be?" I'll send my resume out to a few places in the city of Philadelphia, and I did. I got an offer working in an early child care facility and it was small. They offered me an assistant director role and I thought, babysat, I could do this.

And it was a great experience. I jumped into it. I was able to use my business degree and my sociology background, humanities, working in the city. I did that for a little over three years and really accelerated in the organization. Went from assistant director to director of a small center, and then by the time I had been there for three years, I was running a large center that had 43 staff members-

Patrick Lageraen:

Wow.

Julia Braun:

... in a unionized environment. So it was pretty big. But I knew that I didn't want to stay in Philadelphia and I wanted to come home back to Buffalo because that's what everybody does, they come back. And so when I came back to Buffalo, again, I was on the job search and who do I go back to? My sister. So she had finished SUNY Fredonia with her Bachelor's in Business with a concentration in finance and was working at a financial aid advisor for a small private college.

And she said, "Hey, well there's an opening at admissions." And I was like, "Great, I'm going to submit my application. I could do this." And I did. I got the job and I loved it. So I worked in the admissions office there for five years and I loved helping students, talking with them, and they had a vision of where they wanted to be. And then the application process was the first step in getting there. And I loved doing that, but I always felt like I lost track of them after the admissions process. Nobody gave me an update. They didn't come back to say, and I wanted be part of that transformative experience. Knowing that when you're an Academic Advisor, that's where you get to be part of that transformative experience and you have to have a master's degree. So I, again, went back to school for a master's while working.

So I did an evening, weekend type program at St. Bonaventure to get a master's degree. And immediately upon graduation, applied for the first opening of an Academic Advisor role, and I got it. So I then became the Academic Advisor for a bachelor of business program, and I loved that experience also. Did that for about four and a half years. But the program was small, and I wanted more students and I wanted a bigger environment. And that is when I came to UB, there was an opening for an advisor in the graduate program's office in the school of management, and I was so excited at the thought of working with graduate students. I had applied and I've been here now for over 10 years.

Patrick Lageraen:

Yeah, here you are.

Julia Braun:

Here I am.

Patrick Lageraen:

Do you feel like your identification as a first-generation student affects how you view other students? You kind of had to chart your own course and now you're getting to see the courses that everybody else charged for themselves?

Julia Braun:

So I definitely... The part that I love about working with graduate students and how I bring my experiences to this role is that I feel like I understand the challenges that come with being a young adult and trying to navigate all of the things, trying to prioritize your school, trying to have finances, make sure that your budget is met while you're a student, but also having the conversations with students to help them identify what they don't know. Sometimes you don't know how to put into words like, "Well, here's what I want to do and here's what I think I need in my toolkit." But you have to have a conversation sometimes with someone who can lead you to that door, and that's where I strive to be sure to do that.

Patrick Lageraen:

Yeah. Okay. So coming back to your role at UB, what is the Graduate Program's Office? What sort of services do you provide to students there?

Julia Braun:

Sure. So the Graduate Program's Office, in its physical space, is where all of the program advisors, their offices are. And so as an office, our goal is to help remove barriers to success. And so it's not only about making sure that you're taking the right courses, but also making sure that you've created an academic plan, thinking about your program as a whole. It's important to have a conversation with your advisor to say, "Hey, look, I think these are the classes that I want to take. This is where I see myself and can we create a plan to get there in a timely way?" One of the things that I do is working with students to make sure that they understand the course the way courses are offered. Not everything's offered in the fall, some things are offered only in the spring. And so when you think about your plan, you have to do that.

Patrick Lageraen:

There has to be some strategy there.

Julia Braun:

Absolutely. The other thing that the graduate program's office provides support with is the unforeseen things, the things that you don't plan for, right? You think you're going to get started on this two-year journey, but then all of a sudden you lose your housing, your financial situation changes. There's things that come up in your life and that's when you need to talk with an advisor too. Here's this thing that's happening, can we help problem solve? Can you help me to figure out a way to still be able to complete my studies while navigating this situation that I'm experiencing?

Patrick Lageraen:

Right. And then in your office, since you are the experts on I guess graduation requirements, how much are you tied into actually getting someone from day one to graduation and making sure they've hit all the check boxes?

Julia Braun:

Oh, that is every semester. I mean, making sure that every student within our population, checking their schedules, making sure that... It's graduate study. So there are times that you might want to take a class that's extra, right? That's something that's for your own personal gain and knowledge, that's fine, but also making sure that you're on track with the requirements that you need for graduation and making sure that you are doing that in a timely way.

Patrick Lageraen:

Right. I guess one of the biggest blunders could be finding out that you don't have enough credits. Spring semester's when you're supposed to be graduating. What would you do in a situation like that?

Julia Braun:

Yeah, absolutely. So there is a recommendation for every semester. So if you're in a 60 credit hour program, there's four semesters and you think, "Okay, well each semester, 15 credit hours," something like that. But there are times when you may take a class more, a class extra and lose track of all the things that are needed. And so I know that's part of what I do is to double check and make sure that everybody's on track and I will reach out if I notice that you're short of class or ...

Patrick Lageraen:

So it's very much in a prevention approach.

Julia Braun:

I would say so. A system of checks and balances maybe of... Again, you have a lot of space to be able to... Some semesters you may want to do more than others, but at the end of the day, we need to make sure that you're progressing in a good way.

Patrick Lageraen:

What about for dual degree students? Because their credit requirements I'm sure can get a little bit complicated. Do you assist them on that?

Julia Braun:

Absolutely. So thinking about dual degree students again and thinking about some of the experiences that I've had, and that's a lot to navigate. I can't imagine trying to do two programs at once. So that's something that I feel like frequent connection, right? Because not only do you have to be looking at emails from your advisor from the MBA program, but you're also whatever your dual degree is, whether it's MPH or PharmD or MD, you're hearing from them as well. One thing that I think it's really helpful for students to know is that we work closely, I talk closely with the advisors and the other programs. So I have a counterpart in each of the schools, and we would talk regularly just to make sure that there is an overlap. For instance, a class that you need in the MBA program if it's not conflicting with a class that you need in your dual degree school. So we work closely.

Patrick Lageraen:

Does any of that tie into when the classes are scheduled or are you sort of doing the management after the fact once the classes are already put into place?

Julia Braun:

That's a great question. So there are proactive measures that we do take. So I do get to see the schedule probably about four to six weeks before it's launched. And in that I do look for conflicts. Again, in the MBA program, there's so many combinations of electives that you can take. So you're always going to have some overlap where you have to make a decision, do I want this elective or this one? But thinking about the dual degree programs, we really try to do as much proactive work with the advisors and the other departments as well to make sure.

Patrick Lageraen:

So on one of our recent episodes, we just had Melissa Ruggiero on talking about the CRC and what they can provide to students inside of the school of management, which seems like it's very transitional from your time in the program to your life after it and what sort of job you're looking to get. But I'd love to hear your perspective. How is the GPO different from the CRC and how can students utilize both of them sort of synchronously?

Julia Braun:

Absolutely. So thinking about the two offices, the graduate programs office in our focus is... Again, making sure that you are completing your program with all the requirements needed. Also looking at and making sure any barriers to your success are addressed. Thinking about, again, we talked about those unforeseen circumstances or just needing help with time management or just even having a conversation. I mean, I keep tissues on my desk. It's hard School's, hard midterms are hard, so come in and talk with us. We're here to help you through that. And then we work in conjunction with the Career Resource Center, right? So we're both under the student services umbrella. And thinking about more of the post-grad work, where do you see yourself and helping with those employment offers and getting your resume ready for the job search, that would be the career Resource Center side. But on the graduate program side, it's working with you with all of those unforeseen circumstances and also making sure that you have the right courses that you need to graduate.

Patrick Lageraen:

So let's say a student was working with the CRC to try and tailor themselves and their resume for a specific job that they want, and the advisor in the CRC says, maybe you should explore getting this concentration in the MBA program to prove that you are this. Would the student then be handed off to the GPO to kind of tailor their curriculum?

Julia Braun:

Yeah. I would work with a student to make sure that we have a course, an academic plan that meets the requirements for that concentration because we want to, again, address that. Sometimes you might have a plan in your mind of, I want to take these four courses in the spring and then these four courses in the fall, but then we have a conversation, and you get a better understanding of, well, the three classes that you listed that you want to do in the spring are actually not offered in spring. They're offered in fall or vice versa. So you need to just make sure that you share what you're thinking with a

subject matter expert to validate that that plan is able to be carried out. And then that's where I would step in.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Makes sense. Coming back to the MBA program itself, so I know you mentioned that you were involved with Advantage and then curriculum, and then I think a couple other things. What is the extent of your involvement? How into the weeds do you get with the MBA program itself?

Julia Braun:

So great question. Well, thinking about orientation, those are types of things that I work with. We're hosting it at RiverWorks this year, our team building. And so I started working with RiverWorks in January to secure that space for us, and to plan out what team building and things like that would be offered in terms of curriculum and other things. That is the faculty side. And I work very closely with Professor Ian Tarrant. I consult with faculty on the concentration, what course offerings they want for each concentration, and then I'm on the backside of just putting the updates onto the web page and things like that but...

Patrick Lageraaen:

Yeah, I understand. So MBA Advantage is our orientation, and I think that's a pretty well-known part of our program specifically only because there's three of them. What do you think that does for students setting them up with communications from the school of management so early in that first summer?

Julia Braun:

Absolutely. So whenever you think about any type of programming, first you have to think of its goals. And so when you think about MBA orientation or you have to think about, there's the degrees of one building sense of community. So the MBA program is Team-based and getting to know your cohort. So a big part of that is just building that sense of community and engaging and experiences where you get to know each other.

Patrick Lageraaen:

And that's why we get our team members during Advantage.

Julia Braun:



Correct, yes, but not right away because...

Patrick Lageraen:

Because then you would sort of self-select into smaller groups, and we don't want that initially.

Julia Braun:

Right, right, right. And so you need time to meet everyone in the cohort. And then also thinking about the other things that have to come through as part of the programming with that being introduced and acclimated to all of the things with University at Buffalo, I mean understanding HUB, just like being able to know how to log in. If you've never been a student here before and learning how to use UBlerns, we have a summer UBlerns course, which again helps get you used to logging into UBlerns and then you're ready, right? So those are all of the things that my role supports with. It's getting you ready for that first semester.

Patrick Lageraen:

And I can speak personally that it's very effective. You do all the resume workshops. The VMAQ was one of them that was set up as part of Advantage. We did, what was it, the Statistics boot camp and the Accounting boot camp where we came in and it's like, why are we doing this stuff over the summer? But you come in and you feel like you're kind of ready to get started.

Julia Braun:

Absolutely, absolutely. And then there's so many opportunities to where you get to meet your faculty. There's a faculty panel, and that's exciting to hear from. And then there's a lot of mini group work, I feel like, as part of that and getting to meet each other.

Patrick Lageraen:

So thinking about the program again and just how polished and put together it is. I think one part that stands out of course is that first year fall semester with how integrated everything is, especially with Corporate Champions and how it spans multiple classes. Could you just talk about how much work goes into planning all that? Because it must be so much logistics.

Julia Braun:

Sure. So there's two different sides to Corporate Champions. So the first part of the Corporate Champions program is the actual pairing of teams with organizations. So there's one part where each team takes on the identity of a local organization, and that's how the team is identified. And so my role in that is working with a team with alumni and the Career Resource Center to help identify what organizations are going to be part of the Corporate Champions program for that year. And then within those organizations, identifying a point person. And so not only when I am introducing the program to students, I'm also having meetings with the champions throughout the summer, acclimating them to the touch points of the program, and organizing site visits with them, and setting up working with leadership interviews. There's all of those things that are part of that.

Patrick Lageraen:

So when you're garnering the support of these organizations for Corporate Champions, are you pre-screening them and making sure they'd be okay to do site visits and work with students on the basis that you'd like?

Julia Braun:

That's another really good question. So there's a lot of work that goes into that because again, anytime, it's almost like taking on an intern. Organizations will get in their groove of things that they need to do, and sometimes you have to make sure that it's a good time to be able to host a team and Corporate Champions take a lot of time, right?

Patrick Lageraen:

Absolutely.

Julia Braun:

To plan that day, sometimes the site visit's like a half day or a full day, and then getting members of their organization to participate. So again, and it's also about putting together a lot of different industries, bringing together, sometimes we have some healthcare and then there's banking and representation from non-profit organizations to make sure that we have a lot of different experiences.

Patrick Lageraen:

So you mentioned Corporate Champions is in two different parts. So that's the first part with the corporate sponsors, and then there's the classroom component.

Julia Braun:

Correct, correct. And that part is with faculty. So faculty will organize your MBA core faculty, will organize the relationship between the project piece and how it's integrated across the classes.

Patrick Lageraen:

So it seems like you have a really in-depth knowledge of the program at all as a whole and can really understand how strenuous it is. What do you want students to know about the graduate program's office? What do you wish they would come seek help for?

Julia Braun:

I want students to know that they have a level of support where they can come into our office, feel comfortable, connect with an advisor, connect with me, and be able to know that they'll be able to get support. And whether it be with time management, if they're feeling overwhelmed, need assistance with food insecurity, financial resources, these are all things that an advisor can help connect you with. In our campus, we have a lot of resources and our focus is to help you to be successful in your program. And part of that is removing anything that can be a barrier to your success. And so knowing that you have a dedicated person in the graduate program's office to be able to help with that and to someone that you can go to.

Patrick Lageraen:

That being said, maybe there's some ways to help students before they need the GPO. What are some common mistakes you see students making? What do you wish they would do better?

Julia Braun:

So a few things. So number one, I know that a lot of students think, "Oh, I have this, I have this, I've got this." And a situational snowball. And it gets to be almost to crisis level before they reach out and tell someone. I think that one of the things that I think is really important is that anytime you start in a new journey, write a new program. My advice is to take time to visit all of your support systems before you need them. Take time to make an appointment and meet with your Academic Advisor, meet with me, meet with your career advisor ahead of time, just to introduce yourself-

Patrick Lageraen:

Absolutely.

Julia Braun:

... tell a little bit about what you hope to accomplish and then keep in touch with them. Let them know how the journey is going. For students when they get that first week syllabus week, right? You're reviewing your syllabus right on the syllabus, it has your faculty office hours. Stop in and see your faculty before midterms. Doing that early. And again, that same thing, introducing yourself a little bit about what you hope to do after MBA, what your plan is. And that proactive measure is really, really helpful as you go throughout the program, because there are going to be times that it'll be challenging.

Patrick Lageraen:

A lot of last-minute times where you have to send an email and then they know who you are at least.

Julia Braun:

Yes, yes, absolutely, absolutely. It's helpful.

Patrick Lageraen:

I know a lot of my success in the program has come from just building relationships with professors.

Julia Braun:

Yes, yes. And taking the time to do that. Don't make your experience be transactional. That's something that a lot of students do. They will just come to campus, go to class, and leave. But you need to make time in your schedule to take that hour or two hours within your first week of study to say, "Look, I am going to make it a point to go to the faculty's office hours and introduce myself. I'm going to make it a point to get outside of Alfiero and Jacobs, our two buildings, right? And walk around campus and take a look and see what centers there are. Take a look and see, ask questions, and visit offices. There's a lot of really exciting things happening here.

Patrick Lageraen:

So I remember last semester I took a class in the School of Architecture and I had to send you an email to get that approval signed. What do you think about that? What do you think about searching out classes outside of just the school of management?

Julia Braun:

Yes. I think that it's exciting. I think that when you think about this is your opportunity, you have a hub here of research and interesting opportunities to engage in like case studies and innovative work and making sure that you use this time to be able to, again, build your tool kit of resources for post-graduation. And so whatever you need to be able to get you there.

Patrick Lageraen:

So taking classes outside of the School of Management is not just for dual degree students?

Julia Braun:

No. So when you're in the full-time MBA program, there is an opportunity to take some classes in the School of Architecture, take some classes. It really has varied depending on what someone's goals are. But when you share that with your advisor, your advisor can say, Hey, have you ever thought about maybe this and can present you with some opportunities that you're like, "Well, I never would've thought of that."

Patrick Lageraen:

Right. Yeah. I guess one example that comes to my mind is the MBA MSRED, MS in Real Estate Development, which I don't think a lot of people know about as being an option.

Julia Braun:

Yeah, there's some great classes that work really well with the MBA there. There's some great classes in international trade, which is in the geography program, which again, people wouldn't think about.

Patrick Lageraen:

I wish I knew about that.

Julia Braun:

Yeah. And again, it's just from having those conversations to say, "Hey, look, I'm thinking about this." And then I guess the caveat is adding the question, "Is there anything I might be missing? Do you have any recommendations for this?" Because sometimes, again, sometimes people just want a short answer, but sometimes where you're going to get the most benefit is, again, by asking people, asking your

resources, "Do you have any recommendations? What would you do? Is there anything you think I'm missing?"

Patrick Lageraen:

Yeah. What about speaking to most of our listeners, which are perspective students, what advice would you give them about anybody considering an MBA program?

Julia Braun:

Definitely, this is a transformative experience, and just from my experience of working in admissions and knowing the why, right? Why do you apply to an MBA program? You know that you want an experience that's going to bring you to another level, right? And I think that when you start that journey on your MBA, you need to make time to really enjoy the journey and to know it's two years, but to be all in. And sometimes people focus so much on I am working or I'm doing this, and they're fitting the MBA, but making that MBA the priority and fitting all other things around it. So again, I keep going back to don't make it transactional. It's meant to be transformative. So lean in.

Patrick Lageraen:

What do you think that is making the MBA like your main thing, and then having everything else revolve around it? What do you think that looks like?

Julia Braun:

So I think that one of the things that... Well, I'm thinking about the summer, right? So I'll usually start talking with students and they'll say, "I really want to put together my schedule. I'm trying to hand in my availability at work, and so can we talk about what my classes will look like?" And so then I'll usually give them some space to tell me how they see the MBA fitting into their fall. And then I'll say, "Okay, well, let me tell you how it's actually going to..." And from being a full-time MBA student, right? Going through that first fall semester, what was that like?

Patrick Lageraen:

I'm very glad I didn't have a job.

Julia Braun:

That's intense.

Patrick Lageraaen:

That's one thing.

Julia Braun:

Yes, yes. And so thinking about it's different than undergrad, wouldn't you say?

Patrick Lageraaen:

Yes, for sure.

Julia Braun:

Yes.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Instead of the classes being kind of a la carte and in their own little bubbles, everything sort of meshes together, especially the first year of the MBA program, every piece of information very much felt just in time like, "Oh, we just learned this in OB." But here's something from communications that ties right into it. And it's like, "Was this designed that way?"

Julia Braun:

And then you hear that Fridays when you just look at your schedule, you're like, "Oh, I have no classes on Fridays." But I feel like all summer long, I say, "But remember, Fridays are really not an open day." Fridays are really not a free day. What happens on Fridays? There's always team meetings, or you find out about a guest speaker that's going to be on campus, or that's when you have a site visit for your corporate champion. Corporate champions know that you're available on Fridays, so something's always coming up just in time, right?

Patrick Lageraaen:

Right, yeah, totally Right. I loved having the Fridays open. If I worked really hard during the week, I could get all my stuff done kind of in between classes, then maybe finish it up on Friday and then actually have the weekend off.

Julia Braun:

Yes. Yes, absolutely. If you time manage it well, you can definitely build in time for health and wellness, which you absolutely need to do.

Patrick Lageraaen:

100%.

Julia Braun:

I mean, you have to have that into your plan, and that's another part where an advisor can come in and help you with. I can't tell you how many planners I work with where we try to find... We'll use Excel, right? Because doesn't everybody put their life on an Excel spreadsheet, right? And so, one of the big I do with students, especially if you've been out of school for a long time and you're trying to come back and just be reminded of how much work is involved outside of the classroom, it is, it's building that time into a spreadsheet and saying, "Okay, here's where my classes are, but let's also block off 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM because that's when I'm going to be reading and doing homework. Let's build in time to go to the gym, and that might be from seven A.M. to eight A.M. Let's build in time to just relax, binge-watch something on Netflix." If that's what you do, you have to have time for that, builds into your schedule.

Patrick Lageraaen:

I'm glad you brought that up because the MBA program is different from an undergrad in that you have people from all different backgrounds, all different work histories and all different places in their own lives. What do you think are some struggles that graduate students see that undergrad students may not see or may not come across?

Julia Braun:

Well, it's different When you're an undergraduate student, you might be living with your parents. There's still this expectation of 18 to 21, you still kind of feel like you have more support at home. But as you get to that 22, 23, 24, 25 and beyond, it is different. You are more independent and navigating school and work as in a young adult, really, that's a whole different set of expectations and challenges, and that's something that we can help with.

Patrick Lageraaen:



Well, this has been a great conversation. I really enjoyed learning about how much work goes into this program, and I think it really shows, everything's very polished. As I said before, it's very put together and I think everybody notices it, so we really appreciate the work that you put into it.

Julia Braun:

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me. And I guess I just want to close with making sure that students know that my door is open, and that, again, taking that opportunity to stop by, say hi, introduce yourself, and making the most of your experience by connecting with your resources.

Patrick Lageraen:

Great advice. Thanks, Julia.

Julia Braun:

Thank you.

Patrick Lageraen:

I hope you enjoyed this episode. Again, we were speaking with Julia Braun, Associate Director of Student Services and the Academic Advisor to the full-time MBA program. Thanks for listening.