Freeman hosts Master of Business Analytics Colloquium

November 21, 2023



Data professionals Peter Pappas (PHTM ’84), Marina Brazhnikova (MBA ’14) and Randall Frost (MBA ’12), left to right, were among the participants in this year's Master of Business Analytics Colloquium, which took place at the Freeman School on Nov. 17.

On Nov. 17, the Freeman School hosted the 2023 Master of Business Analytics Colloquium, an annual conference that brings analytics professionals from across the region to campus to discuss the industry and share career insights with students in the Master of Business Analytics (MANA) program.

This year's colloquium kicked off with a welcome from Dean Paulo Goes followed by a panel discussion on how organizations leverage data to create value. Moderated by Assistant Dean of Corporate Relations Brent Rosen, the panel featured Marina Brazhnikova (MBA ’14), director of enterprise analytics at Ochsner Health; Randall

Frost (MBA ’12), director of systems and analysis at Canal Barge; and Peter Pappas (PHTM ’84), people science manager at DXC Technology.

Over the course of the session, the panelists discussed their jobs and careers as well as how their organizations utilize data. In helping to lead their companies' analytics functions, each of the panelists emphasized the importance of fully understanding the business and being able to effectively communicate data-based insights to company leadership, especially at times when those insights contradict the leader’s thinking.

“At first blush, the leader is like, ‘Well, no, this can’t be right,” Pappas said. “If you understand their business, then you should be able to walk them through a deeper dive – you don’t even have to go further into the data, just explain to them how the data you’re showing them interlocks with the business. If you can show that leader that you understand the business, then they are more apt to trust you.”

“The way you deal with [leadership not agreeing with what the data is showing] is by having a deep demonstrated understanding and trust,” added Frost. “It’s building relationships, knowing the people that lead your business, and knowing the business well enough to help them understand why the conclusion makes sense rather than just saying, ‘The data says this.’

Brazhnikova noted that one mistake analytics directors can make is providing too much data to users.

“There’s only so much attention that people have, and if they have 100 different dashboards to go to, they will go to none of them – they will just not use data,” she said. “What we are really trying to do is think strategically about our portfolio. If you are a clinic manager, what are the things you should be looking at? It’s analytics taking a proactive stance. Let’s define what they should be looking at and then consolidate and minimize. It’s not about creating more. It’s being more strategic about what you’re creating.”

Following lunch, Tiffany Temple, vice president and director of Credit Risk Management at Hancock Whitney Bank, delivered the afternoon keynote. Temple discussed the role of data analytics in banking and credit risk management, citing examples and telling stories from throughout her career. She also fielded questions from students about a variety of topics, including advice on how to break into the industry.

“Don’t be afraid to reach out to professionals, even if you don’t know them,” Temple said. “I can't tell you how many students literally found me on LinkedIn and said, ‘Hey you’re in credit risk. Would you mind having a conversation with me?’ As professionals, we understand that, day one, there are going to be a lot of experiences you don’t have. We understand that, and we also understand that the more we teach you, the more you’ll continue to grow in the industry.”

The final session of the afternoon was a young alumni panel featuring recent graduates of the MANA program discussing how they got their jobs and what their current roles involve. Participants included Basem Elkhatib (MANA ’23), senior business intelligence analyst/data engineer with the New Orleans Saints/Pelicans; Sara Johansen (MANA ’23), director of Tulane Retention Data; Kayvan Khoobehi (BSM ’21, MANA ’23), data scientist with Principal Financial Group; and Peyton Thompson (MANA ’19), data and AI value strategy consultant with Accenture.

The colloquium wrapped up with a networking reception for speakers, students, faculty and alumni in the Goldring/Woldenberg Business Complex.

“With the field of business analytics growing so rapidly, it’s wonderful to be able to bring in practitioners from so many fields — including healthcare, technology, supply chain, finance, sports, education and consulting — to discuss the ways data is being used across industries and opportunities for data professionals,” said Simin Li, assistant professor of management science, who organized this year’s program. “It was also a great pleasure to be able to feature so many MANA program alumni on this year’s panels. They were very generous with their time, and I think they provided our students with a lot of valuable job market do’s and don’ts and career development insights.”