MANA Colloquium showcases ‘Analytics in Action’

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James Martin (MBA ’17), CEO of Gulf Wind Technology, explained the importance of analytics in the renewable energy industry during the 2024 Master of Business Analytics Colloquium.

On Nov. 15, the Freeman School hosted the 2024 Master of Business Analytics Colloquium, an annual conference that brings analytics experts to campus to share their perspective on industry trends and offer career insights to students in the Master of Business Analytics (MANA) program. The theme for this year’s conference was “Driving Business Value and Innovation.”

The colloquium began with a morning keynote delivered by Vipin Mayar (MBA ’88), head of Fidelity Bank’s AI Task Force. During his keynote “Leading in Data and

Analytics in the Age of AI," Mayar discussed the impact of AI in the analytics industry and stressed to students the importance of leveraging this emerging tool in their careers.

Mayar said that AI has exploded across industries over the past several years and would almost certainly transform analytics. "AI is monumental, and disruption is happening right now," he said.

He predicted that workers would soon be using AI tools to perform myriad tasks like creating marketing content, writing code, processing documents, diagnosing illnesses and making drug discoveries.

"You're stepping in when AI is going gangbusters," Mayar told students, "so you have to start using the models and getting really good at them."

Mayar urged students to use their business skills to differentiate themselves in the job market. "The biggest need in the marketplace is not PhD data scientists," Mayar said. "It's someone who has good business knowledge, good communication skills and enough technical knowledge to know how to use these tools. That trifecta is hard to find."

Following lunch, James Martin (MBA '17), CEO of Gulf Wind Technology, explained the importance of analytics in renewable energy companies as the afternoon keynote speaker.

Martin said that data and analytics inform virtually every aspect of his three-year-old startup company, from calculating the energy that wind turbines produce to predicting and modeling hurricanes. “We are a data-heavy, technology-heavy company,” he said.

Martin told students they had a unique opportunity to shape Louisiana’s energy future. “We’re in a fascinating energy state,” he said. “Louisiana is a really interesting area to apply your expertise.”

While he noted some barriers to the adoption of renewable energy in Louisiana, including the relatively low price of oil and natural gas and state politics, Martin was optimistic that transitioning to clean energy is possible.

He cited Gulf Wind Technologies’ new wind turbine in Port Fourchon as one initiative that would facilitate data collection and education and ultimately help researchers better understand the possibilities of wind production in the Gulf.

“This first turbine in Port Fourchon is designed to educate,” he said. “We’re not doing it to make money from it. We want to learn. We want to fail forward fast. We want to test our hypotheses.”

Martin closed by encouraging students to use their analytics backgrounds in novel ways to help solve society’s most pressing challenges. “Innovation is the way we stop global warming,” he said. “You can’t stop innovating.”

In addition to the keynotes, the colloquium featured an Industry Leaders panel that included Andrew Quick (MBA ’01), chief AI officer at Entergy; Paul Fournet, vice president of finance and information technology at Reily Foods; Marina Brazhnikova (MBA ’14), director of enterprise analytics at Ochsner Health; and Chris Tengco (BSM ’07), supply chain excellence lead at Shell.

Simin Li, assistant professor of management science and organizer of the colloquium, said the panel gave students the chance to meet and network with potential employers. “We invite industry leaders from a wide range of industries, including sports, finance, banking, energy, construction, wholesale and logistics,” she said. “We want to use this colloquium to attract attention from local employers who need analytics hires.”

The colloquium wrapped up with a Young Alumni panel featuring Jaelyn Young (MANA ’24), data analyst at RNGD; Sara Oubre (MANA ’24), business analyst at Stuller, Inc.; Basem Elkhatib (MANA ’21), revenue finance manager at New Orleans Saints and Pelicans; and Connor Melerine (MANA ’21), data and analytics analyst at Regions Bank.

Li said the Young Alumni panel was especially important in helping students envision careers in analytics.

“These alums have first-hand experience that will help our current students land full-time jobs,” Li said. “Their memories are still fresh, and their experiences and success stories are extremely valuable and inspiring.”

Overall, Li said she believes students appreciated the opportunity to meet industry professionals and hear examples of “analytics in action.”

“Our goal is to connect students with industry leaders and help students figure out what industry they want to join,” she said. “Students think the colloquium is very valuable.”