A CEO competition

Introducing students to the world beyond the classroom.

Alana Higgins, winner of the Win A Day As A CEO competition.

The University of South Australia Business School’s ‘Win A Day As A CEO’ competition provided one lucky student the chance to live the corporate experience.

Arid by the mantra of ‘no substitute for experience’, the UniSA Business School provides real-world practice as part of their extensive learning program. One such opportunity was afforded to Alana Higgins, winner of the Win A Day As A CEO competition.

Into its second year, the competition is open to students of first-year business and law. Commerce student Alana impressed the selection panel in her application. Alana was excited to gain insight into what it means to be a CEO by spending time with Zoos SA CEO Elaine Bensted.

“Being presented with an opportunity to meet an individual such as Elaine is a great benefit to me. I believe dedication and understanding are key components for a role as important as that of a CEO, plus managing people and personalities.”

Alana started her busy day by interviewing Professor Mile Terziovski, Acting Pro Vice Chancellor of the UniSA Business School. She was interested in the Business School’s role of introducing students to the world beyond the lecture theatre. Professor Terziovski spoke candidly of his desire to prepare students for the challenges following graduation.

“Students passing courses is not enough. We have an obligation to prepare students for the business world and aim provide an outstanding student experience and exceptional graduates. We work to simulate real-world experiences in an educational environment and this opportunity offers a link to the real world. In the end 90 per cent of local students find a job in their field with 12 months of graduation,” revealed Professor Terziovski.

The Business School’s aspiration to be in the top five in Australia is on course, while the University’s goal is to be part of the top eight institutions in the country. Professor Terziovski made note of UniSA expansion since its foundation in 1991. “UniSA has shown fast growth and has established a strong reputation for research and teaching quality.”

He noted one of the Business School’s main aims was to encourage and develop research opportunities with international partners. Between work and family duties, Alana felt this reputation, plus UniSA’s flexibility and modernity, would aid her learning experience while completing her Bachelor of Commerce degree.

“Having worked in various fields I compiled a list of what I liked about the business sector and looked to further myself. The Business School has allowed me to undertake my chosen path. I really enjoy what I am doing.”

“It also offers me flexibility,” commented mother-of-one Alana. “Being a mature age student and working mother, I can study externally yet still listen to and contact lecturers. I still feel the interactivity and remain immersed in the university experience. It goes to show you can follow different pathways to achieve your goals. I hope this kind of thing is more common.”

Alana considered the challenges faced by female CEOs and felt the competition would provide invaluable experience. “It is always going to be a challenge when you have a family. Men don’t have to stop, but for a mother, it takes time out of your career. I entered the competition because I believed gaining this insight would aid my career development. I want to prove the sky is the limit.”

After a session of media training with the University’s News and Media team, Alana was whisked to lunch and then to Adelaide Zoo. After a tour of the grounds with Elaine, the pair sat together to share ideas about the Adelaide Zoo and the role of a CEO.

Elaine was appointed CEO of Zoos SA in September 2012, at a time when the Adelaide Zoo’s financial challenges were highly publicised. She has acted quickly to re-establish Adelaide and Monarto Zoos as must-visit locations. “The main aim is to save animals from extinction, but to do that you must earn revenue. Our thinking is focused on ‘what can we do to bring in people and sponsors?’ Creating positive relationships with local businesses and the community is an ongoing aim.”

Elaine quizzed Elaine on many aspects of her leadership role, and she was sincere in revealing her most difficult and most enjoyable functions.

“The most demanding part is making hard decisions such as budget and job cuts. I’ve worked in the public and private sectors and enjoy the influence a public role can have in the community.”

Elaine recommended measures students can take to excel post-graduation. “Those who impress most are people who have researched the company. Personal values and how they fit the organisation are also important,” she said. “You must work hard in line with what the organisation is striving to achieve. Do not be afraid to present new ideas – be proactive.”

Alana said the day was an amazing experience because not too many employees get the chance to speak to their boss like that. “This opportunity has made me even more excited to graduate and enter the field,” she said. “I’m ready to make my dream a reality.”

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