





OVERCOMING THE GREAT RECESSION

WITH ITS LOS ANGELES LOCALE AND FOCUS ON NETWORKING, THE MOUNT'S UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS PROGRAM THRIVES.

BY JOANNA BANKS

PHOTOS BY CARLOS PUMA

Brittany Galin '11 steps into the familiar haze outside the landmark Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. Hollywood Boulevard hums with activity, even in recession-steeped Los Angeles. It is a good day to be an accountant. In these hard times, Galin knows how to read a balance sheet. And that is valuable.

The scene unfolded last summer when Galin, a business administration major with an emphasis in accounting, interned in the accounts receivable department for Thompson Hotels, owner and manager of boutique hotels. Like other Mount students of her generation, Galin committed to a business major in a time of deep recession. "The TV shows and movies you watch,



the music you listen to, the places where you shop and eat — accounting is as close to recession-proof as you can get,” Galin says. “Everyone and every company requires an accountant.”

Until 2010, surveys of college freshmen suggested that fewer incoming students across the country were on the same path as Galin, with business majors shrinking in popularity. As the recession deepened, the lean economy may have cast doubt on the viability of a career in business, according to the annual Freshman Survey coordinated by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA.

The institute’s 2009 freshman survey showed that the percentage of U.S. college freshmen planning to major in business fell to its lowest level since the mid-1970s. Overall, freshmen were less likely to pursue a career in business than ever before in the 44-year history of the survey. The institute closely watched the 2010 survey data, released in January 2011, for hints of renewed interest in business, and there was no further decline reported, says Linda DeAngelo, assistant director for research for the institute’s Cooperative Institutional Research Program. The “undeclared” category appeared to be where many would-be business majors ended up during the drop-off, DeAngelo adds.

For Galin and her Mount St. Mary’s classmates, the major remains a stable, viable choice. The number of traditional undergraduates enrolled as business majors has increased substantially in the last five years. Business undergraduates benefit from the Mount’s Los Angeles locale, enjoying access to major entertainment companies and international firms. They know success is possible based on the prosperous paths of business alums. Among other avenues, students build connections through internships,

Brittany Galin '11 says her Mount business administration degree with an emphasis in accounting put her on track to excel during her summer 2010 internship with the Thompson Hotels group.

attend an ongoing speaker series featuring inspiring businesswomen and men, and soak up knowledge through the many layers of academic life at the College.

FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS

Accessible and well-connected faculty play a large part in energizing academic and professional futures. Professors focus their teaching on the core of the College’s character-building philosophy, says Mark Alhanati, business department chair. Toughness counts, especially now. The business program is grounded in fundamentals: Learning to analyze financial statements is equally important whether a student is focused on accounting, marketing or international business. A good foundation that includes strong networking skills can make the difference in finding a job quickly.

“We are a business department within a liberal arts institution,” Alhanati says. “We infuse ethics coursework into all of our classes. The strength of our program and success of our students is grounded in a strong core curriculum, which is further enriched by access to student-governed professional organizations. And, as a women’s college, teaching communication skills is one of our strengths. The students learn to take risks. Many colleges of business require four math classes to graduate, but that’s not who we are. We’d rather students take courses in philosophy and religion so they can learn how to think.”

Bonnie Hill, a businesswoman and past presidential appointee to numerous federal posts, spoke to Mount business students in 2010 as part of the business department’s signature Vantage Point Speaker Series.



Erika Peraza '11 turned her business education with a management emphasis into full-time employment upon graduation from the Mount at fashion company BCBG: Max Azria. Peraza designed "looks" for the company's clothing line during a lengthy internship.

A Mount undergraduate business degree is a passport to opportunity for this group of Millennials — a driven and tech-savvy generation of women. They are not deterred, having found the character at the Mount to move forward in spite of the Great Recession. During summer 2010, the College placed an all-time high of 12 students in internships and professional positions in the Los Angeles offices of the world's four largest international accounting firms. Recent graduates have been hired by Ernst & Young, PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, Deloitte LLP and KPMG LLP. Mount alumna Zulema Garcia '95 is a partner at KPMG LLP.



IT TAKES A NETWORK

Erika Jorge '10 says she experienced the first wave of the recession during her senior year but remained confident that a business degree was the right path for her. The College's Los Angeles address helped her gain experience during a string of internships with entertainment companies before she graduated. As a marketing student seeking contacts, Jorge joined the Mount's chapter of the American Advertising Federation. Through a regional competition of marketing students from other colleges and universities, she made more connections.

"Internships are huge, and all the leadership positions I held on campus were extremely important," Jorge says. "I used to think that getting a job was all about GPA. At the end of the day, it's really about your experience and contacts." When she was a student working in the College's admission office, a staff member recommended her for an internship at DreamWorks Studios. She proactively sought

out another internship at Saks Fifth Avenue and then contacted E! Entertainment herself, where she was hired for a third internship.

"My classmates and I just kept pushing for more internships," says Jorge, whose E! Entertainment contact ultimately connected her with her current employer, MediaCom. Jorge, an assistant media planner with the Burbank, Calif., company, deals with digital technology and works primarily with people under 30.

Jorge's persistence with landing internships and building connections was fostered by the steady guidance of faculty. "I first started an internship program because we believed it should be required for business students," says David Leese, professor of business and director of the department's internship program. Leese previously chaired the department for 18 years.

"In the beginning, I spent a lot of time trying to place the students. We don't do that now," Leese says. "What we

AN MBA FROM AN INTERNATIONAL CITY

Mount St. Mary's launched its MBA program in 2008 with concentrations in entrepreneurship, health services management, nonprofit management and organizational leadership. Today, the program counts 81 graduates from varied backgrounds — real estate, education and public service, among them. The program is offered in a weekend format to those with a bachelor's degree in any field. Classes are held at the Doheny Campus in the heart of Los Angeles. All students participate in a 10-day international travel-study course to China as part of their MBA curriculum.

A Mount MBA replaces the traditional course-by-course master's curriculum with theme-based modules. By blending business disciplines that are traditionally kept separate — marketing, finance and business law — students develop a "big picture" view of how disciplines come together in the actual business environment. The degree culminates in a real-world final consulting project from an organization of the student's choice.



do now is say to students, ‘We will give you the resources, but you have to go out and find the internships.’ Now our students go out and kick the doors in.”

GAINING REAL-WORLD SKILLS

Dennis Signorovitch, an instructor of management communications at the College since 2003, spent 30 years in the private-sector world of corporate communications and market research. He brings his practical perspective into the classroom. “I tell my students, ‘There aren’t any easy paths to glory and riches, but the opportunities in business for those who have a strong grounding in the fundamentals are not going away,’” he says. “At the end of the day, it’s still a trillion-dollar economy. That number might diminish over time, but that just means you have to sharpen your skills to compete in a tougher environment.”

Signorovitch drills his students on writing in business, especially producing sales reports and strategic plans, and negotiating balance sheets and income statements. “They hear about management principles and management information systems. The dirty little secret is that a lot of people in business programs won’t pick up these skills, so if they do, they have an advantage. Also, they can count on the fact that some people won’t be as motivated as they are.”

Signorovitch heads the business department’s signature Vantage Point series, a showcase of speakers from the business world who come to the College to share their expertise. Past speakers have included Style Network and E! Entertainment executive Salaam Coleman Smith; Michele Rhilinger ’75, vice president of Weyerhaeuser, a Fortune 500 company in Seattle; and Gisselle Acevedo, president and CEO of Para Los Niños, a nonprofit organization that serves impoverished children.

The series offers the kind of inspirational stories about

Karla Cotez ’12, a business major with a marketing emphasis, confidently took her classroom experience into Universal Music Group’s Latin artist division during her 2010 summer internship.

women who made it that students crave. The opportunity to meet successful women in a smaller setting — along with regular, direct access to faculty — is an important selling point, says Erika Peraza ’11, a business student with a management emphasis. “Mount St. Mary’s may be a smaller school, but it’s a women’s college, and that makes a big difference to me,” Peraza says. “A lot of times women feel afraid to put themselves out there, especially in a male-dominated society. At Mount St. Mary’s, you’re not worrying about what guys are thinking. The women here are empowered.”

Peraza held an extended internship position with the fashion company BCBG: Max Azria for several months beginning in summer 2010. Shortly after her December 2010 graduation, the company hired Peraza for a full-time position in retail human resources. During her internship, Peraza worked out of the company’s Vernon headquarters and successfully took on a series of high-profile projects, including assisting with a style guide of clothing “looks” for the 2010 holiday season. The style guide was adopted by retail store associates for the company’s MaxRave line for women ages 18 to 25. Peraza says she and her classmates see the challenging economic landscape as a training ground. “You have to be able to do it all. You have to have skills to do different jobs, to be versatile. I feel like I’m a jack of all trades, and I want to be moving vertically constantly.”

SOMEONE IMPORTANT

Karla Cortez ’12 spent last summer interning at Universal Music Group in the Latin artist division. Cortez, whose emphasis is marketing and minor is graphic design, nurtured her business sense in her family’s flower shops. She saw how the recession ate away at the family nest egg — forcing her parents to close their two shops and shift to a home business.

Cortez says her internship and close interaction with Mount business faculty has framed her career goal to design beautiful album covers for musicians. “I want to be someone important. I want to be a vital piece of a big company,” she says. “I know there are going to be tons of people laid off that already have skills and experience. That means I have to work harder. I’ve always thought big,” she adds, “and I’ve always been dedicated to my studies. My priority is my education.” ♣