



Harvard Business School



Successful Business School Essays | 2024

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Carlyn's Essay

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Successful Harvard Business School Essay

Six pm on a freezing February Saturday in Evanston: after twelve hours of shooting across three locations for our upcoming issue of STITCH, Northwestern University's student-run fashion magazine, our 15-person team was fading fast. The models shivered in the frosty air, our photographer wrung her hands in despair over the disappearing light, and the make-up team was starving. We had one final shot to complete on our shoestring budget. As STITCH's Creative and Photo Shoot Director, I needed to rally our discouraged group. I draped warm leather jackets on the models, posed them under a photographer-approved street light, and found a 50% off coupon to order pizza for the team. Two months later, Teen Vogue featured that shot when it named STITCH one of the country's top 10 college fashion magazines. This experience highlighted the importance of values which I endeavor to consistently practice: advocating for a balance of creativity and business-oriented pragmatism in fashion, taking deep-dive initiatives to create solutions, supporting the growth of others, and establishing common ground to drive impact.

While interning at Pronza Schouler in New York, I realized that both creativity and business are pivotal for success in fashion. After a confusing day left me questioning my dream of working in fashion, I walked to the Metropolitan Museum's Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty exhibit. As I waited in the two-hour line, I internally debated the topic. I was the company's sole finance intern and my Parsons-trained peers seemed disinterested in the economics of fashion. If future designers didn't care about the financials, did an impactful place exist for me? When I entered the exhibit, though, it suddenly made sense. Among the horsehair jackets and antler headresses, I realized these uniquely beautiful creations couldn't exist on their own. While Alexander McQueen created runway art that enchanted audiences, the business team behind the brand converted that awe into a commercial powerhouse. From that exhibit, I developed a mission to help fashion brands achieve success by balancing art and business.

Through its gold-standard executive development program, Neiman Marcus has given me amazing opportunities to blend art and analytics. These experiences have taught me the value of proactively tackling problems with an open solution mindset. Having happily rotated through Buying and Marketing, I felt particularly excited to advance into our more quantitative Planning team and lead the financial growth of a \$75M Ladies Shoes office. One of our most successful silhouettes and consistently sold out. Leveraging the data as evidence, I pitched a two-part proposal to our VP of Planning and Divisional Director: 1) increase the brand's budget despite its low productivity and allocate 50% of this increased budget to basic styles—a 1.5 multiplier to the existing basic allocation; 2) utilize the beauty division's automated replenishment system to optimize revenue and ensure constant stock of top-selling styles. With our senior leaders on board, we then persuaded cross-functional teams including IT and Allocation to help transform strategy into reality. From this initiative, our keystone brand generated an additional \$1.3M in sales and new the replenishment system is employed across our entire division. Without creative problem solving and collaboration across company divisions, this current growth would not have been possible.

Benefiting from amazing mentors in my academic and professional journey, it's important to me to support the growth of others. I lead training classes for new Assistant Buyers and have directly mentored ten colleagues. While I love discussing the intricacies of product, color, and trend, I also strive to share the analytical fundamentals of buying, planning, and retail math to excite junior teammates about the power of data. So far, eight mentees have earned accelerated promotions. When Neiman Marcus upgraded its outdated system platforms, confused chaos erupted. With no available manuals, I taught myself to navigate the new systems and experimented until I found solutions. The company named me a system "Super-User" allowing me to lead meetings training our 30-person Merchant team on best practices. Our team became experts on the new systems which resulted in an incremental \$30M in revenue for the company.

At Alexander Wang and Neiman Marcus, I have witnessed how passions often run high in creatively geared industries. I've learned the importance of identifying common ground and building consensus to enable success and have applied these skills to other areas. I love playing sand volleyball—and you can bet emotions can run as hot as the sand we play on! When I became team captain, we were a patchwork of different levels of expertise, yielding embarrassing losses and frustration among more competitive players. To grow mutual understanding and camaraderie, I partnered tenured players with novices and implemented a democratic playing-time system. While we're not league champions yet, we made it to the second round of playoffs.

While planning the SPCA of Texas' Strut Your Mutt fundraiser, two teammates on our PR committee vehemently disagreed on whether to focus promotional efforts on social media or traditional outlets. During a particularly heated meeting, it became apparent that without intervention our team would splinter. I asked the opponents to share their perspectives and actively listen to the alternative approach. Creating space for and identifying commonalities in differing opinions got us to a solution everyone felt invested in: we would use influencers to promote the race on social media and news shows. With the broad exposure, the race successfully raised \$275K for animal rescue efforts.

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Going forward, I hope to continue melding creativity and business, leading impact by finding common ground, and taking initiative to find creative solutions to successfully scale new luxury designers. The fashion industry is a \$1.2 trillion global business and growing every year. With fast fashion and an over-saturation of top designers in the marketplace, customers are looking for unique clothing to differentiate their wardrobe. However, many young brands that could fill this market void struggle to get off the ground due to a problematic funding structure: companies have to pay for everything upfront but aren't reimbursed until the product sells. I hope to launch a luxury brand accelerator, like those traditionally found in the tech sphere. In exchange for equity, my accelerator would provide new designers an ecosystem in which to strategically assess, grow, and fund their businesses, encouraging the most innovative to expand. I hope to transform the fashion landscape and help designers transport brilliant new concepts from paper sketches to customers' closets.

Professional Review by Mr. MBA®, Val Mistra

Carlyn takes us on a delightful journey of self-discovery and achievement, one that is brimming with "passion" for data and creativity, shining "intellectual curiosity," and "insight" by displaying vibrant, heartfelt examples of introspection and growth. Her detailed progression from creative university student to finance professional and the many "show, don't tell" experiences she thoughtfully portrays "shows" us why she is a superior candidate for any coveted MBA program.

As a Northwestern student in Para 1, Carlyn's vivid account of freezing Evanston, shivering models, and a starving make-up team resound similar campus memories for most college students during challenging assignments. Her splendid example of overcoming an obstacle and quick thinking resulting in an award-winning photo and team-building pizza moment are superb for "show, don't tell." She highlights her 2 personal brand themes: creativity and business excellence.

Para 2 perfectly illustrates Carlyn's "A-ha" moment, after questioning her business worth in fashion, her discovery that business and financials serve as the foundation to all fashion art houses. If done correctly, the "A-ha" moment is an excellent means to showcase one's "insight," self-discovery, self-realization, and wisdom. Great job!

MBA Admissions officers need to see professional achievement, leadership and giving back in candidates and Carlyn details this well in Para 3-4. At Neiman, she showcases her guts, bravery, and leadership to turn around a failing product line, quantifies the work example with financial data (growth, loss, revenue) to show real impact, and provides valuable insight on creativity and collaboration to achieve her goal. Carlyn also highlights the importance of helping others come up as she did. Nicely done!

In Para 5-6, Carlyn chooses to showcase her extracurricular passions for sand volleyball, incorporating her strategic management and teambuilding style with her team, and social impact fundraising initiatives, including her successful management of an inter-person conflict and the quantifiable results of her team's collective efforts. A+ on her extracurricular and social impact examples!

Finally, MBA Admissions teams desire candidates with clear, well-thought out career ambitions. In Para 7, Carlyn details her continuing passion for creativity and business fashion and provides a concrete market opportunity for her future "luxury brand accelerator" solution. It would have benefited Carlyn to briefly specify how an MBA education would help her achieve her future goals: gaps in her knowledge (Entrepreneurship major), professional/social clubs, alumni network, etc.

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