

illUminate Blog Transcript: Manoj Malhotra on Being the New Dean

Recorded August 8, 2024. Listen to it here.

- MANOJ MALHOTRA: 00:00 But I think it's more than that. It's about building relationships with alumni. And that relationship is not just about getting extra resources like endowments and funds for the buildings, but also that connective tissue that allows our alumni and our corporate stakeholders to play a role in the life of our institution.
- ANNOUNCER: 00:19 [music] This podcast is brought to you by ilLUMinate, the Lehigh Business blog. To learn more, please visit us at business.lehigh.edu/news.
- ROB GERTH: 00:31 [music] Welcome to the ilLUMinate Podcast. I'm Rob Gerth, Director of Marketing and Communications for Lehigh University College of Business. Today is August 8th, 2024, and we're speaking with the new dean, Manoj Malhotra. Dean Malhotra was appointed the Kevin L. and Lisa A. Clayton Dean of the College of Business in July 2024. He is a professor in the Department of Decision and Technology Analytics in the College of Business. His research focuses on the flexibility of manufacturing and service firms, manufacturing strategy and supply chain management, the interface between operations and information systems and marketing, and healthcare management. So, we're recording this in mid-August of 2024, and you've been in the office since July 1st. How's the experience been so far?
- MALHOTRA: 01:18 I think it has been a wonderful experience, both in terms of settling in the Lehigh Valley, as well as what I've experienced at the college itself and the university. The warmth of the people has especially stood out for me, a sense of collegiality, a sense of belonging to Lehigh University and the feeling of a community. And I think there has been an amazing culture that I witnessed and a welcome that is with open arms. And that has been very evident and very strong, not only at the university level, as they interface with different groups in the provost office or human resources or other groups, but generally been a very, very warm welcome and a smooth transition into being a dean here.
- GERTH: 02:12 And what's made the opportunity here at Lehigh Business? What made that interesting to you when you saw it? I assumed you were approached by a headhunter.
- MALHOTRA: 02:19 Yes.
- GERTH: 02:19 What was like, "Oh, yeah, this looks interesting."?
- MALHOTRA: 02:21 Yeah. This headhunter or the search firm already knew about me and my background. And they reached out to me towards the later part of last year. And they said, "Manoj, you're the first person, actually, I'm calling." That's one thing that stands out because you fit this to a T. And it'll be wonderful if you would consider it. And I knew a little bit about Lehigh University because I knew Georgette. And I knew about-- because we had a council of deans when I was a dean at Case Western Reserve University, where we met twice a year. We would exchange stories. And I knew a little bit about what was happening at Lehigh, along with other private schools that we had in the mix like Vanderbilt, Emory, Case Western Reserve, Rochester, Boston University, University of Miami, and some others. I was familiar with the fact that

Lehigh University is here at the College of Business and Georgette heads it. And so I said, "Okay, let's hear a little bit more." And then one thing led to the other where I got a better understanding of the opportunity. And why did he think that my skill sets would be particularly attractive to the university and the college at this point of time, especially my ability to build programs, to spearhead research and make it as a top priority for the institution. My success in reaching out to the alumni community and fundraising. All those things were very attractive and something that the school needed at this point. It's a blending of those different viewpoints that kind of dovetailed well with my background and capabilities and what I'd achieved to date that stood out. And that led down to the interviewing process and me being one of the finalists.

GERTH: 04:11

Well, let's talk about that. Once you got here, was there any surprises during the interview process? Anything that stood out?

MALHOTRA: 04:18

Yeah, I don't think there were any surprises. But I think the things that I mentioned earlier on, I was impressed by the thoughtful leadership of the institution. I enjoyed my time with Provost Nathan. I enjoyed meeting President Helble. And it was just refreshing that the sense of humility and a sense of institutional value and a willingness to think out of the box and work cooperatively. I enjoyed meeting not all, but some of the deans and the fact that it was a focused school with five colleges. And there was a very good camaraderie between the deans. So, the soft things about an institution that you do not know from the outside, even if you talk to the search committee, but when you come on campus, you witness. I could see the precursors of some of the common elements of good culture, friendliness, open-mindedness, and collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and that everybody was willing to work with others to do what is best for the school and the institution. So that kind of stood out for me and augmented what I already knew and strengthened my impressions about the institution as a whole.

GERTH: 05:28

And I got to say - I'll back you up on this - I've been here for five years now, or almost five years. And those feelings are true. I mean, that's not just a facade. That's just something that you're going to find is going to carry through all your years, I think.

MALHOTRA: 05:41

Yeah, I thought there was a genuineness to it. I mean, I perceived that. And you confirming it is wonderful to hear. But that's a sentiment that I got from many people that I talked to, that what do you like about being here? And those things come out in multiple ways, but again and again. So good to know.

GERTH: 06:00

Speaking of people, you have to win over the faculty. Let's talk about the faculty for a second. I know you haven't been here very long, but have you met any of them?

MALHOTRA: 06:06

Yes.

GERTH: 06:06

What's your impression so far? And what's your impression as an outsider? Because as a researcher, you've obviously dealt with faculty from all over the world.

MALHOTRA: 06:15

Yeah, my sense is that the faculty culture here is good. That they are focused on the mission of the institution. They are research-focused and the transformation that has taken place in the last 10 years during the tenure of Georgette regarding perceptions about knowledge creation, serving the students, and all that has just kept getting better. Higher quality faculty have chosen to come here and stay. And I think I have a positive impression about the faculty. And they are clearly working in an environment

which is supportive of them. I want to make sure that there is no break into that environment, that we continue to build on all the good things that Georgette did with respect to that culture and enhance it and actually even open out more avenues so that they can succeed. I see my role as somebody who's a cheerleader, somebody who becomes the tailwind behind the efforts of what the faculty are doing and to block and tackle for them and to help them get the resources they need to succeed, whether it's in the classroom or in the research domain or external reach out to the industry or even for grant writing if they want to do it. So I think it's positive and I'm also committed to the idea of trying to meet all the faculty. We have close to 100 in the first year that I'm here. I've already started.

GERTH: 07:43

Can you meet them face-to-face have a sit down? Yeah.

MALHOTRA: 07:45

Face to face, one to one.

GERTH: 07:47

That's a pretty big goal.

MALHOTRA: 07:50

I think it's a worthwhile goal because faculty as a group is just a group. But we have stories that are individual. And each and every one of our faculty brings something valuable to the classroom, to the research, or to our ability to influence the students. So, I want to listen to their stories, what excites them about being here, what are their concerns, if any, and open a pathway and say that we are all a part of the same family. And likewise with staff too, that we are here to help each other and to learn from each other and in a humble way, present what we can do so that we can go together further. I also want to give respect to the faculty, that I want to know individually what each one of them is doing and create an open door. So that's the reason that I think it's important. I started that process and I'm also meeting a lot of people from the university because it's such a large university from different offices.

GERTH: 08:50

How about the alumni? Did you have a chance to meet any alumni yet?

MALHOTRA: 08:53

Yes, yes. Some of them are on the-- actually, even before I started, one of the members of the trustee board reached out to me and wanted to have a conversation, Sarat Sethi. And we had a wonderful Zoom conversation. He was excited that I was coming. I had talked to two of the trustees before during the interview process, including the chair of the trustee board. And those were very positive conversations where they talked about the ability of this university to grow with more corporate connections, which is one of the things that I've done well in my past work. And so there's a general level of excitement and optimism about the school and its future, which I share, and which reinforces that my choice to come here at this point of time is the right choice. I think alumni are an important source of support, advice, and I hope to utilize all of them as best as I can, but also share and present a vision that I have of what will make a comprehensive business school like Lehigh stand out and build its reputational impact to be even stronger in the future.

GERTH: 09:57

Well, let's get down to some nitty-gritty things now. As the Dean of Weatherhead School at Case Western, you worked with the schools of engineering, law, and medicine, and you designed an online MBA program that integrated health and management focus. How did that come about? Because we're starting to do that here, integrating the health into the business. So how did it come about there at Case Western?

MALHOTRA: 10:20

I think I'm very interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary in my nature and orientation. Some of you may already know, but I grew up in the engineering world. I have a master's degree from Ohio State, undergraduate in engineering as well. And the work I did in master's was around fuel cells, chemical engineering, properties of materials in boiler water reactors. They were all unfunded projects. And I also worked on transmission electron microscopy for aluminum alloys for my undergraduate thesis. It was a different world that I existed in. But the training was wonderful. And when I came over and did my PhD in the business school at Ohio State University at Fisher College, it gave me a perspective that was by naturally driven with that interdisciplinarity and thinking beyond the boundaries of your own school or your own organization. At Weatherhead, which does exist in Cleveland, and when we did the strategic plan, we had put in the four pillars of excellence. And one of them was market-focused education. And the two strategic initiatives that we took in that was understanding the impact of data-driven analysis and analytics, which is already your focus here. So that was another attractive point, that this school already gets what I was trying to do there. And the second was, how do you manage the healthcare vertical? Because it's very commonsensical and no-brainer that if you're in Cleveland with the Cleveland Clinic and MetroHealth and university hospitals and VA, it's a cluster, a healthcare cluster.

MALHOTRA: 12:01

And so, in the mecca of healthcare, should the leading business school there not be also leading in the understanding of that healthcare industry and the vertical that it represents. So that became one of the ways of implementing the strategic plan. And the online was to kind of take the access beyond what we already had at Case Western Reserve because of the local population. And we did not have too many models for doing online education from scratch. This program became the tip of the spear for the entire university. And we worked with the external vendor who was going to do the marketing, but we designed our own content. We created the multimedia set of systems. We also talked to the CEOs of all the four major hospitals. And that informed us to make a very forward-looking curriculum that was focused on AI, machine learning, and analytics. And it was very insightful for me to hear from the CEO of Cleveland Clinic that Manoj, we expect people to be skilled in business topics, but this is where our forefront lies. When a cardiac surgeon, now the CEO, is talking about analytics and deep learning and machine learning and saying that your students should have it, it's a pretty transformative moment. And that's why we put courses into that. I also hired a faculty member who had been at Harvard Medical School, but trained in industrial engineering at Michigan. So, all of those people allowed us to create the coursework, which was cutting edge.

MALHOTRA: 13:38

But along with the coursework, we also designed residencies in which online students would come to the campus and learn and also work with all the four area hospitals in understanding the culture and how the management practices were happening to do a longitudinal study for us in the long run that they should understand that not all hospitals work the same in healthcare. I think it has become a distinctive program. The first class graduated just this past June. And they were very happy and satisfied and thought that their experiences were wonderful. And they learned a lot. And it is a very eclectic class that they collect into the program, which consists of surgeons. It consists of people who worked in medical devices. It consists of people with product management, background, engineers, people who are actually in the healthcare delivery. I think we are very proud of what that program has done. And now to that

program, there has been added another segment, along with healthcare, on product management, which takes advantage of the capabilities of other faculty at Case Western Reserve University, whether it's school or management. And I think so the backbone and the architecture and structure that was created was flexible and a robust one. So now we can hang some other dimensions onto it to expand the footprint. But it was very exciting that we brought in the capability on online education that did not exist, but which has been talked about for the past dozen years or so. And I think that has spurred also some thoughts of online program development in other colleges at the university, though the College of Social Health was already delivering online programs, but they were all managed by the external vendors. So, this was the first instance where we in-house developed all the programs and did it in online setting.

GERTH: 15:25

And was there any apprehension about the online part of an online MBA?

MALHOTRA: 15:31

Yes. I mean, none of these changes are easy. And so we have some robust debates and what are the bets being made and what would be the paybacks and all that. So getting faculty approvals and coursework structured and all that. There were a lot of challenges that we overcame and to bring along the faculty into this new domain. And I'm glad that we did, because now it has become the engine for next level of growth in the graduate programs that does not depend upon foreign students coming, but all the domestic students or even those far flung as far as California and others can take this program. So, it expands the footprint of the college.

GERTH: 16:10

And then just jump back to the healthcare piece of it. Like I said, we're starting here to incorporate business and the College of Health with the College of Business. What do you think the opportunities are in healthcare in this area?

MALHOTRA: 16:24

I think there are-- if I look at the landscape of industries and corporations, healthcare is obviously one of the stronger networks here with Lehigh Valley and also St. Luke's. I think that's a strong cluster. There are insurance companies. There are supply chain and manufacturing companies. So, there's a very rich spectrum of firms that if you start going towards New York or even towards Philadelphia-- we are fortunate to be in the middle of that triangle, if you will. I see opportunities in taking advantage of that locational. I mean, Bethlehem is away from the major cities. But we also have some advantages and how can we pull more corporations into our fold. And we have a new College of Health. I think there are a lot of possibilities. We are just launching, which was done before I came. It was already approved interdisciplinary honors-based kind of program in both health and business for undergraduates. I'll have the opportunity to actually put some of the implementations of that together and specifics as we go along in terms of admissions and how do we service that program.

MALHOTRA: 17:34

I'm looking forward to that and my prior experiences would be helpful. And both the dean of the College of Health and I are committed to the idea of learning experientially in that program. And that's one of the things that I also did in my previous job at University of South Carolina when I set up a Center for Global Supply Chain and Process Management. We worked with a lot of healthcare companies, and I worked with a lot of projects in healthcare. I have a specific background in healthcare, which is also part of my current ongoing research. And as such, I think we can exploit that presence of a College of Health along with the integrated program that we've already started, and also see that how can we both learn from as well as provide value to local health area networks through our projects and our knowledge in

different fields of business, which we haven't done so far. So there's a lot of avenues that I've already traveled down on that we can at least explore. How will they come together?

GERTH: 18:34

And can we talk about the grad program for a second? What do you see as the opportunities there?

MALHOTRA: 18:39

I think in the graduate programs, the level of activity and the level of placements that we can do for our students can be enhanced. I think we have been in a level situation, but I think there's a growth mandate both from the strategic plan of the university and what I think the College of Business needs to be matching its capabilities in the undergraduate program, which is doing extremely well. So, I think we need to understand and find out that what do we need to do in terms of our program offerings to attract the strongest students and then be able to place them as well. And if you look at the last few years, a lot of the students from international group, especially from China, were enrolling in the master's specialty program, which was also the case at Case Western Reserve University. But that landscape has changed. Yeah.

GERTH: 19:29

We lost a lot of those just because of government regulations here and over there.

MALHOTRA: 19:33

And it's not just a-- it's a macro problem. It's not just a Lehigh problem, but we experienced it at Case Western Reserve University. And which is why you can now understand better why I was shifting away from that to strategically position the college or the school of management there online in different spaces than relying on students coming from overseas. I think we are still in the phase of that stabilization, and it's a challenge as well as an opportunity.

GERTH: 20:05

And let's talk about undergraduate for a second. Undergraduate is pretty firm, but what do you see are the growth opportunities there?

MALHOTRA: 20:12

I think right now we are ranked 23rd in the undergraduate program in Poets&Quants. I think there's an opportunity to be in the top 15. I'm very bullish on the quality of students and the quality of programs and the faculty that we have. I think we can enhance the quality of services, interact a little bit more with the students in terms of their placement opportunities and extracurricular activities through clubs. And I think we do them, and we do them well. But I think when we benchmark against some other schools like Chapel Hill or NYU, they're doing more. So it creates better student satisfaction when we keep stepping with them, because they are ranked in the top 10, both the schools. So aspirationally, we should be thinking about going for the top 10. And we did some benchmarking with their visitors a couple of weeks back. And they were very impressed with what we were doing. And they thought that there was a lot of room to do even better. I think on the staffing side and all the resource allocations to the undergraduate program, if done strategically and done in the right places, can actually enhance student impressions, placements, and also what kind of rankings can emerge out of that effort.

GERTH: 21:25

Now we have something here called the Vistex Institute for Executive Education. And executive education, for those who don't know, is its programs or individual classes that are taught mostly by our business faculty. They teach them to companies and individuals. It's got a beautiful new home in the top floor of the building that we're

sitting here recording in right now, in the Business Innovation Building. What do you see as the potential there?

- MALHOTRA: 21:50 I think it can only be higher and higher because of the building that you mentioned and the spaces that we have and the faculty that we have. So that's one of my priority areas as well. As we are trying to pull the corporations in, corporations should look at us as a source of knowledge and learning for their managers. And that's where executive education comes in. And I think we can be at least 2 to 310 larger than what we are. That will be one of the priorities to see that how do we bring that message of the hidden gem that we can be and are in more ways than one.
- GERTH: 22:22 And it is a critical pillar, right? The executive education. Other big schools have-- other schools, other well-known schools have it. You don't hear a lot about it. That's why I'm asking.
- MALHOTRA: 22:32 No, I think it is. In fact, in my visioning of the pillars, I think about graduate and undergraduate programs, PhD programs, faculty research. And I also think about executive education, because the comprehensive business school has all those pillars working at full cylinders. I think we have a lot of opportunity to do more expansion of the PhD programs. We have opportunity to expand our footprint in the executive education space. And there is also interconnectivity because executive education graduate programs can pivot off each other. When you do better relationship with companies, they're interested in more of their managers coming and recruiting in your programs or recruiting from our programs. I think it's a virtuous cycle that we can get onto if we link the two. When one rises, the other can rise also in tandem with it. And I think both would be, in some sense, opportunities for growth that could enhance the reputation, but also allow us to do some other things and make investments and bets that may come down the road with it.
- GERTH: 23:35 A lot of people don't realize part of a dean's job is to fundraise. How's your fundraising abilities? And how do you feel about fundraising?
- MALHOTRA: 23:44 It's an interesting question. And I think I see that as very integrated. I don't necessarily see it as a responsibility, but an essential component of what a dean's job entails right now. It's about resource generation. But I think it's more than that. It's about building relationships with alumni. And that relationships is not just about getting extra resources like endowments and funds for the buildings, but also that connective tissue that allows our alumni and our corporate stakeholders to play a role in the life of our institution. And that connective tissue can lead to enhancement of our placements, better quality students heading our way, and also advise through advisory boards on the kind of curriculums we design. And ultimately, we are in applied school. So those relationships with the external entities, including our alumni, are an important metric of what is going to guide us and constrain us in some ways. That we are producing people who are shovel ready when they get out. That they should be attractive to our prospective employers.
- MALHOTRA: 24:48 They are a very important link. And having closer relationships with them is a part of what allows us to learn from them. So that is an element of the relationship building. And the fundraising is an important element of it, but that's not the only element. It's about the whole cycle. And I've learned that with good relationships, alumni not only jump in. And actually, money is one of the easiest things to give. What is hard and what is where you know that you're making an impact is when they come up and say,

what more can I do? How can I spend my time? How can I give myself back to the institution, whether it's coming and teaching a class in the evening or just being there? And to me, that's the highest level of engagement because the giving part of the money and resources comes with that anyway. But that engagement is precious. I see fundraising and the role of modern business school as very interconnected, but more in the form of relationships and the fact that nobody can do it alone. But in combination and as a team, there is nothing that we can't achieve.

GERTH: 25:58

That would be a perfect place to end, but I do have one more question. And that's about research. You're a researcher and a top-tiered researcher, I might add. What do people who don't understand the importance of research need to know-- in a university setting or in a college setting, what do people need to know about the importance of research?

MALHOTRA: 26:17

I think research is critical because you want to make sure that you're preparing your students in the best way possible. When you have researchers who are learning and creating new knowledge, then you also have the opportunity to disseminate that knowledge to your students through the classroom. So, if you were just translating them about the basics and principles without getting that new information or new paradigms or new ways of thinking, then we would be less differentiated than-- there are so many-- there are 800 colleges of businesses around the country. But when you think of the prestigious ones, which are highly ranked in the top five, a lot of Ivy League schools, the Harvard's, the Whartons, the Kellogg's, or the Booth schools, and all that, Carnegie Mellon's, every school without fail, has a very strong research imprint and reputation. And it's not a coincidence. In fact, I had once done a plot, and I found that the rankings of their MBA programs were highly correlated with the research rankings. And is that a coincidence? I don't think so. So better quality institutions not only create better programs, which is done by the faculty, but who are better informed, and who are both learning from practice, leading practice in some instances, doing executive education, doing research and disseminating that through executive education, but also in the graduate programs and undergraduate programs and the PhD programs, who are leading to the next set of faculty who educate the students. I think that's what all the top schools have in common. And none of the schools that don't do research are going to be as highly regarded because the efforts and the outcomes don't quite match what is happening with the top research-oriented schools.

MALHOTRA: 28:01

Now, having said that, it's a capability, especially when you focus on quality, and I'm very highly focused on quality of work, that our research should be meaningful, it should be driven by practical problems. And ultimately, now we are also focusing on, does it make a societal impact? There are so many issues that are confronting us in the social changes. We also have climate change challenges. We have got global conflicts. We need to understand and appreciate the different viewpoints. And we also need to understand that, how do we create our management structures in the world of AI? How do we do the digitization of organizations? And all these complexities can be learned about and handled better with forward-looking schools, which have got research faculty, which are very highly quality oriented. And one of the challenges for the deans is how to build that faculty cater, retain them, and also resource them. So, nothing happens in isolation. It's all interconnected. And research plays a very important role in that regard.

GERTH: 29:06

And that'll be the place where we'll end. Thank you so much. I appreciate it very much. Welcome to Lehigh. Let me say that to you.

MALHOTRA: 29:12

Thank you.

GERTH: 29:13

We're looking forward to it. This podcast was brought to you by iLUminate, the Lehigh Business blog. To hear more podcasts featuring Lehigh Business Thought leaders, please visit us at business.lehigh.edu/news. [music] You'll also find links there to follow us on your favorite social media platforms. This is Rob Gerth for the iLUminate Podcast. Thanks for listening.