

Alumni Profile

Karen Nguyen – Fully Employed MBA Program



Career

Please provide a brief overview of your career path since graduating from UCI.

Since graduating from UCI, I've been fortunate to experience both the corporate world of high-technology and entrepreneurship. To say the MBA at Merage helped accelerate my career, would be an understatement. My background before business school was intellectual property law and I wanted to pivot my career path to high-tech marketing. Upon graduating in 2011 with my MBA, I was offered a global business development management role with one of the largest IT services consulting company. In that role, I built, oversaw and managed cross functional teams across North America, Asia and Europe for their infrastructure services division. As the youngest and only female recruit in a very male dominated industry, I believe the leadership skills gained throughout the program enabled me to acclimate quickly and prove to peers that I was capable of leading colleagues despite the age gap. What I lack in years, the MBA training helped to sharpen my strategic thinking skills to pragmatically lead and execute projects effectively. The experience at HCL Technologies led to being recruited by Western Digital to head the worldwide partner marketing team for their channel distribution business where I developed and launched the global partner program across 90 countries and 17 languages. By 2016, I was itching to use my diverse work experiences, MBA knowledge and entrepreneurial drive to launch a brick and mortar business, Inspired Art Wine-- an art studio, wine bar and gallery located in Costa Mesa. Building a brand from scratch and overcoming bureaucratic challenges was not easy at first, but the business has grown to become the #1 preferred partner for corporate team building. I believe without my MBA background, my venture may have been another statistic, failing after one year. The graduate business education gained at UCI really provided me the framework to identify the trends and respond quickly to changing market dynamics and competitors.

What do you see yourself doing in five or ten years?

In five years, I would like to expand my art and wine businesses globally; not so much opening more locations of Inspired Art Wine but expanding on the concept of art leveraging the connections and credibility built from the brand. I see myself continuing to introduce innovative products and services to my B2B and B2C customers continuing to "inspire" my customer base via curated content, meaningfulness educational experiences and connecting the global art community via my online media publishing

company. On a personal level, I would like to continue to grow my community involvement in higher education and the local community teaching courses in innovation and entrepreneurship and strategic executive communication to aspiring entrepreneurs and corporate executives. At the community level, I see myself serving on boards where I can use my professional experience to drive meaningful results to organizations, private or non-profit sector.

Your Time at UCI

When did you attend UCI?

I attended UCI from 2008-2011 as part of the Fully-Employed Program. I also went to UCI as an undergrad from 2001-2005 and completed my graduate certificate in law from 2006-2007.

What program were you in?

- *2008-2011: Fully Employed MBA program at UCI*
- *2006-2007: Legal Studies*
- *2001-2005: Political Science major;
minor in: Art History, Women Studies and Asian American Studies*

Why did you choose to come to UCI?

Growing up in Orange County and having graduated from UCI for my bachelors and post-graduate, I experienced first-hand the value and quality of the education from this university. I knew that I wanted to settle, grow my career and possibly start a business in Orange County so it was a no-brainer to attend UCI for my MBA education. The abundant amount of resources available as a student ensured that I was in great hands before, during and after earning my degree. From the faculty, to the infrastructure and connections with large corporations in Southern California combined with the personalized experience with Merage staff enabled me to fully leverage the opportunities that crossed my path during and after my MBA education.

Reflections

What made you decide to pursue a graduate degree?

*I'm a lifelong learner and inquisitive at heart in my professional and personal life. The decision to pursue a graduate degree wasn't **if**, but **when**. The path I chose in college led to law and after spending three years working in patent litigation, I knew dealing with precedents and case studies wasn't something I was passionate about. Instead, I was interested in innovation and technology. Rather than just work on legal cases involving Fortune 500 clients, I was interested to learn **what** and **how** these organizations grow and continue to be successful globally. To fill this knowledge gap, a formal education*

combined with the experiential learning was needed. This led me to the MBA path and once I decided I was going to go to business school, the answer of **where** to go was easy—back to my alma mater, UC Irvine.

Alumni Life

How did your education at UCI benefit you in your current life?

Going through the MBA program while working full-time prepared me for the mental, physical and emotional challenges of entrepreneurship. The rigorous curriculum and intellectual environment provided me the business toolsets to think strategically by enabling me to spot trends ahead of competitors, communicate effectively and influence key decision makers at the corporate, government and consumer level—as they are all my clients now at Inspired Art Wine. Building a brand from scratch doesn't happen overnight, but with the core and elective classes I took in marketing and negotiations, helped to refine my written and verbal communication skills, which have been instrumental in presenting my ideas more persuasively to influence customers, vendors, partners and direct reports. The ability to “work smarter, not harder” was a concept I didn't fully grasp until post-MBA, which has been an invaluable time management skill I apply being an entrepreneur limited with time. Despite running several businesses, coaching and consulting, I have been able to keep a reasonable work/life balance with proper time management best practices honed during the three years while in the FEMBA program. This has enabled me to maintain my sanity, health and continue meaningful relationships with people I care about.

What advice would you give to a current graduate student as they look towards their future careers?

My advice varies depending on the mindset of the graduate student. First, if you're someone who knows what career path you want upon graduating, I would encourage you to identify three key people that would serve as lifelong “board of advisors” in your chosen field. Ideally, a professor or former manager, an executive and a peer/classmate. Second, if you're someone who wants to switch careers, focus on industries that are growing because there will be opportunities to gain more responsibilities across different functions of the organization. Third, if you want to be an entrepreneur, study ventures that have succeeded and failed so you get a solid nuance on what worked and didn't work. Above all, whatever path you choose, you will feel most fulfilled when you have added valued to others, gain valuable insights from others and continue to grow personally and professionally.

What person inspires you?

Coincidentally, my company is called “Inspired” and to continue to inspire others, I surround myself with people and places that inspire me, which includes entrepreneurs, colleagues, customers, educators, thought leaders, non-profit leaders, athletes, my

parents, sisters and students. Before and at the end of each day, I allocate 15-30 minutes to reading articles relating to business, health/fitness, education and entertainment. This helps me stay abreast of the latest news that impacts the community on a broader scale.