Talking to the experts

Every year, the UniSA Business School gives one student the chance to enjoy a money-can’t-buy experience in the Win A Day As A CEO competition. The competition is an opportunity to meet with corporate leaders and speak frankly with them about their career and current role. This year brought together UniSA alumni Andrew Daniels, the high-profile CEO of the Adelaide Oval Stadium Management Authority with UniSA law student Antonella Rodriguez.

In A Day As A CEO is open to high-achieving first year business and law students, which inspired Antonella. “I realised that not everyone had the opportunity to even apply, and I wouldn’t get another chance to do it. I took so much away from the day – I thought it might be a quick chat and out the door, but they took their time. In law and business, time is one of the most valuable things you have.”

Antonella decided to move interstate in order to attend UniSA, she grew up in the ACT and had been undertaking online study when she realised she wanted more of a challenge, and to experience life on campus. “I came across UniSA through SATAC, after I registered my interest I received personal recommendations and phone calls from UniSA students to tell me how great it is studying there.” Antonella also liked the mix of theoretical and practical learning – within three weeks of starting her course she was in a Moict Court (court-like space where students participate in mock trials debating the law.

Another attraction was UniSA Business School's inclusive experience. “The Law School is relatively small with a result that is much more personal. The lecturers here know my name – I was sent a personal email from a lecturer congratulating me on my score.”

At this stage in her studies she plans to one day practice law, but Antonella said her day as a CEO helped her see she has more opportunities available to her than she realised. After introductions to the UniSA Business School team over breakfast, Antonella’s first meeting was with Pro Vice Chancellor of the UniSA Business School, Professor Marie Wilson. As well as 20 years of university leadership, Professor Wilson has extensive experience in the private sector – and her career hasn't followed a traditional trajectory. She has postgraduate degrees in science as well as law and management, and has held diverse roles in the public and private sector, including executive roles in the United States IT industry, roles in the public and private sector, including executive roles in the United States IT industry, and academic leadership roles in New Zealand, as well as Australia.

“Doing a law degree will change the way you see every problem you encounter,” Professor Wilson told Antonella. “A lot of CEOs and senior managers are lawyers as well, it gives you a way of thinking about transactions and interactions that is very helpful.”

Antonella was able to ask Professor Wilson about her thoughts on ways to make the most of her time, and received advice that she should gain as much experience as possible through volunteering and placements, both to improve her résumé and help her discover what area of law she enjoys working in.

Professor Wilson spoke passionately about the world-leading work being done within UniSA. “Australians aren’t always good at telling everyone when they’re good at something. We’re working with industry to solve problems – we created mirrors in flexible film from research at Mawson Lakes, which is transforming car manufacturing. These connections don’t just happen in engineering, they happen in business as well – our researchers will change the ways we work in the future in large and small businesses. There’s a lot more potential for the state to grow small and medium sized business though and that’s what our future – and careers for our graduates – depend on.”

And it’s not just industry connections – UniSA also works directly with the general public through its experiential learning program. The UniSA Legal Advice Clinic sees final year law students team up with a managing solicitor to provide free, confidential advice to members of the community. “I would love to build on the success of the Legal Advice Clinic and start a Business Advice Clinic,” Professor Wilson said. “One of the things UniSA will continue to build on is a close connection with the business and professional community.”

Antonella also questioned Professor Wilson about her experiences studying and working in law, how she manages her work-life balance, and her career progression. “I’ve done a lot of research into how managers get better – it’s by reflecting on what they’ve done,” said Professor Wilson. “What went well, understanding why it went well, and comparing that with what didn’t go so well. You have to look back at how you’ve spent your time and learn from your experiences.”

From UniSA to Adelaide Oval, experience a day in the CEO’s shoes.
as a chartered accountant; I haven’t done it for 26 years, but what it has given me is a strong financial background. Your course will give you a strong legal background. It will be invaluable in your career.”

While giving a behind-the-scenes tour of Adelaide Oval, Andrew spoke candidly about some of the challenges they faced in converting the cricketing arena into a joint football stadium and the state’s largest function centre. The scale of the development meant there are many tiny details to be planned, and Andrew pointed out to Antonella that they also employed many lawyers on various aspects of the development, including the permanent loan of the unique Bradman Collection that holds pride of place in the stadium.

Andrew shared how he was across all kinds of intricate details, and said that he enjoys being part of a team that is able to deliver tangible results. He offered an insight into his hiring policy, saying it aligns warning bells if he sees a résumé where the person has moved from job to job very quickly. “I look for high achievers who have the right attitude; a sense of humour and are team players, who have the ability to manage events. Event management sometimes means making sure the toilets are clean.”

Antonella asked about the challenges involved in leading a diverse and large team of people. “Being a leader, it’s essential to give clear direction,” Andrew replied. “To make sure you bring people along with you, it’s important for a leader to be inclusive. You need to foster an environment where people can be creative, but also keep it on the straight and narrow, and on budget. Being the CEO, you’re not everybody’s friend. At times, there are hard decisions. It’s about getting that balance right.”

And in his role with the Adelaide Oval Stadium Management Authority, he has done all of this in the glare of public scrutiny. “People are looking for us to fall over at the last hurdle. When there’s 20,000 people attending a match it’s 20,000 potential opinions and problems.” However, he told Antonella that it’s all worthwhile as he is helping create a truly unique and beneficial asset for the state. “It has been an amazing journey bringing together football and cricket after they were at war for 40 years.”

Antonella also asked Andrew about managing competing interests – such as major businesses within the new Riverbank precinct. “A really important aspect of what we’re doing here is to collaborate, even though we’re competing. Irregularly get together with CEDs of the Adelaide Festival Centre, Adelaide Convention Centre, Intercontinental Hotel and Adelaide Casino and talk about how to achieve a successful Riverbank precinct.”

Queried about his greatest achievements, Andrew listed both his current work plus his role building the Clipsal 500 into a major event. “But as soon as you’ve achieved something, that’s now the norm and you have to do better!”

Something he is passionate about is the importance of a mentor. His first was Ian Cocks, then chairman of the Adelaide Grand Prix. His second was Roger Cook, businessman and past chairman of the South Australian Tourism Commission and the SA Motor Sport Board. “You find people are happy to help you,” he said. “So find a mentor, and get networking. Talk to people, see other things, and find out things you didn’t know you didn’t know.”

Each year the Business School connects around 150 business and law graduates with industry professionals through the Business Career Mentor Program. Before graduating, business and law students also have the opportunity to gain experience beyond their years with the Business Mentors Program, which Antonella has signed on to. “The first year Business School students are matched to a second year or above student who is their mentor, who can answer any questions and help them out.” Antonella will encourage her mentees to work hard so they have a chance to enter the next Win A Day As A CEO competition, as she enjoyed the chance to gain direct insights into the business world.

“Having access to theoretical and practical learning at UniSA will prepare me to be a much more rounded professional.”

For more information about studying business or law at UniSA, please visit unisa.edu.au/business.

Win A Day As A CEO competition winner, law student Antonella Rodriguez in the UniSA City West Law library (left), and on campus (below right). She interviewed Adelaide Oval CEO and UniSA alumnus Andrew Daniels (below left) in the prestigious President’s Room overlooking the oval (far right).

Opening page: Antonella Rodriguez with Andrew Daniels at Adelaide Oval; and receiving her certificate from Professor Marie Wilson, Pro Vice-Chancellor of the UniSA Business School.