



## 2016 Best MBAs: Ami Patel, Wharton

The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania

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**Age:** 29

**Hometown:** Midland, MI

### **Education:**

- University of Pennsylvania, BA in Philosophy, Politics, Economics (PPE) and Spanish
- Relay Graduate School of Education, MEd

### **Where did you work before enrolling in business school?**

- Achievement First Charter Network (via Teach For America): *Founding Teacher* (I helped found a charter school in Brooklyn, NY and taught 1st, 3rd, and 4th grades.)
- Achievement First Charter Network: *Dean of Academic Culture* (I managed, and coached a portfolio of two grade levels and 12 teachers — as well as leading culture development and adult morale for the entire school.)
- Teach For America National Corporate: *Director of School Systems Leadership* (I helped build a leadership pipeline program to support TFA alumni in pursuing systems leadership roles.)

**Where did you intern the summer of 2015?** American Express; New York City

**Where will you be working after graduation?** American Express; Manager, Human Capital  
(I'll be entering a global rotational leadership program focused on human capital strategy.)

### **Community Work and Leadership Roles in Business School**

- Co-Founder/Co-President, Wharton Human Capital Club
- Co-Director of Student Ambassadors, One for the World (I co-manage a team of 16 students to educate and motivate classmates to participate in One For the World — an organization and movement that educates MBAs on effective giving, and encourages them to give 1% of their income to charities.)
- Facilitator, P3: Purpose, Passion, & Principles (I facilitate a nine-week program designed to provide a structured way for students to gain a deeper understanding of their own definitions of success and happiness and how these relate to their professional and personal goals.)
- Student Life Fellow (I advise, mentor, and support a group of 18 first-year students regarding their Wharton experience.)
- Welcome Committee (I help plan and facilitate admit student weekends and serve as a primary “face/voice of Wharton”.)

### **Which academic or extracurricular achievement are you most proud of during business school?**

One of the most meaningful experiences I've had in my whole life has been starting a club while here at Wharton — about something I really care about. After working in education, I realized that people are truly the most important asset in an organization — and knew I wanted to work in helping organizations build systems and structures to get the best out of their people. I realized that learning about drivers of motivation, recruiting tactics, talent management, etc., were not just personal interests but completely in the domain of why my peers invest in MBAs — because they want to go out there and lead. So, myself and a similarly passionate classmate and friend, Mike Lemmons, decided to start a student group to fill this “white space.” We hoped it would generate more of a dialogue — one that we certainly wanted to participate in.

Eight months later, Wharton Human Capital Club is run by six board members, has 280 members, and generates numerous events that have drawn in 50-100 students (as well as monthly newsletters and book club dinners so we can all nerd out on interesting articles together). Just last week, we had an event with Patty McCord, former head of talent at Netflix (famous for the Netflix Culture Deck), that multiple students told us was “the best event I’ve been to here.” (All credit goes to Patty on that.) Moreover, last summer, as Mike and I frequently hopped on calls to dream about what this club could accomplish and set our mission and goals, we talked about Patty being on the top of our “wish list” of who we could bring in and learn from. And then, it really happened.

What it comes down to to me is being able to find a true need in a community and build something that starts to fill that void. This club has allowed me to do that, and I’m so excited about the future it holds at Wharton after I leave.

**What achievement are you most proud of in your professional career?**

One of my proudest reflections on my professional career takes me back to my first year of teaching — the year I helped build a school from the ground up, and was pushed to redefine myself. It was not only my first year as a teacher (and a professional for that matter), but also our school’s first year of existence. I had no idea what it meant to build a school, much less a classroom, when I signed on to do Teach For America. But being charged to do something new and challenging for a very real and motivating “client” (my students) pushed me to look for solutions and ideas everywhere.

For example, I wasn’t satisfied with our writing curriculum (it was vague, didn’t give clear goals and tactics), but we had no other in-house resources. Thanks to my students, I decided to push myself to be someone who made changes happen instead of just complaining, so I took on the role of developing it for our entire grade. I dug into research in child development, best practices from other schools, and leading experts on literacy curriculum. Then each week, I churned out lesson plans that I would share with all the teachers in my grade. My revised plans weren’t perfect — but they became the foundation for how other grades in my school approached curriculum development, and created a cultural shift where teachers began to take a greater vested interest in customizing plans for our kids. This experience really taught me that a problem I want to solve can also lead to solutions for others; it prompted me to look beyond just my classroom and find ways to help build and develop systems and structures for our school.

**Who is your favorite professor?**

Katy Milkman — her high level of preparation and thoughtfulness and strong engagement and storytelling capabilities made every class feel like a Malcolm Gladwell TED Talk. I also really appreciated how at the onset of each class session she quickly reviewed the prior class (in 5 minutes or less) — this really helped me bake in my understanding of new concepts (a great teaching best practice!).

**Favorite MBA Courses?**

Operations Strategy, Managerial Decision-Making, Strategy & Competitive Advantage

**Why did you choose this business school?** My “Why Wharton” decision actually stems from initially being very skeptical of this school. As a former UPenn undergrad (back in 2004–08), I really wasn’t sure about coming to Wharton. I knew the school had a strong reputation, great resources, and would attract smart and talented people. However, I’d had the perspective that Wharton was finance-focused, the community was competitive and cutthroat, and that my nontraditional background just wouldn’t fit in. I knew I would be able to learn a lot, but I was worried that I wouldn’t also be able to contribute. However, I decided to visit during admit weekend, and was completely blown away by what I saw and felt. All the current students were friendly, curious, welcoming, and humble. When I shared my background, they found it interesting and asked really thoughtful questions. I learned there that this was a place where I could contribute, where my differences would be valued, and of course, where I would truly have the support of others around me.

**What did you enjoy most about business school?**

Wharton (and of course, many others schools) has an indescribably special set of people. I have already seen the inimitable benefits of having a “Wharton stamp” (on my resume, in emails, in conversations). Most of all, I’ve benefited from meeting and learning from people who are more than one-dimensional, who have stories and ideas that contradict what one might expect, and who harbor great depth, curiosity, and kindness.

There's the former-finance-something-turned-consultant who started a "book club," where each month ladies get together to read and have discussions about current events and social issues (think: the energy crisis, the confidence gap, etc.). There's the former college football player who nerds out on human capital and thinking about how companies can be better to their employees. It's a rare and special breed here — and it is the biggest thing I will carry with me when I leave.

**What is the biggest lesson you gained from business school?**

That you can't slow down time. I've wanted to do that so badly since I've been here, because the experience has been amazing.

But seriously, what I've learned is that — given that you can't slow down time — it's really important to be intentional with your time. Life, like an MBA program, is fleeting and goes by quicker than we'd like. Coming here I learned about the aspects of my life and goals I have that I need to be purposeful and intentional about —as well as frameworks for thinking about what matters most to me across professional life, personal life, and community life. I see this ability to applied structured thinking to my life pursuits as one of the most self-sustaining and frequently utilized lessons that I've gained from being here.

**What's your best advice to an applicant to your school?**

DO IT! Visit campus and absolutely talk to current and/or former students (you can talk to me!). Know what makes Wharton special — for you. Decide which opportunities you will be most zealous about getting involved with (or creating!), and what resources you will want to take advantage of (who you want to talk to, what clubs will give you tools you need, or content you are curious about) and connect with people plugged into those areas. Seeing yourself at Wharton — really seeing your life here — is a great position from which to apply.

**"I knew I wanted to go to business school when...**I realized that in education, we didn't have all the answers — and I would only start to get them by immersing myself in learning about other industries, companies, structures, and systems."

**"If I hadn't gone to business school, I would be...**regretting not being in business school (and bugging my friends who were/are in business school!)."

**What are your long-term professional goals?**

To be a Chief People Officer (head of talent role) for an education organization. I think talent strategy is the key issue/challenge in educational reform, and currently we don't have a robust set of best practices and solutions.

**Who would you most want to thank for your success?**

Without a doubt, my family. I landed the parent lottery. I'm an only child, and my parents and I are incredibly close. While they've been unsure about certain decisions I've made (they weren't too thrilled about TFA at first), their willingness to trust my decision-making, and throw in their support, is something I really admire, and suspect wasn't easy. They immigrated to the United States for economic opportunity and they didn't have the chance to experiment and test out jobs/industries/etc., immerse themselves in graduate programs, take professional risks, etc. Their sacrifices in putting aside certain enjoyments in life and working so hard is the only reason I've been able to accomplish anything at all.

**Fun fact about yourself:**

I spent part of my summer before school living in a treehouse in Laos.

**Favorite book:**

- Fiction: Too many to list but I'll settle for *Freedom* by Jonathan Franzen
- NF: Katherine Graham's autobiography, *A Personal History*

**Favorite movie:** *Amelie*, *Spirited Away*, *The Lives of Others*

**Favorite musical performer:** Alt J

**Favorite television show:** *Parks & Recreation*, *Arrested Development*, *Modern Family*

**Favorite vacation spot:** Australia

**Hobbies?** Learning to cook, adrenalin-inducing sports/activities, journaling, photography

**What made Ami such an invaluable addition to the class of 2016?**

“Warm, thoughtful, and empathetic, Ami is passionate about people and learning their stories. Because of these qualities, she was invited to join the two most selective groups on campus — the Welcome Committee and Student Life Fellows. Ami is no stranger to building strong learning communities.

Prior to Wharton, she helped build and refine leadership development pipelines in education as the Director of School Systems Leadership at Teach For America. Before that, she spent four years at a charter elementary school in Brooklyn as a founding teacher and then a dean. After seeing too many talented teachers and leaders leave the education field, she first realized the key impact of and need for strong talent strategy — and the analytics to drive it.

Less than a year ago, she co-founded the Wharton Human Capital Club to help future business leaders understand their workforce and teams; create systems and cultures for them to thrive in; and ultimately, help their organizations grow. Ami — and her nontraditional background — has truly been an asset to the Wharton community.”

**Howard Kaufold**

**Vice Dean of the MBA Program**

**The Wharton School**

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