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Meeting All the Challenges: These Five Colby Alumnae are Reshaping the World of Business, Finance, and Technology with Their Liberal Arts Education

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Meeting All the Challenges

These Five Colby Alumnae are Reshaping the World of Business, Finance, and Technology with Their Liberal Arts Education

Kayla Voigt '14

Waterville may be more than 300 miles from Wall Street and more than 3,000 miles from Silicon Valley, but it remains the beating heart behind the thriving business careers of Colby alumnae Leslie Dougherty Biddle '89, Felise Kissell '91, Andra Ofosu '07, Joerose Tharakan '08, and Anne Clarke Wolff '87. For these five female executives, rising to the top of their careers took grit and determination—and a confidence driven in part by their Colby education.

In competitive industries like financial services and tech, women, and especially women of color, continue to remain underrepresented.

For every 100 men who receive a promotion, only 86 women do, according to Women in the Workplace, the largest study of women in corporate America, conducted by the management

consulting firm McKinsey & Company. And that's if they stay at all—with mounting caretaking pressures during the Covid-19 pandemic, more than one in three women have left the workforce or plan to downshift their careers.

These five Colby alumnae are the kind of women who rise to the challenge that crises like these present. Weathering the financial crisis, layoffs, personal losses, competitive corporate cultures, and now the Covid-19 pandemic, each has found themselves returning to lessons from their time on the Hill to move forward. And they've continued to make an impact, not just at their respective companies, but on the industry as a whole.

Looking back on these challenges, would they have done it any differently?

The answer, for all of them, is no.



Left to right, Anne Clarke Wolff '87, Joerose Tharakan '08, Andra Oforu '07

A WINNING COMBINATION FOR WHATEVER LIFE THROWS AT YOU

When Felise Kissell '91, head of investor relations and corporate affairs at Aramark, a food service, facilities, and uniform provider, thinks back on her Colby days, there is nothing she wishes she had done differently, no course corrections she wished she had made—nothing she wished she could go back and tell her 20-year-old self. “I wouldn’t tell her anything, because Colby embodied me with the toolkit and confidence to handle everything that led me to where I am today,” she said. “Taking the ‘right’ classes, or the ‘right’ internships, or the ‘right’ jobs are not what’s going to define your career. It’s your code of conduct, your positive energy, your problem solving. You don’t need all the answers.”

Kissell approaches her career with the true spirit of the liberal arts, with roles in her 30-year career spanning banking, retail, technology, and the food and beverage industry that took

her from Wall Street to Atlanta and back. But it’s Colby she returns to fondly when she thinks about the twists and turns from her 20-year-old self to today.

“The liberal arts background empowers you to think so broadly,



Your career doesn’t have to be linear. I’m not afraid of these big transitions It’s uncomfortable in the moment, but the amount you learn and the confidence you build out of that is so meaningful.”

—Leslie Dougherty Biddle '89
Partner,
Serengeti Asset Management

and apply it so deeply,” she said. “Colby afforded me the opportunity to bring out my best self and adapt to whatever roles that came my way. Whether it’s heading up investor relations as I do now, or leading corporate development, strategy, or communications, I can apply that background to different responsibilities.”

AN EVER-CHANGING INDUSTRY NEEDS GRADUATES WITH AGILITY

That’s exactly how Trustee Joerose Tharakan '08 feels her Colby experience prepared her to lead a global partnership team at Microsoft. Graduating during a global financial crisis wasn’t easy, but taking a creative approach and a jump-in attitude she learned as an international student at Colby served her well in an industry that’s always changing.

“The crux of the idea of liberal arts is to look at things from multiple perspectives,” she said. “A lot of students worry they don’t have the technical expertise. But the nature of



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—Joerose Tharakan '08,
Director of Partner Development,
Strategic Global Partnerships,
Microsoft



Left to right, Felise Kissell '91 and Leslie Dougherty Biddle '89

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That translated into a decade-long career at one of the largest and most well-known technology companies in the world. "I never pictured myself staying at one company for 10 years, but the reason I've stayed is because I've been able to do so many different things," she said.

Tharakan started her first job as an account executive, taking a leap into the unknown. "I joined Microsoft as an account executive in Pittsburgh, which honestly, I didn't know where it was on the map," she laughed. "But I knew I could learn a lot and stayed open, and it ended up being a great way to jump into the fire from the get-go, understand the industry, and be on the front line of customer service."

STAYING OPEN TO NEW IDEAS

A similar sense of openness and willingness to learn is what has defined the career path in finance of Board of Visitors member Andra Ofosu '07. Currently a director in the U.S. sales team at Aspect Capital, she's transformed her economics degree into a thriving career at some of the top hedge funds and banks across the globe, including Credit Suisse.

"I didn't set out with the idea out of college that I'd love to sell hedge funds," laughed Ofosu. "Careers are this mix of luck and the paths you consciously choose. I ended up in this interesting place where I'm constantly stimulated and growing, and it's been amazing."

It was at Colby and her study abroad experience at the London School of Economics where she first discovered what finance



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—Anne Clarke Wolff '87,
Founder and CEO, Independence Point Advisors

could look like as a career. “There are few instances where what you learned in college exactly maps to what you do for your job,” she said. “What’s most important are the critical thinking skills that you come away with, and at a place like Colby, creating the sort of widespread curiosity in different disciplines and the way the world works, so you’re always learning.”

Graduating in the heart of the global financial crisis forced her to think differently right away, a skill that’s served her well throughout her career. “A lot of folks worry about whether they’ve done the ‘right’ internships or are applying to the ‘right’ companies, and of course that’s important,” she said. “But keep your eyes open for things and ideas that come out of left field that you may not have considered before.”

THE LIBERAL ARTS ARE ANYTHING BUT LINEAR

Trustee Emerita Leslie Dougherty Biddle '89 started her finance career in a non-traditional way, moving from a role in the financing arm of a global development nonprofit to a government position before finding her way to Wall Street. She now serves as a partner at Serengeti Asset Management, specializing in alternative investments. Looking back, the thread that combines them is a chance to learn something new.

“Your career doesn’t have to be linear,” she said. “I’m not afraid of these big transitions, and actually, I really liked going from the U.S. government to a private company,

and then a private company to Wall Street, and now a smaller organization. It’s uncomfortable in the moment, but the amount you learn and the confidence you build out of that is so meaningful.”

She credits her time at Colby with giving her that confidence to try new things. “Colby educated me to be a full person, not just to get a grade in a class,” she said. “The great thing about a liberal arts education, and Colby in particular, is you have friends, professors, and the administration encouraging you and supporting you to step out of your comfort zone. You’re allowed to explore, and I took that with me.”

Trying new things and approaching each role with an entrepreneurial spirit, whether at a big company, nonprofit, or startup, is muscle you build over time—one Biddle practiced at Colby, taking art classes alongside her economics requirements. “Every time you do it, it’s uncomfortable, but it increases your ability to manage different situations, different cultures, and different ways to handle challenges.”

A CAREER BUILT AROUND LIFELONG LEARNING

That’s the same approach Trustee Emerita Anne Clarke Wolff '87, founder and CEO of Independence Point Advisors, takes for each new venture. With stints at big-name companies, including CitiGroup, JP Morgan Chase, and Bank of America, she’s learned firsthand the power of zigging when other people are zagging.

“My career path is always about, where can I learn something interesting? Where can I play a role in company transformation?” she said. “I’ve always followed a philosophy that work should be about learning, and I think that’s driven by being a liberal arts student. The times I’ve made changes in my career were when I felt like I was hitting a plateau.”

That desire is something she first honed at Colby, taking classes across a variety of disciplines. She’s made a name for herself as a champion of a diversified, liberal arts approach in an industry that often prides itself on tradition. It’s one of several reasons she chose to start her own firm in 2021, despite the challenges of a global pandemic. “I started to think about how to create a modern investment bank with exceptional, under-utilized talent, to provide value for clients that weren’t being addressed in the market today,” she said.

When you craft your career based on what you can learn, opportunities arise you would never expect, she said. No matter what, Wolff emphasized leading with what interests you and what you want to learn more about. “I always tell students, study what you love. The benefit of a liberal arts education puts you on par, or candidly, exceeding, the talent potential of the kids who’ve had narrow vocational training. Don’t worry about being a philosophy major. Own it, be proud of it.”