

# CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

Detroit and Southeast Michigan's premier business news and information website

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## Back to school: From a journalist to a doctor, 7 share their stories about pursuing MBA

By **Chad Halcom**

Local business executives often take a little time midcareer to go back to school for new skills — but the reasons can be as varied as the degrees they pursue. Many have advancement goals in mind with their current employers, while others want to diversify their skills or meet new demands.

But returning to school can mean adapting to new modes of education like online learning, or balancing work and family demands that didn't exist in their undergraduate years. *Crain's* spoke with a some current and recent midcareer students on tackling those challenges. Here are their profiles:

- **Andrea Klaver:** Honing her administrative skills
- **Tracy Gallo:** Click created opportunity
- **Sam Mossallam:** Leader in health care
- **Marta Salij:** Diversification
- **Kahn Hall:** Cross-training lead to dual degree
- **David Contorer:** His network grows
- **Scott McGregor:** From journalism to accounting



Photo by Jacob Lewkow  
Andrea Klaver: MBA student wants to hone her administrative skills

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## Kahn Hall, 39, West Bloomfield Township

### Program manager, Cadillac seating, Johnson Controls Inc., Plymouth

By **Chad Halcom**

Going back to school at Walsh College in 2007 was originally part of a plan by Kahn Hall to cross-train and make himself more appealing as a senior industrial designer for **Johnson Controls Inc.**

But finance became so intriguing his ambitions soon grew into a dual degree, which took six years, and for a while he considered a bigger career move. Now a program manager in seating operations at JCI's Plymouth campus, he has his sights back on advancing within that organization.

"I'd like to stay within automotive because I've got almost 15 years in now. I thought for a while about investment banking and other opportunities in finance as I went through the program," he said. "But auto is in my blood, and I decided to keep it here and apply my new skills where I am."

Hall completed both the MBA and M.S. in finance programs at Walsh in 2013. Program managers at JCI typically oversee employees in several backgrounds, from designers like himself to supply chain management and purchasing employees, and he wanted one day to manage an entire product and see it through to launch.

Getting the advanced degree was not a prerequisite to becoming a program manager at JCI, but Hall said he wanted to gain competency in the other disciplines within product development to help him advance.

"When you're in industrial design, you're really working in one lane, and to break out of that is sometimes difficult. But Walsh really helped me to do that, and I'm really grateful to them for allowing me to grow," he said. "I had a feeling I could influence more than the one spoke of the wheel where I was."

#### Education

**Recent program:** MBA and M.S. in finance, Walsh College, 2013

**Previous degree:** in automotive design, Center for Creative Studies, Detroit, 2003.



Kahn Hall

Finance became another passion during his studies, he said, and that helped gain attention from some of his instructors. Hall was eventually selected as the commencement speaker for his graduating class in 2013.

Hall said he wants to advance to a senior program position or vice president position someday, but the degree has him prepared for any of several career paths in the automotive industry.

**Piece of advice:** Learning new software was a process, but time management and balancing family needs were the main challenges. "My wife works the evening shift, and we have a 6-year-old daughter. I became extremely creative and resourceful about how I completed the assignments and studied for the exams. It took the entire family to help coordinate these activities. It also took an extreme inner drive to search for the path to overcome any obstacle."

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## Andrea Klaver, 31, Clarkston

Research coordinator, Beaumont Research Institute, Royal Oak

By [Chad Halcom](#)



Photo by Jacob Lewkow Andrea Klaver

Sometimes people who get promoted in an organization feel that their new management duties are a redirection from the career they first chose. But Andrea Klaver wants to delve further into her leadership role.

Klaver, a research coordinator after two promotions at the **Beaumont Research Institute of Beaumont Health** in Royal Oak, started pursuing an MBA part time at **Walsh College** in fall 2014 and is taking one course per 11-week semester, or four per year. Her degree doesn't have a specific focus, but she expects it to hone her administrative skills.

"I realized, due to the Affordable Care Act being passed in 2010, health care and research were going to have to be managed differently," she said. "So I'm hoping now to not be just a part of the massive shift that's underway in health care, but to help lead it."

### Education

**Current program:** MBA, Walsh College, Troy. Expected completion, early 2018.

**Previous degree:** B.S. in microbiology, Michigan State University, 2006

One new experience in her current degree program has been taking some classes completely online — but most have involved a mix of two hours in class per week and two hours online. The new degree is not a training program for any specific position, but Klaver considers it an investment in her own future.

"Ideally I'd love to stay here (at Beaumont), because I know the ins and outs of this organization right here, and I know research," she said. "But I'd also like to have a role in human resources management and find a way to work up into Beaumont."

Klaver returned to college while raising two preschool-age children. She credits her family with supporting her in the time commitment, but said her experience doesn't seem unusual among part-time graduate students at Walsh.

"I'm right about in the mean on my age," she said. "I don't feel singled out or a lot older than the group. I didn't know that I ever wanted to go back at first, and it took me six or seven years in my career to realize this. But there are plenty of others like that as well."

**Piece of advice:** There is no perfect timing for anything, including a new college degree. "A year from now, I'm going to be one year older anyway, so I may as well be one more year further into my degree program. I just have to study differently now that I've got a family, finding every small opportunity to do so. I carry my school supplies with me everywhere."

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## Marta Salij, 54, Birmingham

### Accounting intern, Puckett, Clement and Schellenberg PC, Troy

By **Chad Halcom**

Like many journalists downsized in a shrinking market for traditional news outlets, Marta Salij saw the writing on the wall and decided to change careers rather than try to hold onto another media job. Also like many journalists, she found herself suited to another career that deals in hard facts and tangibles.

Salij, lost her job as a book critic for the *Detroit Free Press* in 2007 and started a few weeks ago as an intern for Troy-based **Puckett, Clement and Schellenberg PC** while she completes an accounting degree at **Walsh College**.

"I could see what was happening to print journalism, and I decided it was time to spend a few years with my young kids and to write a novel," she said. "(And) I did write most of a novel, and discovered I don't like to write fiction at all. I like facts."

Salij started working as a seasonal tax preparer for **H&R Block** about four years ago, discovered she liked the work and is preparing to sit for her CPA exams later this year. Returning to college in June 2014, Salij said journalism and accounting have much in common and she chose Walsh over other local schools on the recommendation of several friends and neighbors. But with two semesters to go at Walsh, she already completed job interviews last fall and expects to start in a position at **Baker Tilly Virchow Krause LLP** in Southfield after graduation.

Salij said Web-based research and student diversity were two of the most noticeable changes since completing her undergraduate degree at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville.

"I'm impressed with the number of international students in my classes," she said. "The student body is so much more diverse than in the 1980s, in age and ethnicity."

**Piece of advice:** Ask around and pick a school where graduates have good career prospects, and view the degree in terms of a return on investment. "Taking on graduate school debt at midlife is scary, especially if you will be sending your kids to college soon, too. ... Think carefully about what degree will result in (good pay, and) look for a school with a proven record of job placement."



Marta Salij

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