Managing global investments with the constant fluctuation of the currency market may seem daunting, but for Marisa Kurk (BUS MS ’08), it’s just another day at the office. As chief operating officer at Mesirow Financial Currency Management, she provides operational infrastructure and strategic risk management insights to institutions worldwide, including pension, insurance and other funds. Working with the investment team, Kurk meets with clients to determine the best strategies to manage their international currency risks and exposures.

“We’re really focused on client customization,” she explains. “Rather than pushing out products and saying the client needs to fit our model, we really listen to our clients’ needs and have a customized solution that works for them.” Kurk has fine-tuned her currency risk management approach over the course of 11 years at Mesirow, where she climbed the ranks from entry level to senior management. “I know it sounds clichéd, but the most important thing for me is to really focus and work hard,” she says. When she gets mired down in the details of day-to-day operations, Kurk takes a breath to recenter herself. “As long as I’m focused on doing quality work and serving the clients, I find that really good things do flow from that.”

Kurk is driven to see the immediate impact in all that she does. In her free time, Kurk serves as a gala committee member with the Children’s Place Association, an organization that helps support children with illnesses or living in extreme poverty. “It’s a great cause,” enthuses Kurk. “It really supports not just the children, but the family as a whole, and you can actually see the impact it’s having on their lives.”

She credits her success to a number of factors, including her tailor-made education at DePaul, the on-the-job training in the currency sector, and her highly developed organizational skills and flexibility that allow her to manage clients across time zones. Thanks in part to Kurk’s efforts over the years, the currency group at Mesirow has grown from managing $1.5 billion in assets to nearly $70 billion. “There hasn’t been one year that’s particularly successful,” she says. “It’s just been that year-after-year growth. When you put it all together, it’s impressive.”

“One perk of my job is visiting clients in their regions. One of my favorite places to visit is Australia. They have the opposite summer and winter as we do, so when it’s the middle of winter and very gloomy here, it’s summer there.”

From kindergarten onward, Tawanda Lawrence (EdD ‘14) arrived at school ready to learn. “My parents are not college graduates, but I was always told that getting an education was one of the most important things I could achieve in life,” she says. Now, as the assistant superintendent of curriculum, instruction and technology at Country Club Hills (Ill.) School District 169, Lawrence has more than met her parents’ expectations.

Lawrence oversees three schools that together serve approximately 1,300 students. Ninety-five percent of the students are black, and 85 percent of the population qualifies as low-income. “My primary goal is to provide a quality education in our schools,” she says. “It’s my department’s role to offer teachers and administrators the tools they need to ensure there’s effective instruction occurring in every classroom and that the curriculum we implement meets the needs of all students.” This overall objective keeps Lawrence on the move 10 to 12 hours a day.

Lawrence’s responsibilities are many and varied. She ensures that all curricula are aligned with the Illinois Learning Standards, which includes creating curriculum maps, selecting textbooks and overseeing 10 subject-area committees. Lawrence also conducts pilot programs for new materials, organizes professional development training for staff, leads assessments and manages federal grants. “We strive to implement multi-tiered levels of support for students, including addressing their social and emotional needs,” she notes.

For her doctoral thesis, Lawrence researched black middle school students who were academically successful despite having economically disadvantaged backgrounds. “I was blessed that my parents were able to expose me to so many different experiences growing up, but I wonder if I would be where I am today if I hadn’t received those resources,” she explains.

Lawrence acknowledges that hers is a big undertaking. “Thankfully, I’m very passionate about the work that I do,” she says. “It really brings me joy to collaborate to make a difference in the lives of children.”

“Our district has a lot of strengths, including our high percentage of returning teachers. We have a strong teachers union that works closely with administration to achieve our mutual goals.”

See more from J.R. Hawbaker (THE ’05), Cody Lassen (SNL ’06), Sylvia Garcia (LAS MS ’06) and Marquis Hill (MM ’12) at depaulmagazine.com.
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