

Women to Watch: Professor melds business, academic worlds

- By [Stacey Wiedower](#)
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PHOTO BY [NIKKI BOERTMAN](#)

Dr. Carolyn Callahan is a multitasker who is a University of Memphis professor and director of the School of Accountancy.

Before she earned her PhD in accounting from Michigan State University, Dr. Carolyn Callahan worked in corporate accounting. That time in the real-world business environment is what shaped her career in academia.

"One of the things I felt important was to bridge the gap between business and academics, to have it reflected in a real-world way," said Callahan, director of the School of Accountancy at the

University of Memphis. "The way people describe me is certainly as an academic, but also as someone who has her feet in the real world, the business world."

As KPMG Distinguished Professor of Accounting, Callahan has her feet in the classroom too. But it's her role as a college administrator that she feels lets her make the biggest difference in students' lives.

"It became obvious to me that if I really wanted to impact education, I would have to take a leadership role," she said. "I saw it as a way to connect with colleagues and make a difference for students. And that's the overriding concern — how to deliver what students need from us in a customer-oriented fashion."

Callahan gained experience in teaching and administration at the University of Massachusetts, Notre Dame University and the University of Arkansas before joining the U of M in 2009.

She has earned multiple awards, served in several prestigious posts and devoted time to professional groups.

Now, she's taking her wealth of experience in the business and academic worlds to the Memphis community, working to make new connections for her students in the corporate accounting field.

"When I came to Memphis, it became very important to me to have the business community involved with the School of Accountancy," she said. "I quickly formed a board of 12 members to advise me about the business community and also to tell me what kinds of students they would like to have (as employees)."

Along with formation of that SOA Advisory Board, which includes executives from several of the city's largest companies, Callahan has worked to customize the school's curriculum to the local community's needs.

She's also turned the program into one of few whose graduate students exit with Certified Public Accounting (CPA) certification complete or well under way.

Callahan is always thinking forward.

"I've always been interested in seeing how we can deliver programs differently so we can serve students differently in contemporaneous society," she said. "I think the days of 'walk and chalk,' where students sit in front of professors, have passed us by. Now, we have to have different methods to train students in a way that they can readily enter society and take jobs.

"We can no longer hide ourselves in the ivory tower. I think most educators now want very much to make sure students are well-trained."

Tell me how you see your role as director of the School of Accountancy.

I see my role as an advocate for the professional support and success of our School of Accountancy's faculty, students and staff. At the same time, I have a responsibility to align the school's vision with the goals of the Fogelman College of Business & Economics and the University of Memphis.

What's the biggest challenge you face in your day-to-day job?

I am the unit head for a very large department now offering the accounting major on two campuses (Memphis and Jackson) in two media: traditional classroom and online education. Yet I wear multiple hats in addition to administration. I am an avid teacher and perform significant academic research while training doctoral students. The truth is, I love multitasking and my work.

What led you into the field of academics?

I wanted to make a difference in the classroom for students. A compassionate educator has the opportunity to change a life every time he or she steps in a classroom. We can constructively engage our students in the learning process and demonstrate compassion for the issues they face inside and outside the classroom.

What do you like best about living in Memphis?

It's a vibrant city with beautiful green spaces, great restaurants and wonderful musicians.

What's your biggest dream for the city?

Memphis has a unique charm and the economic potential to be one of greatest cities in the United States. It is my hope that Memphians can all work together to promote a wonderful, unique city that attracts tourists from around the world.

What would others be surprised to learn about you?

I'm an avid "Star Trek" fan who enjoys solving mathematical problems for relaxation and fun.

What book is currently on your bedside table?

Michael Burlingame's "The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln." I'm hoping to see the movie "Lincoln" during the holiday break.

If you were given the day off from all your regular responsibilities, how would you spend it?

Hiking and jogging the beautiful trails in parks around Memphis.

What's the best advice you've received, and from whom?

My mother: Be who you are in the world.

My father: Do good, and good will follow you.

What's the best gift you've ever been given?

Scribbled notes and cards from my three children and the letters from my husband.

Dr. Carolyn M. Callahan

City of residence: Memphis

Family: Husband, James, and three adult children

Job title: KPMG Distinguished Professor of Accounting, director of the School of Accountancy at the University of Memphis

Organizations: American Accounting Association, American Council of Education Fellow, Financial Executive Institute, Leadership Academy

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