

Episode 67: Graduate Degrees – Need them? Want them?

An Interview with Brad Eiben of Carnegie Mellon and Tanuja Vallabhaneni

Elizabeth Ames ([03:50](#)):

I'd like to welcome Brad and Tanuja to the Women in Product podcast. It's great to have you both here. I know that we're going to have a little conversation today about Carnegie Mellon and their Master of Science in Product Management program. So I think I'd like to start with you, Brad, and maybe you could tell us a bit about how the Master's of Science in Product Management program came about. What inspired or drove Carnegie Mellon to put this program in place? Why don't we start there?

Brad Eiben ([04:38](#)):

Happy to, Elizabeth and I like this question because we actually have a pretty unique origin story in about the mid teens, 2015 roughly. The dean of the School of Computer Science here at CMU, he came to Carnegie Mellon from Google. He was formerly the Vice President at Google, came to be dean of our computer science school. And he had a very interesting observation that led to the creation of this before unknown Masters in Product Management program. He said that when I was at Google, we had the most difficult time even at Google, they had a difficult time hiring qualified product managers. So his statement was, let's make them. So that observation, that statement, it's kind of like a product origin story. At the same time that observation and that statement led to a collaboration between the School of Computer Science and the Tepper School of Business to partner 50/50 and create this unique animal that is the MS in Product Management program here. And the first of the program was actually in 2018. So they did research, they figured out what are employers looking for in terms of product managers and crafted a totally unique curriculum around that idea. And it's grown from there. It's really an interesting start because something as unique as this is difficult to get buy-in at a university level, especially when it's a hybrid and a collaboration between multiple schools.

Elizabeth Ames ([06:28](#)):

Yeah, it's a really interesting story because product management has been around for a while, but its origin story does really sort of start in Silicon Valley and Google was one of those companies, but although there's many, many in the valley that have had versions of that role over time. And it's also interesting to me because we did a study a few years ago really kind of looking at the state of women in product management. And one of the things that we found both men and women, that people didn't come directly into the profession. They came in all kinds of weird pathways through engineering, through marketing, through business analysts, all different places. And also many of them didn't have any much training was kind of

like they got thrown in and learn as you go. And I think that that has created this situation that I hear a lot from people in our community, which is how do I get into the field? I'm interested, how do I get in right? Because it's just not very clear. And so having a degree program around it kind of gives it a different twist, if you will. So Tanuja, what drove you to sign up for the program? And if you could talk about that, what got you there and then what were your expectations when you stepped into it?

Tanuja Vallabhaneni ([08:08](#)):

Yeah, sure. So I went to college for computer science. I started off my career as a software engineer at S & P Global. And I worked there for about six years. And every time I was given a project, the first question I would ask is, why are we doing this? What's the customer value? And I was offered a product owner role multiple times just because of the questions that I was asking, the things that I was interested in. But I felt like there was something missing in the traditional product owner role back in 2015/16. It was more executional. And I'm like, I don't know if I want to do this. I still enjoy building the product. And a product owner felt more executional, but it did not have the decision making powers. And I'm like, I don't know if I want to do this. And after six years at s and p when it was the right time for me, both professionally and personally to move on and explore new opportunities, I was like, I want to bring decision making to the ground level where there's work happening, bring strategy not just to the leadership but layers below that.

And I found out about product management and then I'm like with the exact same question, how do I get into product management? And I had different options. I was looking to do a master's, but I'm like, do I do an MBA or should I do Masters in business? Should I do Masters in technology? What do I do? And then one of my friends who did a Master's in Engineering Management at the time said, Hey, have you looked at this new program that Carnegie Mellon University has started, which is called the MSPM? And I found out that we would be the second cohort. And I'm like, ah, that sounds scary. But I did talk to a lot of alumni and it just is a perfect program in terms of curriculum, in terms of the timeline. We start in January, we had a summer internship right in between and we finish off with six more months of courses and a capstone project. I'm like, this seems to be the right fit of not just theory, but also very practical way of gaining knowledge and being able to transfer that and start a career in product management. And to your question about my expectations, it's not just understanding and learning what product management is about, but also having those doors open or create for us as graduates of these programs. And I think CMU more specifically TE and School of Computer Science able to do exactly that for us.

Elizabeth Ames ([11:08](#)):

Yeah, I think it's interesting because you bring up the idea of going and getting an MBA, and certainly there are plenty of people that are in product roles that do go that route, but it's a pretty big cost associated with it. And I don't mean just financial cost. I mean it's two years generally speaking. So it's a big chunk of time. And I think one of the things that's really interesting about this program is that it is very compact. It's a year commitment and you're going to have an internship working in the space and a number of other things. And Brad, I don't know if you want to comment on the decision making process to structure it the way that you guys have structured it, but it seems to me like that feels like a much more doable route and maybe a much more focused route

Brad Eiben ([12:04](#)):

Focused is the key word, Elizabeth. That's the word really, because this is actually a positioning problem when you think about it because we do have a great MBA and we have other great programs that are somewhat adjacent to product management and people from other programs, even at Carnegie Mellon will graduate to become product managers. But focus is the key that's we specifically exist for that user, that prospective student, that aspiring product manager in such a way that we essentially cut the fat out and focus on the principles and the core of what a well-trained PM needs to know and not just know but also be able to practice. Because the experience element of this program is arguably the most important of them all. When we talked to incoming students and asked them What attracted you to the program very frequently, the top one and two responses in either order are the internship or the capstone project at the end of the program.

Elizabeth Ames ([13:18](#)):

I mean, it's an interesting space and it's very much highlighted by the fact that you've brought two different schools or parts of the school together, the business side and the technical side because both of those play a part, but they don't necessarily encompass the whole, there's more when you get those two pieces together. So it's interesting because when you really step into a product role, even though you have to have a business perspective, you don't necessarily need all the detailed business training you're going to get in an MBA. Right,

Brad Eiben ([13:59](#)):

Right.

Elizabeth Ames ([13:59](#)):

So yeah, Brad, maybe you could talk a little bit about the course of study and what is covered. I mean, we've sort of gotten a bigger picture on how it fits together over the course of a year, but maybe you could drill down and Tanuja, please feel free to jump in if there are particular parts of it that were like, oh yeah, loved that, or that has proven to be very valuable when I've stepped out in the real world. So

Brad Eiben ([14:30](#)):

I'm glad you said that. I was going to ask Tanuja to edit my answer anyway or add to it maybe. And Tanuja, I'll say, a few things have changed in the past couple of years since you graduated, but for the most part, I describe the curriculum to this program as having five pillars. And the first three are for those of us, and that's probably most of the audience here familiar with the Venn diagram that is UX, tech and business. Those are kind of the standard, the basic, what people might expect. But even within those three, there are a lot of master's degree degrees out there that combine both the business and the technology. But adding that design and that UX element to it really is kind of the special sauce, if you will, of the program. It's most frequently when I talk to alumni like Tanuja, what people come back and say, this really changed my worldview. This really changed the way that I look at problems is the design element. And that's roughly a third of our curriculum.

The other two pillars are leadership, which is maybe hidden inside of everything else, but it's extremely critical. It's none of those other three skills mean much as a PM if you don't know how to lead the people around you in that regard then, so we have the world's most excellent business presentations professor, for example. I'm sure that Tanuja remembers well, but in the fifth and final pillar, I mentioned it earlier, is the experience not only at your internship and not only during the capstone project, are you doing real PM work, but a lot of the classes are structured in a way that you're either working with industry, you're working with people that are currently working in industry. The professors know both the theory and the real world practical application. So I always tell our students, one of the dilemmas, and I'm sure you see this all the time, Elizabeth, is that how can I get an entry level PM position when all the job descriptions say must have experience even for the low levels? So this one year within the program really represents at least a year's worth of equivalent experience. I describe it not as an academic program, but as a training program because they're practicing. It's like the metaphor, you can't learn to swim by reading a book, and we take that to heart.

Elizabeth Ames ([17:20](#)):

That's a great point to make here because I do think that a lot of times people do a lot of self-education through books and stuff, which is great. No knock on that. But then being able to actually take that back out in the world and apply it in practice,

there's a reason why practice means more than one thing here. Doing things makes you better at it, right? That's how people learn and advance their skillset. So maybe you'd like to talk about the things in the program that were the most valuable to you.

Tanuja Vallabhaneni ([18:03](#)):

Yeah, I definitely want to talk about a few specific courses. We had courses like business Fundamentals for technical product managers. We had principles of product management. They laid the foundation for us. They talked about different pillars of business, how a product manager interacts with these different stakeholders in principles of product management. We learned about road mapping, the processes and tools that you as a product manager would use day in and out. But I think the thing that is really valuable for me as a product manager, the design aspect of it, and when we say design to someone who's just graduated college, it's almost always about prototyping, figma tools. But design starts much earlier than that, like ideation. How do you brainstorm how you come up with these ideas? How do you test these? How do you interview customers? How do you gain insights from these?

I think these are invaluable skills for product management that a lot of, even if you read books, most product management books do not talk about this. Most product management courses I think ignore the most important aspect of product management, which is design. And we've had great courses. We had service design and digital service innovation course. I remember we had multiple days where a company, a snowboarding company in Pittsburgh would show up in our class one day, give us a problem statement, and it's not just an assignment anymore. We are actually helping real people startups. We are helping real companies figure out their path forward or they're stuck because of a problem. And we are helping ideate with helping prototype, which I think was a great experience. And this was on top of our capstone project. These are things that are not advertised in the program where they happen just as part of our day-to-day classes. So that's one of my design as a whole is one of my favorite aspects of the program. The second thing that Brad mentioned, the leadership.

The leadership is a very generic and high level term, but I think what was really helpful for me was stakeholder management. How do you manage people? How do you manage teams? The business presentation class is not just about making a presentation, making a PPT and delivering it, right? It's about understanding who your audience is. Like let's say you're presenting to a CEO of the company or a decision maker of the company. What is it that they need to get out of the room and say yes or no to your proposal? So understanding their motivations and looking at the problem in different angles and trying to tackle it from a customer standpoint. In

this case, the customer is whoever the audience for your presentation. That has been a great value. I actually remember when I interviewed for PayPal in my last round of interview, one of the questions was What is your weakness?

And I said, conflict management. I did strongly believe that that makes me nervous. If there is a lot of conflict in the room, it does make me nervous. And I'm like, would I be able to make a good decision? I didn't know that. That was not something that I was put to test, but that was my immediate response. I think it should be conflict management. And three months into my role, I had a one-on-one with my skip manager, and he said, Hey, in my interview you mentioned stakeholder management was, or conflict management was one of your weaknesses. But I've heard from multiple directors, senior directors, that you would do a great job at it if there's tension in the room, if people are fighting, you are the adult in the room bringing the people together. And when I reflect upon it, it's exactly that one year of experience that has taught me how to interact with multiple stakeholders. We are talking to people who are coming from the industry. We had adjunct professors from Phillips, we had adjunct professors from Uber, we had a lot of talks from Google, we had guest speakers from Google and all of these, when you interact with all of these people and when you work on capstone projects with companies, you learn a lot of invaluable skills alongside courses like negotiations or business presentations. So I think those were the two most valuable pillars for me. Design and managing people and teams and the leadership aspect of it.

Elizabeth Ames ([22:35](#)):

Yeah, it's fascinating to hear you talk about conflict resolution and the different types of leadership that you have to step into because I think that people in general think of leadership as just like, well, you're managing people, but oftentimes as a PM you're not directly managing people and you have to find ways of leading them to have agreement on what you're trying to build and to understand the underlying issues. And that again, is one of those things where you can read about it, but actually being able to work with people and figure out how to get everybody moving in the same direction is pretty tricky and a pretty powerful skillset

Tanuja Vallabhaneni ([23:23](#)):

For sure. My 8-year-old son listens into my meetings and he's like, you're a manager, why don't you just tell them what to do? Why is it always a back and forth? And I'm like, I wish, wait, that's not how it works. I don't manage these people. Then he is like, what are you even managing then?

Elizabeth Ames ([23:39](#)):

I love that children always have the insight immediately. Why don't you just tell them? Oh dear. So talk a little bit about your role at PayPal, and so you did this program, you completed it. How did you land the role of PayPal? I'm asking the question that everybody listening wants to know now. How did you lean the role at PayPal after this?

Tanuja Vallabhaneni ([24:07](#)):

This is a crazy platform to tell you that story. I was just talking to Brad yesterday and I mentioned that he didn't know that I met my PayPal recruiter at a Women in Product conference.

Elizabeth Ames ([24:19](#)):

Yay.

Tanuja Vallabhaneni ([24:23](#)):

But just to give you some background on what the job search is like or how do you land that first thing, it definitely wasn't an easy ride. I did my masters in 2020 during the pandemic, three months into the course, it was all virtual internships were virtual interviews were virtual. The whole life was virtual at that point. So I had multiple internship interviews get canceled because of covid. Companies couldn't figure out if they want to do a summer internship or not. And after a couple of months of that, I landed an internship with Pulse Secure, a cybersecurity company in San Jose. I had a great time. It was a much smaller company than s and p where it's tens and thousands of employees, whereas Pulse Secure was a much smaller company, and the work that I was doing had so much impact that I was in multiple meetings with the CXOs, defining the strategy for the company, defining the strategy for the product that I was working on at the time. So I had a great internship and at the end of it I'm like, I had a great time. I like the company. They like me. If I get offered a role, I would accept that and that would be it. But then a couple of months after my internship, the company got acquired and there were multiple layoffs and

Knew what was going to happen. So I knew I couldn't rely on my internship offer for my full-time job. So I started networking. I started interviewing, applying for companies, and then I attended the Women in Product conference and in one of the breakout rooms, I had a great conversation with this recruiter. At that time, we were like 15 minutes away from each other, but we were like, sad world. We can't meet and person for a coffee, but let's do a Zoom call. And we really connected me to a team that was looking for a product manager at the time, and it was end of year and Covid changed a lot of things. And one of the things that happened was we are moving this role to a different country. So because of budget issues and stuff, and

my recruiter then connected me with this different team, and I loved the team that I spoke to.

I work for the Buy Now pay later team at PayPal. We call it the Global Pay Later Team. I've had great conversations with almost five product managers on the team. I spoke to the engineering manager and I knew that I got other offers, but I knew that's what I wanted to do after these conversations and where the team solution was. And it just did feel like a perfect role. And it's been three years now at PayPal. I've had a great time and I'm really looking forward to the next whatever PayPal is going to do in the next few years.

Elizabeth Ames ([27:33](#)):

That's awesome. What a great story. I mean, I think it's a great illustration of having this extra thing that helps you land that job, but everyone's still doing the work to get the job right. It's not like it just floats in.

Tanuja Vallabhaneni ([27:55](#)):

The thing I would say is Carnegie Mellon, Tepper School and Computer Science, they have the best resources in terms of employment or connections with companies, networks, with companies. We have a great alumni network. There's never a time when I reached out to an alumni, it hasn't been useful. At least there's a very insightful conversation and I've learned something new or they connect me to someone in their previous company. It's just such a strong network. But on top of that, there's also a lot of your work that's required, right? What do you want to do? Where do you want to be? Who do you want to network with? It doesn't have to stop at cmu, it doesn't have to stop at the program or even with the alumni, there's a lot of people out there willing to help. There are a lot of amazing organizations, and I in fact have advised a lot of people who reached out to me for how do we prepare for interviews? How do we land these interviews? I'm like, there are all these amazing conferences that you can attend. You just don't learn stuff from this, but you network with amazing people. Even if it does not translate into a job interview, you still learn so much. You make great connections, which are definitely going to help you sooner or later in your life.

Elizabeth Ames ([29:17](#)):

Yeah, it is definitely a position professionally where you're constantly learning, even if you have a ton of experience in a particular vertical market, FinTech type stuff, well, you might have interest in something else over here. And then how do you move over into that area? Or how do you move up and have a higher level view across the company that you're at, et cetera. I mean, there's a lot of places to go, and it does open up doors for other types of roles as well over time. So talk a little bit about how

your perception on the things that you learned when you were at Carnegie Mellon versus what you've built on top of that, stepping into the role as a professional. What things have you sort of feel like you got a little bit pushed further ahead by having been at Carnegie Mellon and now you're building on that or seeing how that is valued in the marketplace?

Tanuja Vallabhaneni ([30:28](#)):

For sure. I did talk a lot about the design aspects of it, the people management aspect of it. And in the first year that I was at PayPal, I had a lot of foundational tools and processes that I know that I could use from day one to get things rolling. And that really helped me learn the business faster. I didn't have to worry about the day-to-day stuff as much because I knew my foundations with my internship or with my Capstone project and even the one year curriculum were strong enough that I had more time to focus on the business aspect of it. And when you're working in a company like PayPal where it's such a big company, nothing gets done just with one team or with one vertical of the company, you're talking to multiple domains, you are talking to different stakeholders like legal compliance.

So what that really helped me is dive more into topics that I had little control of. And I think that's given me the advantage. I really understood different domains of product management at PayPal or different, what does risk do? What are the regulatory requirements in this region versus this region? Whereas if you don't have those foundational skills, you spend a lot of your first few months trying to build those instead of learning more about the business. And that really helped me grow both vertically and horizontally. Within a year, I was leading multiple expansion projects. I was working with domains that were far beyond the team that I was working with. It's no longer just how do we build the front end for this product that we are launching, but it's almost like you would lead the geo expansion for this project, which includes marketing, which includes regulatory, legal compliance requirements, includes risk modeling.

Brad Eiben ([32:29](#)):

So it just opened my path to so many other things that I could learn. So I think that's one thing. And the other thing, as I said, is the leadership aspect of it. I was able to go into these meetings with senior leadership and being able to understand what their requirements are or what their aspirations for the business or for the product were very easy. And it put me in a state where I'm like, oh, I could question them because I had the knowledge of the business as well as the product. And once you start doing those things, I think you also build a lot of credibility when you ask those stuff questions. When you say no and have a good reason to say no, you have good data. You back it up with enough data, enough information, enough insight and value,

you build credibility. And that has been super helpful for me, as I said, to grow both vertically and horizontally.

Elizabeth Ames ([33:33](#)):

I think that is such a great point about when you have those fundamentals, it's kind of like you don't have to have your focus down at that fundamental level. You can pick your head up and look around and understand what the objectives or the company or different groups are or different needs, and that will sort of jet propel you in the organization, because being able to take those things in really quickly and learn about them makes you so much more valuable to the company, right? Because you understand the context that you're working in and you understand what people above you need from you and why. And yeah, big. That's such a great point. Such a great point. Yeah. So yeah, Brad, tell me as we kind of wind up here a little bit, tell me a little bit about this is year number X for the program, and where do you see the program going from here a little bit?

Brad Eiben ([34:40](#)):

Well, it's year seven, and just to give a little context to the answer, we've gone from the first cohort, had four students in it right now, and we've hit our maturity goal of being right around 50 students per year. And we find that to be, you might say, the sweet spot for the program.

As we grow, it's a little less running a startup and a little bit more like running an established business at this point when I started, well, Tanuja was a student and she was one of the very first people I had a feedback discussion with. Tell me about your experience. Tell me about what works. Tell me about your pain points because we were in the early days of the program, there were various student issues that are just to be maybe expected with, you have a business school and a computer science school and you drop this new population right in the middle of it.

We've experimented for the last four years and we'll continue to, because this is such a unique program in that sense that experimenting to identify exactly what it is that gives the students the best probability to succeed. And even now, every year, our alumni base grows significantly because we started small and every year it's a significant percentage increase, and how do we leverage the success and highlight the success of people like Tanuja?

Elizabeth Ames ([38:02](#)):

I just love, it's like it's a product program that has a product mindset. We're constantly improving. We're constantly looking at things. We're understanding what

it takes to have impact and succeed. I think that's a great storyline there. Yeah, go ahead.

Brad Eiben ([38:20](#)):

I was just going to say it has a well-defined job to be done. Yes. Yeah,

Elizabeth Ames ([38:24](#)):

There you go. So just for people who are listening, if they're interested in the program, what's the best way for them to find out information about it?

Brad Eiben ([38:37](#)):

Yeah. Well, it's relevant as we sit here right now and throughout the summer, we are in our admissions process for the 2025 cohort, and our program begins. We're unique also in that we begin in January and graduate in December. So we have a semester of classes, an internship, then a semester of classes. So this is the perfect time for anybody who's interested in potentially either becoming a PM or becoming a student. They both paths lead the same direction. We are accepting applications right now, so it's the perfect time for that. And you can find our website either going through the [Tepper School of Business](#) website, or the easiest way might be ms-product-management@cmu.edu. Not the shortest of the vanity. That's

Elizabeth Ames ([39:35](#)):

A mouthful there. Yeah,

Brad Eiben ([39:36](#)):

It is.

Elizabeth Ames ([39:37](#)):

We'll try and put that in the notes for people in the transcript.

Brad Eiben ([39:41](#)):

That's far better than trying to, yeah. Yeah, that's far better than memorization. And feel free to connect with me on LinkedIn. My last name is spelled E-I-B-E-N, so that's Brad Eiben, and I think there are only two of us on the planet, and I'm the one that works at CMU, so I'm easy to find.

Elizabeth Ames ([40:02](#)):

That's great.

Brad Eiben ([40:03](#)):

Also, before I forget, I always forget this detail, and because we're in admissions right now and because we, well, I'll add specifically for this audience, it's worth noting, and it wasn't necessarily this way when you were a student, but for the past few years, say three years or so, we've been very roughly 50/50 male/female in terms of admits that's come, I saw Tanuja's reaction that's come a long way from the early days, and it's not by accident. We love doing events and discussions like this, and **anybody who wants to apply can do it free of cost with the code** WIP for women in product 25 for the academic year 2025. So **WIP25**.

Elizabeth Ames ([40:55](#)):

Excellent. So just to end on an inspiring note here, Tanuja tell me a little bit about your career dreams. What's going to happen for you in the next few years, or what are you hoping to happen in the next few years with your career?

Tanuja Vallabhaneni ([41:12](#)):

That's a great question. Thank you for asking that. I think as an engineer, I was scared to grow vertically, but that's not the case with product management. I think as you grow vertically, you're also growing horizontally as a product manager. And what that means is you are more of a decision maker. There's more strategic decisions that you make as you grow within product management. And I'm really looking forward to that. I work for a great team at PayPal, so I'm really excited to grow at PayPal, which since you've asked about dreams, one of my, I think, long term dreams is to be in the field of education somehow. I've had great adjunct professors, mentors who've mentored me, and I want to be that person for people. I haven't done anything to start that journey yet. I am definitely open to helping people if I'm easy to find on LinkedIn as well, if you get my name. So please feel free to reach out. But apart from that, I want to be in the field of education as an adjunct professor. I don't see that as a full-time career, but I want to be. It's been my childhood passion. I always pretend it play as a teacher. So it's a very strong passion of mine, and I hope I start working on it sometime soon.

Elizabeth Ames ([42:36](#)):

Well, let me just say, I think that's super inspiring, and I am sure there's lots of people in our community that would love to talk to you about different things and have the benefit of your experience. So congrats on the job and the role that you're in, and I'm hoping to see more of you in the future. So thank you both. It was great talking to you both and really appreciate all the information. I'm sure that people listening, happy to hear it. So thank you.



Tanuja Vallabhaneni [43:09](#)):

Thank you so much for having. Thank you. This is a great conversation. Definitely.