

First Year Scholarship Report for the HBS Association and Foundation of Germany

Dear Members of the HBS Association and Foundation of Germany,

Thank you for the generous support that you have provided me with during this academic year!

It has been a wonderful and enriching experience so far, both academically and personally. I perceived the first few weeks as overwhelming and was a little anxious if I can meet the requirements – after all, being challenged in front of >90 peers and having a script writing down your comments is unusual, and a forced-curve grading system is a little intimidating when everyone around you seems rather impressive. But I could soon settle in thanks to the very collaborative, supportive and welcoming ambiance on campus and enjoy the colorful and joyful hustle and bustle.

The academic quality is as high as I expected, and day-to-day academic life at HBS is more time-consuming and rigorous than the reputation of most MBAs. Professors are not only true experts in their fields, but also skilled moderators and at times entertainers creating vibrancy and surprising twists. I have never felt indoctrinated, but learned a lot (even in classes I believed to know much already) and really enjoyed most cases. The required curriculum forced me to immerse in new subjects I probably wouldn't have chosen deliberately, thereby discovering new fields of interest.

A remarkable experience were the Field Immersion Experiences for Leadership Development (FIELD): In FIELD II, we worked in cross-section teams of six people on real projects for companies in emerging markets – in my case for the fast-casual PERi-PERi chicken chain “Nando’s”, which is headquartered in Johannesburg and operates restaurants in 20 countries. At first, I was skeptical of the endeavor; I have worked as a consultant for four years and perceived it as yet another consulting project, plus I doubted that we could add value in any meaningful way to Nando’s in this brief period of time. But the final presentation and Nando’s reaction proved me wrong, and it was extremely interesting to work in an emerging market and in such a different cultural context. I really appreciated my amazing HBS project team and this socially responsible, global and a little quirky company with strong local roots and a truly pleasant working atmosphere.

In Field III, we worked in self-selected teams of five on a startup idea, generated first sales and pitched to VCs. We struggled quite a lot, were abandoned by our external product developer mid-way through, but managed to be deemed in the group of “most viable” projects in the end. Although – temporarily – emotions in our team boiled up and it felt like another painful obligation, I think retrospectively that Field III was where I learned the most and I am very happy that I was part of the (preliminarily?) last generation of HBS students for whom Field III was mandatory.

Furthermore, all the time spent together in the same classes with the same 93 people formed another integral part of my RC year: the section experience. Although I have to confess that I am reluctant to section pride and resonate with the ironic t-shirt print “my randomly assigned section is better than your randomly assigned section”, I am truly grateful for the sense of belonging and community in my section, and that we managed to create and maintain an open and honest atmosphere. Plus, some of my closest friends are in my section (and from team Nando’s), and I like to believe that they are friends for life.

The abundance of highlights allowed this first year at HBS to pass by much too fast to absorb everything: HBS traditions such as the formals “Holidazzle” and “Newport Ball”; various parties organized by the different student organizations; the intramural sport events; five (!) section as well as student club retreats to Vermont, Maine and Cape Cod; section social events such as Boston dinners and the Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations; weekend getaways with friends to Washington DC, New York, Chicago and various places in New England; skiing trips on the East Coast and Colorado; and travels with section mates to Iceland and Canada.

I was elected Co-President of the “German Speaking Society (GSS) - A Student Clubs of HBS”, and in spring, the new leadership committee took over office and started organizing the yearly Oktoberfest Trek to Munich. Although the tent, in which the GSS had reserved their tables in recent years, refused us due to incidents in the previous years, we were able to find another tent, which offered us tables for 120 people on a Friday; what a great fortune! We are still busy working out the details for this mega trek, but are on schedule. Furthermore, we plan to revive the speaker series, organize a club retreat, and have more cultural events during the year.

Over the summer, I am back in my hometown Munich. Almost two years ago, I wrote in my application for HBS that I would like to work in the automotive industry and be part of the revolution around the key topics autonomous cars, the convergence of connectivity, electrification, and the sharing economy. So here I am at BMW, and although I am not working directly in the strategy department, it has been very interesting so far.

But HBS wouldn't do justice to its reputation if it didn't shake up your beliefs and open up new prospects. Corporate jobs (from automotive to consumer goods and tech) , startups, VC, PE, and consulting all have their advantages and drawbacks; and due to this wide variety of possibilities, the career choice seems more difficult than ever before; I am even undecided on which continent I would like to live!

Already my first year at HBS has been a life changing experience in so many dimensions, and I am very much looking forward to the second! Again, I would like to express my gratitude for the scholarship to you – thank you!

All the best,
Carolin