



Rutgers Business School-Newark senior Justin Vahalla (second from right) with students he worked with during a coop program at Unilever.

Road to Supply Chain Leadership gives student opportunities to gain real-world experience

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As a boy, Justin Vahalla built model ships, trains and planes with his father and wondered what career he could pursue to feed his love of transportation.

At **Rutgers Business School** (<https://www.business.rutgers.edu/undergraduate>), he learned about opportunities in logistics as part of his studies in supply chain management.

“You can use a career in this field as a way to uplift and integrate smaller suppliers and smaller countries and smaller economies into larger economies, and it can be this mutual relationship, as opposed to just the big taking from the small. It was something that really appealed to me,” said Vahalla, a senior at **Rutgers Business School-Newark** (<https://www.business.rutgers.edu/undergraduate-newark>).

Vahalla applied to **Road to Supply Chain Leadership** (<https://www.business.rutgers.edu/road-to-success/supply-chain-leadership>), part of Rutgers Business School's **Road to Success programs** (<https://www.business.rutgers.edu/road-to-success>), to be surrounded with other top-tier students. “I just knew that it was going to offer a plethora of opportunities,” he said.

Road to Supply Chain Leadership provides training, site visits to manufacturing facilities, and mentorships with professionals from companies that are corporate sponsors of the program. Students are encouraged and prepared to seek co-ops and internships that have the ability to transform classroom lessons into real-world experience.

“It's night and day between learning from a textbook versus standing on the factory floor and being able to apply concepts that you read about, or that you study for in exams,” said Vahalla. “It is in person, and it's tangible.”

“You can learn as much as you can from a textbook,” he added, “but then you actually work in industry and work at one of the largest supply chain companies in the world, and there's just so many benefits.”

The Road to Supply Chain Leadership Program helped Vahalla land an internship in summer 2023 at Shiseido's East Windsor facility, which is responsible for all of the company's manufacturing for the U.S. market. Donning a lab coat and goggles, Vahalla worked on the factory floor supporting the electrical and mechanical engineering teams. “We were applying the Lean Six Sigma framework and lean manufacturing processes to optimize the manufacturing line,” he said.

Vahalla's next work experience was an 8-month co-op at Unilever's U.S. headquarters in Englewood Cliffs. The corporate position involved the auditing and inventory management of shipping pallets, with Vahalla tracking 4 million pallets annually at 82 locations for Unilever's vast network of third-party manufacturing, packaging and warehousing networks. He left the co-op with a deeper data literacy and a mastery of Excel.

In the photo above, Vahalla is pictured with other students in Unilever's co-op program, from left: Mario Flores, Michelle Sanchez, Daniel Erenberg, and Grace Wright.

Road to Supply Chain Leadership was “the only reason that I got those positions,” said Vahalla, who is now serving as president of the program's e-board. “It gave me resources to find direction,” he said.

Vahalla said getting those opportunities to work in corporate settings and interact with employees at Shiseido and Unilever was invaluable. “It was very beneficial having these resources and seasoned professionals to ask questions and get input on career questions,” he said. “It really helped me grow overall.”

Matthew Walsman (<https://www.business.rutgers.edu/faculty/matthew-c-walsman>), an assistant professor in Rutgers Business School's Department of Supply Chain Management, saw Vahalla grow. "Justin has always been an eager and hardworking student," Walsman said. "His application of effort in the RSCL program and at RBS has given him the experience required to mature into a reliable leader."

Vahalla, who graduates in May, plans to leverage his real-world experience at Unilever and Shiseido to find a full-time job in supply chain management. Because the field has such a vast array of jobs, Vahalla is keeping his options open. But the job will probably involve ships, trains and planes in some capacity.

-Sharon Waters

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