Campus administrators, leaders, and students gathered in the Commonwealth Honors College Events Hall Wednesday to hear Bateman Scholar in Residence Aren LeeKong speak.

LeeKong, originally from Brooklyn, New York, first spoke about how he came to UMass. He said that having grown up in a single-parent family, the cost of college was a challenge. UMass presented itself as an affordable opportunity, even for an out-of-state student like him. While at UMass, he was able to secure an internship through Sponsors for Educational Opportunity (SEO). SEO’s mission is to find underrepresented young people and match them with professional opportunities. It was through that program that he got his first taste of Wall Street.
After graduation, LeeKong worked as an analyst at Citigroup Global Markets. LeeKong eventually left Citigroup to join Kohlberg Kravis & Roberts (KKR), where he was a founding member of the capital markets team. AT KKR, he noticed that a number of companies were not able to capitalize on investing opportunities created by the financial crisis in 2008. He developed an interest in creating a more flexible private investing strategy, leading him to join Highbridge Principal Strategies (HPS) as a managing director. There he created the Strategic Capital Partners strategy.

“UMass laid my foundation,” he said. LeeKong told students that college is about “learning how to create you.” In many ways, that’s the reason he attributes his success in business to his degree in communication. He said he’s noticed a global trend of barriers breaking down, especially in business. He believes it doesn’t matter what a student studies as a major but what they learned and what they can bring to a company.

LeeKong offered advice to students entering the workforce, applicable to both Wall Street and beyond. He said that the bottom of a person’s resume—their interests—is what matters the most. According to him, people do business with people who are “capable, likeable, and someone they can trust.”

In terms of what he wished he had done while in college to better prepare for the business world, he said, “explore other cultures and take classes beyond the requisites.”

“Part of your success will be, can you find commonality when you walk into a room of strangers,” he explained. “If you’re at university, you’re two steps away from, well, everything.”

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