

# GSB Connection

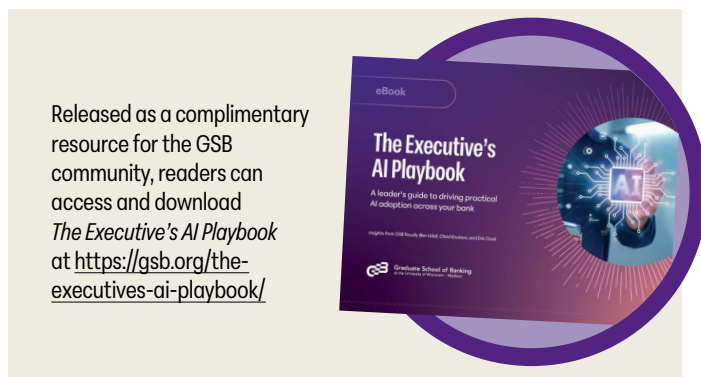
The Official Newsletter of the Graduate School of Banking at the University of Wisconsin-Madison



## Banking Forward: The Age of AI

*The Executive's AI Playbook* arrives at a pivotal moment for the banking industry. As artificial intelligence rapidly reshapes how financial institutions operate, compete, and serve customers, bank leaders are being challenged to think beyond technology alone. AI adoption is no longer simply an IT initiative — it is an organizational transformation requiring strategic leadership, governance, and cross-functional alignment.

Written by GSB faculty and industry thought leaders Ben Udell, Chad Knutson, and Eric Cook, *The Executive's AI Playbook* delivers actionable insight for banking leaders navigating the opportunities and complexities of AI across business lines, operations, HR, cybersecurity, marketing, and finance.



Released as a complimentary resource for the GSB community, readers can access and download *The Executive's AI Playbook* at <https://gsb.org/the-executives-ai-playbook/>

The release of the e-book also reflects a broader evolution taking place within the Graduate School of Banking at the University of Wisconsin-Madison flagship program. Beginning with the 2026 session, GSB has expanded AI integration throughout the curriculum, including new core AI coursework in both Year 1 and Year 2, AI-integrated learning experiences embedded across subject areas, earlier exposure to IT Strategic Management, and responsible AI application within the Year 3 FiSim experience. Students will also have access to several AI focused electives designed to explore emerging applications, strategic implementation, and innovation across banking.

As banking continues to evolve, GSB remains committed to preparing leaders with the strategic perspective, technical understanding, and executive judgment needed to lead confidently into the future. With enrollment for the 2026 GSB cohort closing June 1, now is the time to explore the nation's premier banking leadership experience. ●



# GSB Alumni Spotlight Profile Alex Prater-Cena

Chief Financial Officer | Central Savings Bank | Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan



## Building Opportunity Close to Home

Raised in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Alex Prater-Cena always knew she wanted to build both her career and her life in the region that shaped her. Community banking became the ideal intersection of strategic leadership and meaningful local impact — creating opportunity not only for financial institutions, but for the communities they serve.

“One of my biggest motivators is helping our neighbors succeed and creating opportunities for people to build meaningful lives here in the Upper Peninsula,” she says. “As a mom, that purpose has become even more important to me.”

Today, as Chief Financial Officer of Central Savings Bank, Prater-Cena helps guide the institution's long-term strategy while focusing on the broader impact those decisions have on employees, customers, and local families. She enjoys solving complex financial and strategic challenges but finds the greatest fulfillment in seeing thoughtful leadership translate into meaningful outcomes for both the bank and the community.

“The most rewarding part of my role is helping shape the future of our institution while empowering the people around me to grow,” she says. “Watching ideas turn into measurable results for both the bank and the people we serve is incredibly fulfilling.”

While Prater-Cena's professional foundation began in accounting, much of her banking expertise was shaped through curiosity, initiative, and a commitment to continuous learning. She immersed herself in industry seminars, webinars, research, and leadership development opportunities while steadily expanding her role within the organization.

*Photo Caption: Central Savings Bank supports local students through a community donation to Sault Area Public Schools.*



That commitment to growth eventually led her to the Graduate School of Banking at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, as the recipient of the Michigan Bankers Association GSB Scholarship. She completed the program in 2025, graduating second in her class.



“GSB helped connect years of self-taught experience into a greater understanding of leadership, strategy, and banking, while surrounding me with people who challenged me to think bigger.”

For Prater-Cena, GSB became more than a banking education. The experience broadened her perspective on leadership, strategy, and culture while reinforcing the importance of adaptability in an evolving industry.

“GSB provided an opportunity to better understand how leadership, strategy, finance, operations, and culture all connect to make an organization more effective,” she says.

She credits the in-residence experience in Madison as one of the most impactful aspects of the program. Conversations with peers from different markets and backgrounds challenged her thinking and expanded her perspective on leadership and organizational strategy.

“One of the biggest takeaways for me was the importance of adaptability in leadership,” she says. “GSB reinforced that strong leadership is not about having all the answers; it's about asking the right questions and building teams that can navigate change together.”

That perspective continues to shape her leadership at Central Savings Bank today, where she has emphasized cross-functional collaboration, employee empowerment, and an intentional, data informed approach to strategic planning and decision-making.

*Continued on page 3 ...*

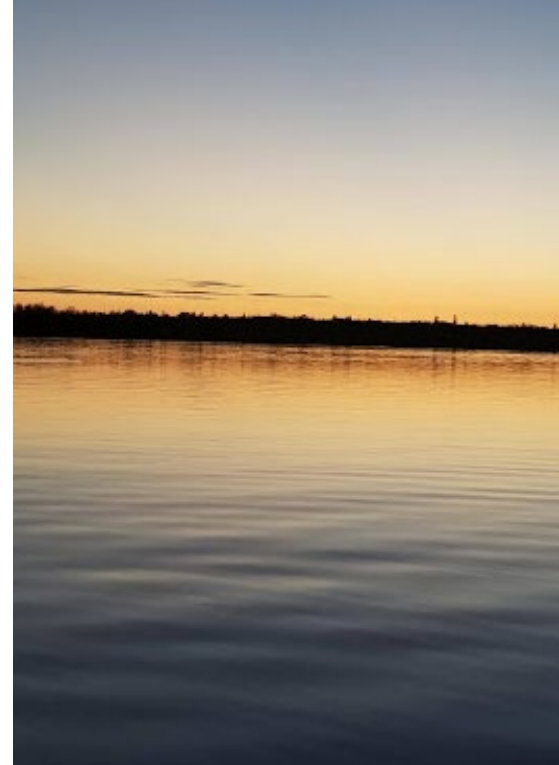
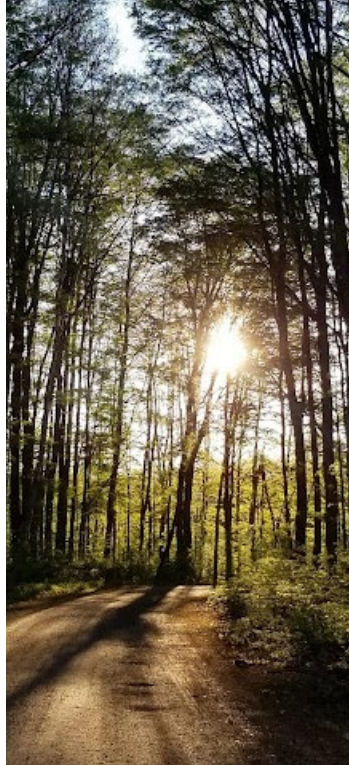
*...continued from page 2, "GSB Alumni Spotlight: Alex Prater-Cena"*

Outside of work, Prater-Cena enjoys spending time with her husband and daughter and embracing the outdoors in Michigan's Upper Peninsula through gardening, cooking, boating, and exploring local trails. She is also active in the Sault Ste. Marie Rotary Club and serves as Vice Chair of the Chippewa County Community Foundation, where she remains passionate about supporting local families and businesses.

In addition to completing the Graduate School of Banking program, Prater-Cena attended GSB's Financial Managers School in 2021 and recently participated in the inaugural Advanced Financial Managers Forum this May, continuing her commitment to lifelong learning.

Reflecting on her experience, Prater-Cena says GSB helped transform her self-directed learning into a broader leadership perspective grounded in both strategy and purpose.

"GSB helped connect years of self-taught experience into a greater understanding of leadership, strategy, and banking, while surrounding me with people who challenged me to think bigger." ●



*Photo Caption: (Right) Exploring the trails and outdoors of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. (Left) Sunset along the waterfront in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, where Alex Prater-Cena calls home.*

## The Countdown to GSB Session Is On!

### The 2026 Graduate School of Banking session is almost here.

Soon, banking leaders from across the country and beyond will gather in Madison to learn together, challenge ideas, strengthen leadership skills, and build relationships that continue long after session ends.

We look forward to welcoming the 2026 cohort for another memorable summer of learning, leadership, and connection at GSB-Wisconsin. ●



## GSB Faculty Article

# Rethinking the Branch: Aligning Capital With Customer Reality



Technology does not transform banking by itself. Customers do. Their expectations reshape the role and purpose of every delivery channel we have — including branches.

That may sound obvious, and for many bankers, it is. These are conversations already happening in boardrooms and leadership teams across the country. The challenge is not recognizing the shift, but determining how to respond — especially as the industry moves quickly, with new competitors, tools and artificial intelligence capabilities emerging constantly.

In my work — particularly in teaching bank leaders how to think about branch viability, digital delivery and consumer behavior — everything starts with one principle. Every dollar of capital should align with the needs and banking preferences of clearly defined target market segments.

In my classes at the Graduate School of Banking, I work with a diverse group of leaders from urban, suburban and rural markets, across primarily the Midwest. Despite that diversity, the same themes surface repeatedly:

- **Demographic pressure.** Many markets are facing projected population declines alongside a high concentration of mature customers. In some cases, more than half of customers are older, yet they hold a disproportionate share of deposits—often 65% or more—creating potential liquidity risk over time.
- **Uncertainty around branch viability.** Banks are struggling to determine whether to keep, close, or transform branches in markets that are shrinking or undergoing demographic shifts.
- **Uneven digital capabilities.** Many institutions lack the digital features and functionality needed to attract younger customers—the very group required to diversify and sustain the customer base.
- **Frustration with the pace of decision-making.** While many leaders recognize what must be done, progress is often slowed by the complexity of the trade-offs involved — balancing community presence, deposit stability, regulatory expectations and long-term strategy.

Most GSB students and banks in general are experiencing these challenges, which require a new mindset and approach to meet them head on.

The industry has not ignored these questions—but answering them requires difficult, high-stakes decisions. The next phase for many institutions is not defining the problem, but building the confidence and discipline to act on it.

### The Zen of Banking

That's why I've come to think about this moment in our industry through a framework I call the “Zen of Banking.” It rests on three ideas: balance, simplicity and adaptability. These principles can help guide long-delayed decisions about the branch.

One of the most important balances banks must strike today is between high-tech and high touch. Customers want digital convenience. They expect to open accounts online, move money instantly and manage their finances from their phones. They also still value long-standing relationships, sometimes built over generations. These expectations are not mutually exclusive. Digital tools can make the customer journey faster and easier, while human relationships provide trust, advice and connection.

That shift has direct implications for physical networks. Branches remain one of the highest fixed costs in banking, yet only a small share of customers now use them as their primary channel. The question is no longer whether branches matter, but which ones, and for whom.

The answer depends on the target market and how it prefers to engage.

Balance also applies to risk. Traditionally, bankers think about diversification in terms of loan portfolios or concentrations of commercial real estate. But another form of concentration risk often goes unexamined: the composition of the customer base.

### Demographic Dilemma

It's already been stated that many community banks today have a disproportionate share of older customers holding a huge portion of bank deposits. But institutions must also consider how they are attracting younger households. That makes this question unavoidable: Do we have a plan to retain these deposits and build relationships with the next generation?

Consumers demand simplicity and, let's face it, banking has a tendency to make things more complicated than they need to be. They want to

*Continued on page 5 ...*

...continued from page 4, “GSB Faculty Article Rethinking the Branch: Aligning Capital With Customer Reality”

understand quickly what a product does and whether it solves their problem. Yet too often, banks layer on processes, products and channels in ways that make the experience harder, not easier.

The traditional branch has become part of that complexity. If a customer has to come in to complete a task that could be handled digitally, the branch is not adding value — it is adding friction.

Banks must constantly ask a basic question: Is this easy for the customer? Adaptability is essential to long-term relevance — and it increasingly comes down to speed.

Change is accelerating as expectations evolve, technologies emerge and risks grow more complex. Banking is no longer always a place customers go. It is something they do — across channels, in real time, and increasingly embedded in other experiences. The institutions that thrive will be those that can make decisions and adjust quickly as the landscape changes. They test new ideas in branch formats, staffing models and digital capabilities — learning and adjusting without allowing decisions to stall.

### Mandate for Emerging Leaders

Finally, for mid-career bankers stepping into leadership roles, this is a moment that calls for clear, decisive action.

The industry has not ignored these questions—but answering them requires difficult, high-stakes decisions. The next phase for many institutions is not defining the problem, but building the confidence and discipline to act on it.

Capital is finite, and the cost structure of physical networks demands disciplined choices about where to invest, where to adapt and where to exit.



Balance reminds us that technology and relationships must evolve together. Simplicity challenges us to remove the friction that frustrates customers and burdens our organizations. Adaptability requires us to act, learn and adjust — not wait.

The future of banking will involve more data, more digital tools and more automation. But even in a highly digital world, customers still want something deeply human: a financial relationship that feels personal, responsive and trustworthy.

Technology will help deliver that experience, but success will ultimately depend on a disciplined understanding of customers — and a willingness to align strategy, channels and capital priorities that meet their needs. ●



*Joe Sullivan is CEO and founder of Seattle-based Market Insights and a widely recognized consultant, speaker and strategic advisor to financial institutions across the United States and Canada. With more than 30 years of experience, he is known for his forward-thinking approach and engaging style, consistently earning top ratings from clients and audiences. As an instructor at the Graduate School of Banking at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, he teaches “Branch Viability, Optimization and Profitability,” focusing on evolving consumer behavior and the changing economics of branch networks.*



## Faculty Spotlight

# Leading Your Banks Cybersecurity Strategy with Chad Knutson

Cybersecurity threats in the banking industry move faster than standard textbooks can keep up. Between automated ransomware, phishing campaigns and more, cyber risk has evolved into a critical component of a bank’s overall strategy. That is why having an industry-leading cybersecurity expert like Chad Knutson guiding our technology programs gives GSB students such a significant advantage.

As the CEO and co-founder of SBS CyberSecurity, Chad has dedicated his career to helping financial institutions effectively bridge the gap between technological innovation and secure operations. We recently connected with Chad to get his take on the current state of banking cybersecurity, the impact of artificial intelligence, and how flying airplanes mirrors network defense.

**GSB: You are out in the field every day with SBS CyberSecurity. How does that shape what you bring to the classroom?**

**Chad Knutson:** As Faculty Lead, and beyond helping shape content, I act as a bridge between the real world and the classroom—shaping curriculum and selecting industry-leading faculty to ensure the programs remain practical, relevant, and impactful. By working closely with financial institutions, regulators, and cybersecurity professionals, I bring current challenges and emerging risks back into the curriculum and help shape how that content is delivered across both programs. Often, the best outcome is the one you never hear about—where a bank avoids a breach, improves its technology strategy, or strengthens its defenses because of something they learned. That quiet success is ultimately the goal.



**GSB: In your view, what is the most significant shift in the banking threat landscape right now?**

**Chad:** Cybercrime has steadily increased over the past two decades, but the most significant shift today is the acceleration driven by artificial intelligence. While AI is creating new opportunities for banks to improve efficiency, it is also enhancing the capabilities of cybercriminals. We are already seeing a growing gap between the pace of defensive efforts and the evolving sophistication of attackers. AI will further widen that gap by enabling faster vulnerability discovery, more advanced exploitation techniques, and greater automation of attacks. This means banks must fundamentally rethink their approach, not only doing more, but doing it faster—while also leveraging AI as a thought partner to enable smarter, faster, and better decision-making across risk, fraud, and technology strategy.

**GSB: When you are teaching the Bank Cybersecurity School, what topics tend to resonate the most with students?**

**Chad:** I particularly enjoy teaching topics centered on real-world breaches and incidents. There is tremendous value in exploring situations where attackers succeeded, where controls failed, and discussing what could have been done differently. These case studies are one of the most effective ways to learn. Often, breaches are not the result of highly complex failures, but rather missed fundamentals. Helping students recognize those patterns and take practical improvements back to their organizations is incredibly impactful.

**GSB: Outside of banking and technology, what is a hobby that might surprise your students?**

**Chad:** It is something I do not talk about much, but I am a private pilot. I fly a small two-seat airplane, and there are actually a lot of synergies between aviation and cybersecurity. Risk management is a big deal in aviation. You rely on structured processes, checklists, and continuous awareness of your environment to ensure safety. The same principles apply in cybersecurity. Today is the worst version of me as a pilot, and I will stay proficient, practice, and be better. The exact same continuous improvement mindset applies to staying sharp as a security professional.

Whether you are looking to sharpen your own executive oversight or seeking specialized training for your team, Chad’s thought leadership drives the practical curriculum found in our upcoming Bank Cybersecurity School and Bank Technology Management School. Visit [gsb.org](https://gsb.org) to register or learn more about these engaging 5-day, in-person programs. ●