Plantain Papi:

(singing)

Liesl Riddle:

Welcome to GWSB Proud, a podcast all about why are you proud of GWSB? My name is Liesl Riddle and I am the associate dean for graduate programs here at George Washington University School of Business, and I have the great pleasure of sitting down with GW alumni, faculty, staff and students to hear why they are GWSB proud.

Welcome to the podcast today. Today I'm joined by my very dear friend and also colleague Professor Leo Moersen, who is also our chief diversity officer for the George Washington School of Business. Hi, Leo. I'm so glad that you're here today.

Leo Moersen:

Thanks Liesl, it's good to be here with you.

Liesl Riddle:

So for our audience, why don't you walk us back to the very beginning of your career. You've had a very interesting career and then combining it with what you've done at GW. Can you just tell us the story of how did you get to GW and why?

Leo Moersen:

Sure, glad to do that. Well, this is actually my third career and it all started as an undergrad student in business. And after graduation I went to work for one of the large public accounting firms. I was there for two years during which time I got my CPA. But I realized that I didn't want to do it for the rest of my life. I was still in my early 20s. I wanted more, and what I really missed was school. I'd always loved school starting from the first day of kindergarten all the way through college. I just loved being in school and learning, and I still do. So I decided to go back to school and my favorite classes as an undergrad student were my three business law classes. Just funny, that's what I teach now.

So I decided to apply to law school and I got into a good law school, surprisingly. So I spent three years in law school, loved every minute of it. Unlike many of my classmates who were anxious to graduate and get out into the real world and make big bucks. I really loved law school. So I did graduate and went to work up here in Washington D.C. with a law firm for about three years. And then I saw an ad in the bar publication for local lawyers, that GW's accounting department had put in. They were advertising for somebody with a JD CPA to come teach business law in the accounting department. And I wasn't in the job market, but I thought, "This looks really interesting. This is a way to get back to school and actually get paid for it this time."

So I sent them a resume, campaign in for an interview, and I fell in love with the place. I fell in love with GW. And then it was that anxious few days waiting for an offer and when I got the offer I was thrilled. So I came to GW then and I've been here ever since, and that's been 37 years now that I've been at GW. So obviously it was a-

Liesl Riddle:

37 years.

Leo Moersen:

.... [crosstalk 00:03:18] career. It's been a rewarding career for me in many ways, so I'm happy to be here.

Liesl Riddle:

Well, and you've played lots of different roles in your 37 years, right?

Leo Moersen:

I have. One of the roles I haven't played is that of a typical professor. I do teach. I teach a lot and I love teaching. But I haven't done much research at all. I did enough to be offered tenure, but then once I got tenure I stopped with the research, because I don't have a PhD. I don't have that research background. So instead of doing research, in addition to my teaching, I've been doing a lot administrative type work. Service to the university. Both at the university level, which has been great, and I recommend that to young faculty to get involved at the university level in service because you're going to meet people all across campus, very rewarding, and at the school level done many things.

Just to tick off some of the most memorable ones, so I ran the master of accountancy program for several years. Maybe my most fun was the time that I was the academic director of the Madrid Study Center, or study abroad office in Madrid campus. And that allowed me to spend a year in Madrid with my family, which was life changing for all of us, [inaudible 00:04:44]. And then I also was the dean for undergraduate programs in the business school for four years, and that was also challenging as you know, challenging to be a dean of programs like that. But also very rewarding. I learned so much about leadership, about myself and it gave me an opportunity to work with some tremendous people and to make a difference for our students. So I'm very proud of those four years.

After those four years were up, I took a one year sabbatical back in Spain and when I came back this year, this past year, our dean, Mehrota said, "Here, I'd like you to do something for us now. Here are three options for you." And I looked through those three options. I talked with my wife about them and thought about which one should I take on, and that's when I choose to become the chief diversity officer. So that went into effect in January and I've been doing it for six months now. Six and a half months. And it's also been very challenging, but very rewarding at the same time.

Liesl Riddle:

So why are issues related to diversity, equity and inclusion particularly of interest for you? To take a whole position focused on that for the school.

Leo Moersen:

Well, I think it's really important to me, because I guess I have a sense of justice like most people do. We want justice. We want fairness. And if we look at the situation, particularly in the United States, our local situation, there's a lot of injustice and a lot of unfairness. There are a lot of people who don't have the advantages that I have and face significant headwinds trying to move forward, because of their race, because of their gender, because of sexual orientation, disabilities they might face, their religion. There are many different headwinds that people might face. And while I haven't faced them, I would like to use whatever experience I have, whatever influence I have to try to eliminate as much as possible the headwinds that these people face, because they're unnecessary.

It doesn't have to be this way. The black people, women, people with disabilities, and many other groups of people the challenges that they face getting ahead, don't need to exist. So to me, I think it's important that society do what it can to correct these injustices. Give everybody a fair opportunity to get ahead according to their abilities and their needs. And if I can play a part in that, then that would be very rewarding for me. So when Anuj came to me with these options of what he would like me to do, this is the one that really attracted me, because I thought, here's something where ... Here's a place where perhaps I can make a difference and when I do retire ... you can probably calculate by age by now, it won't be that long in the future ... when I do retire, this is something I can look back on with pride.

I didn't just teach tens of thousands of students, which is significant in itself, but maybe I was able to leave a legacy at the school. Maybe I was able to do something that was really important. A challenge, but very important. And if I don't succeed, well, at least I tried and I won't regret that I never took that opportunity to make a difference. So it's a somewhat selfish reason. It's trying to feel important and feel like I've made a difference and give my grandchildren something that they can be proud of in their grandfather, those kinds of things. But I also think it's the right thing to do.

Liesl Riddle:

I think speaking frankly, I think there were a lot of people when you first took this role that were, I wouldn't say shocked, but surprised that a white male, not you, but a white male would take on such a role, or even should take on such a role. And I felt that way often myself with some of the work that I've done in social justice myself about where is my role as someone coming from the white community and so on, and what should it be? And so I'm curious what your thoughts are on that kind of a reaction and what you think should be the role of those like us?

Leo Moersen:

Yeah. Well, that's a great question, Liesl, and it's a challenging question. And it's a challenging question. I mean, you see most people who are appointed to CDO positions don't look like me at all. They're not as white, not as male, not as old, I suppose. And I don't know that it has to be that way. I mean, there is some research that says that there are advantages from naming a white male as CDO. And this is unfair that it's the case, but that it shows that the role is taken very seriously. Now I have to be careful with that, because that could be misinterpreted, right?

Liesl Riddle:

Right.

Leo Moersen:

One could be very serious giving that role to anyone. But it does, it demonstrates that they had to think twice about doing it and not just though reflexive and automatically that ... I think that the reasons that Anuj offered it to me is that I have years of experience at this school and across the university and I think I can say that I'm well trusted by people. Well respected. And that I've learned to be persuasive in challenging situations. So I won't be doing this forever. I'm hoping I can use my experience and my background and my contacts and my persuasion to get this thing going. To get it really going. But I need the help of a lot of other people. I need the help of the diversity council and more. I can't do this alone. I don't have the knowledge that it would take to do this alone. I don't have the background in these matters to do it alone. So this is a team effort. I'm just the titular head. I just carry the title and some of the responsibility for this. But it's definitely a team effort. And it's grown. We've got more and more people coming on board all the time.

Liesl Riddle:

Well let's talk a little bit about the council, because I have to say, I mean, I think that's one of the most inspirational aspects. I think you're very honest and very courageous about the role that you're playing right now. I think the work that you and the committee are doing together, you represent a lot of different types of voices as a collective and you're building such a great team there. Talk a little bit about who that council is, what they've done so far and what you want to do going forward.

Leo Moersen:

Okay, yeah. I'm happy to talk about that because I think they're amazing. I'm really proud of the team that we have assembled. I do want to just go back to your last question, because it was a difficult question and I want to be careful. I want to also add though that it is unfair to put all of this heavy lifting on the shoulders of the people who have been victimized by racism, sexism, et cetera. It shouldn't be left to them. In many ways it's people who look like me that are the problem. Well, they ought to be part of the solution. So I think that's an important piece of the answer to your question.

So our diversity council is first of all very diverse. It's made up of 15 people. We have seven faculty members including myself and seven staff, plus one alum. And so there's that balance. We have racial, gender balance. We have balance in terms of sexual orientation. But people weren't necessarily chosen for those reasons. I mean, those were important characteristics we wanted, because they bring knowledge and experience and a voice to this important council. But people were chosen for their talents, for their ability. So at our very first meeting, the diversity council, we went around the table and I asked everyone to put all modesty aside and talk about what are their strengths, then how can they bring those strengths to advance our mission of increasing diversity equity and inclusion at the school. And this was such a useful exercise because we all learned a lot about each other in the process.

And we also learned that we have a variety of strengths. Some people are strong in communication. Some people are strong in data. Some people have strong networks. Most of the people are passionate about this. So we're able to employ the strengths that we have with the time that we have and the interests that we have and bring them to bear the best that we can, each of us individuals on solving these problems and moving us forward. So it's really exciting. I think we've done good things already in the six and a half months we've been together and really excited for the upcoming year.

Liesl Riddle:

So what have been some of those activities?

Leo Moersen:

We've had a few meetings as a council, but mostly we're trying not to meet so much and talk so much, which is what a lot of committees do, but we're trying to actually do things. So we've had some programing already, and this is part of the education piece and bringing people in. Getting allies, getting people to join our effort. We've had a couple book discussions. So we had for Black History month we had three books, all of which had to do with racism themes, in particular segregation. And we invited the entire community of faculty and staff to choose one of the three books and read it during the month of February for Black History month. And then we had a book discussion of the three books together in early March.

And we did something similar with Asian-Pacific Islander month and then in June we had two events. One was on Juneteenth. We worked with the GW Black MBA Association, one of our leading graduate student organizations, to put on a program called The Joy of Juneteenth. It was a wonderful program open to the entire community. And then we also had a pride event because June was Pride month. Dr. Katina Sawyer from our management department who does great research, diversity, inclusion and in particular in LBGTQ communities, she put on a program on being an ally to the LGBTQ+ communities and beyond.

I really liked that because one thing it did was inform people more about the different communities that we have, and different pride communities that there are, and the difficulties that they face. The headwinds that they face. Not being mainstream. Not being like what society expects or has expected people to be. Being different in that way. Enormous headwinds that they've faced. So what challenges do they face and then how to be an ally in general, which is important, but also how to be an alley in particular to the pride community. So it's a wonderful program. She's such a great colleague. I look forward to doing more programing with her and other faculty in the year ahead.

Liesl Riddle:

She also has a great podcast. I'm going to put in a plug for her podcast. The Workr Beeing podcast. And that is really a great opportunity for people to listen to a dissection of some of the latest academic research coming out in the field of management. But then in a very easy to use kind of fun way, for managers. And I think she and her colleague from graduate school still get together and do this. And it's a really, really great podcast to listen to.

Leo Moersen:

I bet it is. I bet it's great. She'd be brilliant at something like that. She's speaks so well. She's so enthusiastic and so knowledge. Smart. That's great. I'll have to listen to that. Yeah. So we'd like to do some more of those events. I'd like in the year ahead for us to start co-sponsoring events, partnering with academic departments in the school or offices, like the graduate program or undergraduate programs offices. I'd like us to do things together. And also across campus with other schools to do things together, co-sponsorship. I think that helps to spread the word. Helps us get the word out there to more people. It shows a lot of unity, which is what inclusion is about. So I'm excited for that. That's going to be one of our initiative going forward this year. A lot of our programing will be co-sponsored.

Liesl Riddle:

So I know you when you started this, it's a very new initiative, although the idea of promoting these values is not new necessarily to GW, but having a more of a concerted and organizational systematic effort toward it is. So I'm wondering, I'm sure you've sort of taken stock of what can be measured along these lines of diversity, equity and inclusion. How is the school doing right now? And then, what are areas that you really want to hone in on to really start moving the needle for the school?

Leo Moersen:

Right. We've taken some measures, and we're going to do more. We don't have any measures of inclusion yet. That typically hasn't been done. So we're going to try and do that somewhat scientifically. And we have plenty of people at this school who know about those kinds of surveys. But in terms of demographics and diversity, we have some data that we've been able to get through the university, through the school, both on students and on faculty. I have to say, Liesl, though, kudos to you, because where we've been doing the best I think is in graduate programs. That program that you've been leading for so many years. Our graduate programs has done wonderful. We're 55% female among graduate students. And you know these numbers. Undergrad is doing well also, 49% female. That's actually probably even better isn't it. It's right about 50/50.

But in terms of where graduate programs has been especially good is with the increasing number of black students that you've been able to bring in. I think it's, if I'm not mistaken, it's up to 14%, which looks more like the general population in the country. Undergraduate, I think this is an area where we need to continue working. Our undergraduate population is only 6% black in the recent statistics. So that's below where we would like it to be. But, as you know, we don't actually admit undergraduate students at the school level. That's the university. That's something the university does centrally. But what we can do is work with the undergraduate office for admission and see how we can help. What we can do is try to raise funds for student scholarships to bring more students in. And I'm happy to talk about those kinds of efforts any time. So I think that's where we're weak is in black and Hispanic students, particularly at the undergraduate level.

In terms of faculty, we need to recruit more black faculty. We only have, if I'm thinking correctly, we only have four black faculty out of say over 100. Maybe 110, 120 full-time tenure track faculty. So that's woefully low. Our students need more, they need to see in front of them more black role models. They need to see more women. That number's been improving, but we still have a ways to go. And you know it's a little bit harder to move the needle on tenured faculty and even tenured track faculty. There are challenges, but we have to face them and do what we can do.

Where I think we can move the needle quickly is with our part-time faculty, with adjunct faculty. Because from my conversation with students, they see a faculty member in front of the class, they don't necessarily know what that person's status is as a faculty member. Are they full-time, tenured, tenure track? Are the adjunct faculty? Students don't necessarily know and don't necessarily care. So there's one area where we can start changing that demographic and getting more faculty in front of students who look like our students and that's with adjunct faculty. So I'm working now with our department chairs on this process that we have for hiring adjunct faculty. And we're talking about ways that we can better diversify the pool of people that we hire as adjunct faculty. And I think that'll show immediate impact.

Liesl Riddle:

I think what's interesting too about some of the school's efforts lately, and this is really in large part thanks to our partnership with Microsoft. Michael Richardson, one of our online MBA alums is on our corporate council representing Microsoft and has really introduced all of us to leading thinkers within Microsoft about those living with disabilities. And both in terms of students and their needs but also staff and faculty and their needs. Most recently Microsoft donated the help and support of a disability and accessibility audit for the school of business to really take stock of what kinds of disability services do we have, accessibility opportunities in both our curricular, co-curricular, as well as our general operations. And I think we've learned a lot from that report. There's an awful lot that we need to do to move the needle on that. Much of that is controlled at the university level too, but there are many things that we can really start to do, I think here in the school.

I'm very proud of the work the instructional design team has always done with our online programs to really work on the accessibility of that content, because I think that's really opened up doors for a lot of students living with disabilities. But there are also these sort of hidden diversity issues as well that I think universities also need to truly recognize. For example, first generation. We have a really active first generation club on campus that provides an awful lot of information and support and truly community for undergraduate students that may be the very first in their family to ever go to college. And I think many of us that do come from families where higher education has been more the norm than not, many of us just take for granted a lot of information that we have just gotten through osmosis about college, about learning, and about the professional life and the professional world out there and how to transition to it. So I feel like the university's done a really great job with the first gen community, many of whom are business school students, right?

Leo Moersen:

And another group, veterans as well.

Liesl Riddle:

Right.

Leo Moersen:

I think GW can be very proud of that as well. Yeah.

Liesl Riddle:

Absolutely.

Leo Moersen:

I want to thank you for your leadership in terms of helping students and faculty, people who face disabilities. You've done great work.

Liesl Riddle:

Well thank you.

Leo Moersen:

You put together a workshop in April on that, I remember right? It was a meet and greet. And how to include people with disabilities in the workplace. Yeah.

Liesl Riddle:

Well-

Leo Moersen:

I think I had some ethical issues and wasn't able to go to that, but I [inaudible 00:27:30] that I missed it.

Liesl Riddle:

... You know it's an issue near and dear to my heart, but I still have an awful lot to learn as well in that, so I've been really grateful. It's been a really interesting year of learning with our partnership with Microsoft on that one in particular. So I want to turn our attention now to really calls for action. We have a lot of different audiences that listen to this show. Alumni for example, students. So first let's talk about alumni. What are some calls for action? We have alumni out there that are getting excited about what they hear that we're doing and want to help us move the needle forward, how can alumni get engaged with your work?

Leo Moersen:

That's great. There are several different ways. First of all, I mentioned earlier that we have on the diversity council an alum member, an alumna, Christine Brown-Quinn, who we're so lucky to have her because she's the newly appointed president of the GW Alumni Association. So Christine will continue to be on our diversity council and as well on the Dean's Board of Advisors going forward. So what a treasure Christine is.

Liesl Riddle:

Absolutely.

Leo Moersen:

So the GW and GWSB Alumni Associations are fully behind our efforts thanks to her leadership. And some ways that alumni can get involved, I think it will be different depending on each person's circumstances. But I think younger alumni, probably not appropriate to ask them for money necessarily, and that's not the only way that people can contribute, but to contribute their time. So young alumni, if they can come back to campus, or come back virtually to campus and meet with groups of students and share their experiences. How did they go from GW to where they are now? There is no group of people that our students enjoy hearing from more than recent alumni. And what I hear from many alumni is that there's nothing that they enjoy more than talking with the students who come behind them. So it sounds like a match made in heaven. And what we can do, what we can try to do, is to facilitate that match. So to put our recent alumni or even not so recent alumni together with groups of students, match their interest.

For our affinity groups, say for example the Black MBA Association, for groups of students like that, it'd be very helpful to hear from recent alumni, black alumni, to talk about their experiences in the workplace. How does their employer help them to succeed? What kind of mentoring opportunities are available? What kind of networking? How welcoming is their industry to them? So these kinds of programs I think would be great for alumni to be involved in. Then of course more senior alumni and entrepreneurs, you can work with our career center to hire our students. Recruit from our students. We have a great director of our career center, Mark Strassman, who was featured on a podcast not too long ago ... Thank you, Liesl. He'd be very happy to speak with you about different ways that you could help our students who are looking to move from GW into a career.

And then of course there are financial contributions of any size that could made, that would be very helpful. Scholarships of course are very important. Contributions can be made to hire faculty in certain areas. One thing we're talking about is the possibility of an endowed chair for a faculty in the area of diversity, equity, and inclusion. To hire a professional with an endowed position. To lead the effort among faculty in research, in teaching diversity, equity, and inclusion. I think that would be great. And other contributions can be made to the dean's fund. When I was the undergraduate dean, one thing that I found very helpful was having an emergency fund. Some money set aside so that when a student faced some unexpected emergency, that might interfere with them completing their semester, even graduating, we could provide the resources they needed.

I remember one student's house burned down. His family's house burned down. But we were able to help to the extent that we could. And several other stories like that. So that kind of a fund is very helpful. And that fund existed I know at the undergraduate level thanks to the contribution of a generous alumnist. So many different ways. If none of them resonate, feel free to reach out to me or Liesl. I'm sure we can come up with some other ideas that fit your abilities.

Liesl Riddle:

And what about students, how can students ... You've mentioned Black MBA. What are some of the other organizations or ways really that students that want to do something undergrad or grad to really help in this effort?

Leo Moersen:

Yep. So we have just about every affinity group student organization that you can imagine. Several for women, Hispanic students. Usually they're separate graduate and undergraduate. Pride organizations. Asian-American. Of course black. We have many student organizations along those lines. Those student organizations can reach out to me and I'll be reaching out to them, and already have in the case of several of them about how we can do programing together. And I'm always happy to go to one of their meetings and answer questions and talk to them. To talk to them about what we're trying to do and how they can be involved. So otherwise, I would encourage students to do the same thing that I would encourage all of our community to do, faculty, staff and alumni, and that is to diversify their networks. Our networks if we look at them are often made up of people who look a lot like us. People who have similar backgrounds to our background. And networks are so important for helping ourselves, but also for helping other people get ahead.

That's the most rewarding thing about a network is when you can use your network to help somebody else. But if your network isn't diverse, then you're not going to be able to use that network in a way that really advances diversity, equity, and inclusion as much as you could. So I encourage everyone to try to diversify their network. And I'm hoping that in the coming semester, in this coming academic year we'll have, we're going to have a program, probably a panel about the impact of a diverse network. Impact in the sense of how it can benefit you and how it can benefit our core values diversity, equity, and inclusion. How it can benefit the school, the community, how everyone benefits from having a diverse network. And it just requires a little bit of effort.

Liesl Riddle:

I'm looking forward to that one. Well, and another thing people can do is read and learn. And I think your book groups have been very helpful for that for me. So what are you reading right now in this area, Leo? Or do you have a favorite book or set of books that you'd really recommend the listeners to?

Leo Moersen:

Oh, that's great. A great question. Yeah, I've read so much in the past six or seven months since Anuj offered me this position. It's been tremendous. Tremendously rewarding to learn all of this. But it's also challenging, absolutely. I mean, it challenges the things that I was taught all the way through law school even. Then things I was taught. The very important things I wasn't taught, but that are real. So I'm glad you brought that up. It's really important that people read, educate themselves. It doesn't just have to be books. There're all kinds of media that we can follow that can fill in these gaps in our education.

So three books I would recommend, in particular, to people who are starting out or along the journey of learning more about this. I think one that was so influential for me is a book called the Color of Law. The Color of Law by Richard Rothstein. He's a law professor who wondered why are our neighborhoods so segregated? You go from city to city, why do black people live on one side, white people live on another side of town? And why are those sides of towns so different from each other? Economically and in other ways. And what he found was it wasn't like most people believe, well that's where people chose to live. They want to live with people who are like themselves.

What he found instead was that government played a huge role in bringing this about. Federal, state, local governments required residential segregation of races. I went through law school. I didn't know that. That wasn't taught. And his book is very detailed, very well written, heavily footnoted, explaining all of that. And then he explains the consequences, the legacy of that. How we still live with it today. Because you go into neighborhoods today, sure those laws have been removed from the books, but the legacy remains and you see the economic disparity. You see the education and health disparities that exist, and they can be traced back to those times. So a very influential book, The Color of Law.

And then two other books I'd recommend for being an ally to groups of people who don't look like you. How to be an ally. One, The Person you Mean to Be, by Dolly Chugh. That was recommend to me by Christine. Not just recommended, she sent me the book. Christine Brown-Quinn sent me that book and I'm glad she did. I really got a lot out of that. Then I went on to another book, I read for Pride month called the Savvy Ally, which is a lot about being an ally, but in particular to the pride community. And I learned so much about the LGBTQ+ communities and how to be an ally to them. So I'm grateful. The Savvy Ally is by Jeannie Gainsburg. Really good book. Funny, easy to read, very informative.

And then on my nightstand, waiting to be read a couple of books, which I hope we'll have a discussion of at some point at the school. I want to read Caste by Isabel Wilkerson. It just came out this year. Looks like a great book and it's got great reviews, and I've heard from friends it's a must read. And then a book not so many people have talked about, but it's called The Conversation by Robert Livingston. He's a Harvard professor. I've seen him on television many times. Very impressed by him. What he says really resonates. But his book The Conversation is about how to talk about race with people, and that's a difficult thing. How to talk about race. We're not used to doing that, but we need to be. So how to talk about race and then how to turn those conversations into productive outcomes. So that looks like a great book. Very well written, brilliant author, Robert Livingston, The Conversation. So those will be my next two books and I hope that we'll have a conversation about them at one of our book discussions.

Liesl Riddle:

Absolutely. Well, you're a great professor, Leo, you've now given me tons of homework. I now have several books that I have to add to my nightstand. And as always, every time we talk I'm just so grateful for your service. I'm very inspired by your passion and your commitment to something that's very difficult but very important. And I know that you live and breathe GW like I do, and it's great to see us doing something new and different and more in this area. So thank you for your service. Thank you for the book suggestions, and thanks for taking time out to talk with our audience here on the podcast.

Leo Moersen:

Well thank you, Liesl. I'm always happy to help you. You're a super star at the business school.

Liesl Riddle:

Ah, thank you.

Leo Moersen:

Thank you for your podcast and everything else you do. We're lucky to have you.

Liesl Riddle:

Well thanks, Leo.

Plantain Papi:

(singing)

Liesl Riddle:

That's all for this episode, thanks for listening today. Shout out for music credit to Plantain Papi, also known as Michael Ferrier, GW class of 2020. See you next time to learn more ways we are GWSB proud.

Plantain Papi:

(singing)