Speaker 1:

(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. I have the great pleasure of sitting down with GW alumni, faculty, staff, and students to hear why they are GWSB proud.

Liesl Riddle:

Welcome to GWSB Proud today. I'm excited that we have our executive director for our career center in the studio today, mark Strassman. Welcome to the podcast, Mark.

Mark Strassman:

Thank you, Liesl. Thanks for having me. I'm very much looking forward to sharing all we do in our career center. We're very proud of our abilities and our talent that we bring to the table.

Liesl Riddle:

It's a really special thing that we have here in the School of Business. We actually have our own embedded career center that's just for School of Business students, both grad and undergrad. It's really a special thing. Not every business school has that special focused career center. Can you talk to us a little bit about who is your team, and what are the kinds of things that they do? Why is it beneficial for a business school to have its very own career center?

Mark Strassman:

Yeah. As I mentioned earlier, we have a very talented team where many career centers, general career centers of universities, typically have coaches and talent from all kinds of blocks, where in a business school and in a career center like ours, we try to take people from industry to come be our coaches and people from industry to go and be our employer development consultants because they talk the talk that gets them in the front door and helps them understand where the student's coming from because they were once that student or where an employer is coming from because they wanted to hire that kind of student.

Mark Strassman:

So, that's the first differentiator is the business school, or at least our business school Fowler Center, career center, is employing people from the business world, from industry. And that helps tremendously. Our team is made up of quite an interesting grouping of professionals. First and foremost, we call them senior career consultants. They're the ones that a student would do their career coaching appointments with, and hopefully we'll have a chance for me to go into a little bit of detail later about the seven steps of our career action plan that every student is introduced to and walked through with our coaches.

Mark Strassman:

So, every student knows before they even walk in the front door, what can I expect from a coaching appointment? What can I expect from the career center? So, the career action plan is a centerpiece of those coaching appointments. We also have a team of employer development consultants. We call them EDCs for short, and these EDCs spend their time basically opening doors. We can't guarantee a student a job. We can't even guarantee a student an interview. What we can guarantee a student is that through the coaching appointments, they will be able to visualize what it is they want to do in their career and be as properly prepared for that interview opportunity, if and when they get it, than they could possibly be.

Mark Strassman:

So, they never have to look over their shoulder and say, "I could've done this better. I could have reviewed that better. I didn't know a case interview looked like this." It's all about the preparation. Our employer development consultants, again, can't guarantee they can get you a job at Facebook or Google, but it's their job to pave the way to slightly open that crack of the door with alumni and with other connections that we have in the community. Then as we get closer to the finish line for internships and upon graduation staring us in the face, those EDCs, those employer development consultants who are the employer-facing and the coaches who are student-facing, get together and work student-by-student, one-on-one, to try to find them the opportunity for that internship or that full-time employment.

Mark Strassman:

So, it's really quite a robust series of services that is a little bit like a search firm, which is where my background comes from. It's very outcomes driven. It's not just about, "Oh, sure. We'll help you with your resume, your cover letter." It's about outcomes. It's about getting you properly prepared and in front of the right audiences. Then, of course, we have our program departments where we have our communities of practice, which is experiential learning. I know there's a whole podcast on that, so I won't go into much detail.

Mark Strassman:

But we are on our third year of Communities of Practice consulting, experiential learning to teach students about what consulting looks like, sounds like. It's a very, very broad range of opportunities within consulting, so we try to clarify that a little bit. We're in the pilot process of our Communities of Practice of finance, Wall Street and other finance opportunities. Hopefully, this fall we'll pilot and begin to set up our Center of Excellence, the CLP with the work we're doing with Department Homeland Security and that MBA program. So, it's quite a team. It sounds huge. It's not, but it is a nice sized team with lots of different skills.

Liesl Riddle:

You know, Mark, a lot of the people that listen to this podcast are actually GWSB alums, and what they may not realize is that you've done some really amazing redesign, physical redesign, of the space because, of course, the career center is actually embedded in the School of Business on the fifth floor right across from where the graduate programs office is. The fifth floor is really this nice little community spot for graduate students and a lounge there and so on. But tell us a little bit about, share a little bit about what was your thought process behind that redesign because you did a lot of things, I think, with that redesign that we're intentional.

Mark Strassman:

Yeah. Intentional it was. COVID robbed us of the opportunity [inaudible 00:06:42] to work. We were out of the space for three months, as you know, and spread out all over the building. We moved in very happily for three whole days before we got cast out to our homes and our virtual world, but before we go into our build out of our space, you casually went over something, the grad lounge, which is this communal space that is in between the grad programs office on one side of the fifth floor and the Fowler Career Center on the other side of the floor. You can't get from one side to the other without basically being intercepted by someone hanging out on the ground lounge.

Mark Strassman:

It is the thing I miss the most since we've worked virtually, just to be able to meet the students where they live, for example, and they're hanging out, whether it's they're eating lunch or they're studying in between classes. It is an environment that can't be replaced in any kind of virtual environment or even in any kind of one-on-one session. Just being there in groups and understanding the cohort is just been... Like I said, that's the thing that I missed the most. Can't wait to get back to it.

Mark Strassman:

But in our space, when I came to the career center a couple of years ago, now... It's hard to believe it's been two years, but it is. It was a very closed-off space. Everybody had offices and the interviews. You could basically be a student, be seen by a career coach, and never see anybody else, interact with anybody else. It was very isolated. What I've come to learn is that Coach A lives in a vacuum in that type of environment, where if they're sitting next to Coach B and Employer Development Consultant A, there's collaboration that takes place and there's conversation that goes on.

Mark Strassman:

It's like, "Oh, I overheard you talking to a student who's interested in cybersecurity. Well, I just had a meeting with a cybersecurity company," and all of a sudden conversation takes place as opposed to just being locked in this interior office with four walls. We literally tore the... Thank you for donors. We literally tore down the career center down to the girders, and we took out almost all the walls. We still have private space, of course, for interviewing processes to make sure that anything of confidence remains in confidence. But you can't get to those interview offices without passing through where the EDCs sit and talk, where our program coordinators sit and talk, where all the other coaches sit and talk.

Mark Strassman:

Just as importantly as seeing and hearing what's going on in the career center, our career coaches and our EDCs are in pods. They're out in the open in this collaborative space with standing desks, which are both ergonomically wonderful, but also were designed so we could just stand at our desks and talk and collaborate and share information. It really did create this open environment that we really can't wait to get and put it to use, to watch it work and to share ideas.

Mark Strassman:

Then the last piece that we did that I think was uniquely important as well is we took some internal offices and we converted them to collaborative space. So, where most coaching appointments are one-on-one, we've come to realize that many students have similar issues, similar things that need to be discussed; and it becomes so much more of a robust conversation when there's three or four students and one or two coaches. So, we've created this collaborative space, soft furniture, as opposed to a desk and two chairs for visitors, but something that's movable and the ability to create community and have a conversation.

Mark Strassman:

Then, of course, our crown jewel, we've created a conference room for ourselves, which we've never had before, with all the technology and all the bells and whistles to be able to do a lot of the virtual things that we're doing now but in a more professional environment and with high-end technology. Yeah. It was a very thoughtful process. It's all about collaboration. It's all about being out there in the open and being able to have conversation that wouldn't have taken place if you were just stuck in an office with your coach and then moved on to other things in your day.

Liesl Riddle:

Mark, earlier when you were talking about what your coaches do, you said the famous phrase, "Career action plan." There's a joke around here, Mark, that your middle name is this phrase, Mark "Career Action Plan" Strassman. So, tell us why you developed this, what it is, and why it's really so important for our students.

Mark Strassman:

Oh. Yeah, I could talk hours which I don't think anybody wants to hear about my career action plan and the concept. When I came to the career center, I interviewed a nice cross section of students; undergrads; specialized masters; MBAs, from part-time MBAs to online MBAs to the global MBAs; really a good cross section of students from different cohorts. A similar message came through, and these were people who, some used the career center, some did not. A message, a similar message, came through from all of them, which was, "I don't really know what the career center can do for me. I can do my own resume. I'm competent. I've worked before. I'm just not really sure what the need is to come find you guys."

Mark Strassman:

Or, "No, I used the career center. They did a great job with this mock interview I needed." But nobody fully understood or had the same definition of what a career center can do for them. So, we set about putting in place this career action plan, which was seven steps that we believe each and every one of these steps are important for every student, from career switchers who are going from something that they've done for the bulk of their career to something that they're trying to envision that they've never done before, to people who are just trying to better themselves in their organization, to undergrads who are just trying to figure it out for the first time.

Mark Strassman:

So, we built this seven steps that build on one another, and we start with the self-assessment and the visioning, the questioning around really, "What do I want to do? What skills do I have that I want to put into place? What's going to get me out of bed in the morning and get me excited about my career?" We spend quite a bit of time in the intake and the first series of conversations and coaching sessions envisioning what it is the student wants to do. Then we enter the research phase where we try to figure out, "Okay, not only you want to do, where do we find that? Is that in a big company, a small company, a multinational company, and only a domestic company? What is that job title called? What does the progression look like?"

Mark Strassman:

We give the student a sense of, "Okay, if this is where you want to commit, this is where we find it. This is what your career path would look like." It's our feeling that it's only then that we can truly refine the resume and cover letter. Now, all students are going to work very early on their resume and their cover letter, because some of these job fairs and career fairs happen so early in semesters we want to be ready. But as you start doing this research and this visioning, your resume and your cover letter will go from generic to specific. So, we do a lot of work around crafting something that tells your story in the cover letter, talks about your passions, talk about what you want to do.

Mark Strassman:

Then the resume that obviously is the A, B's, and C's and the construct of representing the careers, experiences that you've had before. Then we transition into the personal brand and reputation building, the LinkedIn's of the worlds, the social networking, to give you a sense of what you're going to look like to the audience that you don't know is looking. The personal brand is very important. Once we feel good about the personal brand, then and only then can we start working on building our network and developing our network, and that includes alumni. That includes employers, mock interviews.

Mark Strassman:

These are all people, your cohort itself, the students you sit next to, this is the most important time the beginnings of building your professional network that will be with you for your entire career and beyond. Then we take that network, we show you how to build it. We show you how to use it. We teach you how to network, which is a little different than building the network. Actual networking is something we find to be very important. And once we go back to non-virtual and actually shake hands again, the skill of networking is very important.

Mark Strassman:

Then, of course, the interview preparation and mock interviews and rehearsals and case interviews, if we do our job really well, managing the offer process. You'll be surprised how many students get multiple offers. It can be a very anxiety-ridden process when you have deadlines to meet and you've got to give an answer and it affects your life. You need to make some decisions. So, we look to do all this as a part of the career action plan. I know that sounds like a lot to conquer, but the idea is to give it an organized thought process that builds from one another. Yep. That's the career action plan.

Liesl Riddle:

Well, you mentioned this networking piece. That's one of the things I think that is so very valuable about the work that you and your team do. How do you build relationships with these employers? How do you leverage our alumni network that is so vast inside D.C., but really around the world, to really help mentor and give advice to our students?

Mark Strassman:

We work very closely with the development and alumni relations department, and that is step one. They are the gatekeeper to the history of GWSB, and then of course still they'll go beyond even those walls to GW, the university as a whole. One of the things that I was just so amazingly surprised by pleasantly was how helpful our GWSB alumni are, just incredible, from across the country, across the globe; and it's not just executive director of the career center. Sure. I'll talk to you. We introduce our students, or we teach our students how to introduce themselves. I'd say 85 to 90% success rate in terms of getting a response, getting even if it's just an internet and email interaction, a positive flow.

Mark Strassman:

So, we work with the students and teach them all sorts of skills, lifelong skills, how to use LinkedIn, how to connect, how to make the appropriate ask. I think that's probably the most eye-opening piece for students is, okay, so they connected with me. Now, what do I do? It's an art, not a science, how you do it. But if you go to LinkedIn, I think there's 170,000 self-identified GW alums, and with the click of three buttons, we can teach you how to connect with, of those 170,000, the ones in the industry you're interested in, the ones in the geographic region you're interested in. It's, it's a skill, and it's one that will last you a lifetime and build your career.

Mark Strassman:

But it takes a village. It takes the coaches and the EDCs, and it takes developmental alumni relations. It takes the faculty. It takes administration. Everybody knows somebody, and that's the piece that's important is knowing that you always want to ask the question and look to get introduced to somebody else. So, again, we worked very hard in building that network, and the best thing I could say or in the short answer it's, we have wonderful alumni, unbelievably giving.

Liesl Riddle:

So, if one of our wonderful alumni is listening to this and they're thinking, "I'd really like to do something with the career center to help the next generation of students," what are some of the activities that they could participate in, and how would they get started?

Mark Strassman:

Oh, that's almost as much fun for me to talk about as the career action plan. Again, working very much with the alumni relations group, we get introduced to alums. They do an amazing job of embracing alums that haven't been engaged in years, and you only get one shot to make a first impression. They're trying really hard to rebuild some bridges, so that's not a first impression. They're trying to get that second shot at it, and when they hand that relationship over to us, we have to succeed.

Mark Strassman:

So, I tell them all the time, "If you bring an alum that is interested in giving back, I will find something for them to do," and I haven't failed yet. So, what are those things? First and foremost is mentoring. We cannot get enough mentors. It is probably the greatest gift we can give our students is the opportunity to talk to someone who sat in your seat in a lecture hall, who understands what the faculty is talking about, but more importantly has navigated the employment world in a career that's the same interest level as a student has as a GW alumni.

Mark Strassman:

The GW alum is a little bit different than a University of Virginia alum or a Harvard alum or a Cal Berkeley alum. Everybody has their own story to tell, and because they've lived the life that our students are living, it's a great mentoring approach. So, yes, it's about the industry they're in, but it's also about the world from which they came from that makes it so personal and so important. So, we just line up mentors. As quickly as we can get them, we find students to mentor.

Mark Strassman:

We also have our Communities of Practice program, which we've talked about, which is a power user of mentoring. That's probably the crown jewel, that and the pro bono project, of our Communities of Practice. So, mentoring is really huge. We also do a tremendous amount of industry round tables. Whether it be with grad programs or whether it's the undergrad programs, every piece of our student cohort universe has a need for understanding what an industry makeup looks like. So with that, again, it takes a number of mentors and alums to tell a story of an industry. You can't have one person telling it, because even if you were to get somebody from Hilton and somebody from Marriott to talk about the hospitality industry, it would sound completely different how those organizations are structured.

Mark Strassman:

So, we have round tables, industry round tables. We have career week where we have panels of industry experts. We can always find an opportunity for a speaker to come. If they don't have the time or the bandwidth to be mentoring on a continual basis, maybe once a semester or twice a semester we bring them in to be a speaker as a part of a panel. Then probably my favorite program is we've developed the Executives Investments program, and it's not quite as big a lift as it sounds.

Mark Strassman:

But we work with executives, and an executive is really in our mind somebody who is five, seven, 10 years or above. We've even had some that we've worked with in startups that are less than that. But it's an opportunity to introduce someone who has built some success for themselves in their careers in a plethora of industries, and they allow for one-on-one opportunities with students who need a safe haven. For example, if you think you want to be on Wall Street, just for the sake of argument, you can't get the interview and then start out with the question of, "So, tell me. What is life on Wall Street like?"

Mark Strassman:

You need to have those answers when you're in an interview. You need to be prepared. You need to be so buttoned up, but we needed more opportunities of safe havens. We needed to give a place where a student who may think they want to be in Wall Street or maybe not, be able to ask that question that may sound like a dumb question or an uneducated question to some, but really all it is is exploration. So, we continue to grow our Executive Investments program, people who want to help students answer the questions for the first time.

Mark Strassman:

This past semester, we had 24 in the fall semester. We had 22. So, we ended up with almost 50 executives which had over 250 independent student one-on-one opportunities that I think every one of our mentors, certainly, we're just in love with the concept. Most of our students, I think, we're in love with it. Some of them felt like, "Darn, I wasted my one opportunity for a one-on-one with X, and I really shouldn't have. I should've gone to Y." But it's incredible. The more execs I can get involved in this, I think, the happier the students will be.

Mark Strassman:

So, there's just countless ideas, and the first question I ask when I meet an alum is, "What would you like to do," because I don't want to live just in my vacuum, my imagination. We've gotten some of our best ideas from alum saying, "Well, if I had my druthers, I would do X." So, by all means we're open to new ideas to get engaged.

Liesl Riddle:

Well, I'll tell you, Mark, you've just done such fabulous work in such a short period of time. You have a great team. You've got a great space that we hope to all be back in soon, and you've really created, I think, a very vibrant web of networks with our alums, with our dean's corporate counsel, with local employers, and really international employers, and most importantly, our students. So, we're so grateful for all of your creativity and hard work, and I really appreciate you joining me in the podcast studio today.

Mark Strassman:

Well, it's my pleasure. I hope get another opportunity to talk again, and I look forward to doing these kinds of things in person.

Speaker 1:

(singing).

Liesl Riddle:

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