Liesl Riddle:

Welcome to GWS Be 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.

Liesl Riddle:

Welcome to the podcast. I am so excited today to be able to share with you about our Consulting Abroad Program. This is our quintessential student experience in our Global MBA program, our full-time MBA program. And I'm joined here by my colleague, our Assistant Director for Global and Experiential Education for Graduate Programs, Sarah LaRosa. Good to see you in the studio today.

Sarah LaRosa:

Hi Liesl, very nice to see you.

Liesl Riddle:

So, Sarah, tee us up a little bit, level the playing field. What is the Consulting Abroad Program for the Global MBA students?

Sarah LaRosa:

The Consulting Abroad Program was created 13 years ago to provide an opportunity for Global MBAs to synthesize and apply the knowledge they gain during their first year of study in the program. So students work in teams to develop and present actionable recommendations to a real business challenge for a global partner around the world. So far over 1100 CAP students have engaged 150 companies in over 20 countries.

Liesl Riddle:

I can't believe it's been that long. I mean, I was a faculty member when we did this the first time and it was so much fun to teach in that first group of CAP students. And so many of my, and this is no joke, many of my CAP students, at least more than half that class, I'm still in touch with, that many years later and in regular contact with, so hello everybody, if you're listening to this particular podcast. But I think that really speaks to the great community experience that is really the Consulting Abroad Program for students, but also students and faculty as well.

Liesl Riddle:

Speaking of students, we have three of our Global MBA students from class of 2022, who started off and went all year virtually, including their Consulting Abroad Program. So I'm going to have each one of them sort of introduce themselves to the audience here. Michael, why don't you go first?

Mike Tadesse:

Hi, I'm Mike Tadesse. I am a Global MBA Class of 2022. My professional experience was in Business Development Compensation for a Fortune 500 company. I'm now a founder of HappyPlate, a local marketplace startup that enables people with long-term health issues to eat according to their health needs.

Liesl Riddle:

Great. And Allison?

Allison Van Fechtmann:

Hi, Allison Van Fechtmann. I am also a Global MBA candidate. Prior to coming for my MBA, I worked in the automotive manufacturing industry. So I was a business analyst and a project manager before that. I also have my Bachelor's of Science in Biology and Biotechnology.

Liesl Riddle:

Fantastic. And Vincent.

Vincent Villeneuve:

Hi, and thank you, Dean Riddle for this amazing opportunity to share one of our greatest experience of the academic year. So my name is Vincent, and together with Allison and Michael, I was a first-year Global MBA student. Prior to joining GW I acted as a project consultant on advocacy projects with implementing partner organization of the United Nations, of various United Nations agencies. And for this CAP project, I was with a team of five working for a private Turkish Bank, QNB Finance Bank, on enhancing their mobile chatbox.

Liesl Riddle:

Well, already our audience can see that these are really some exciting countries and companies. One of the reasons why we offer this Consulting Abroad Program is really a practicum course offered at the very end of all of our core course experience for our MBA students. It's really an opportunity at the end of that first year to take all of the knowledge that you've gained across all the different functional areas and all the integrative business courses, and really put it into practice with a brand new work team, students that you haven't worked with before, a new faculty member who's an expert in that country and some of the industries that you're studying, and then you get to work with a real client in that country and have a lot of exchange with them to solve one of their problems.

Liesl Riddle:

And the whole reason we do this is because you come back as an MBA student, you want to be able to take new tools and start putting them into practice in your own career. And we hope the CAP is one of those opportunities to try out those muscles, those new muscles, so to speak. So I'm curious, how do you see, students, how do you see the CAP experience connecting with your career path? And Allison, why don't we start with you?

Allison Van Fechtmann:

Sure. So, as I said before, I have my Bachelor's in biotech, but I did get away from the pharma industry and worked in automotive, but getting to do the CAP project, I was able to get some real hands on experience in the biotech field, which was so great because I'd like to return to that post-grad. So having the international component as well, so doing some market entry and honestly, it was virtual, but that knowing how to do virtual presentations is so critical, especially for working with international companies and global colleagues.

Liesl Riddle:

Yeah. I mean, I think the idea of being able to put on your resume that you managed this virtual team, that big buzzword now is so important, so it's the presentation, but it's also all that global virtual team management that you all did and did so well. That's a really great point. Mike, what about you, what's the connection with your career story?

Mike Tadesse:

With my career story, I think the advantage here is that prior to coming, I've worked with different clients that were international, but specifically with Absa Mobile, it's a startup in Ghana, and given that I just launched my company, it enabled me to think from the founder's perspective and help him understand his needs in a way, whether it's from marketing or looking at their company focused on too many products. And I was able to practice my entrepreneurial skillset as well as work with different people in my team from different career backgrounds that enabled us to really come together for one goal. And so I think that was a incredible experience. And as an African, someone from the continent as well, it allowed me to understand the needs that Africa has on mobile money. How well they're growing now, but also the issues from operational risk and regulation side and how it's really difficult to do business over there because of the lack of infrastructure. So in case I want to do a startup in Africa in the future, now I feel like I'm well-

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Mike Tadesse:

I want to do a startup in Africa in the future. Now I feel like I'm well equipped to understand what I need before I even think about planning the future in Africa.

Liesl Riddle:

Wow. That's really, really exciting and great to hear. How about you, Vincent?

Vincent Villeneuve:

I was definitely looking forward to learn more about the current challenges that a financial institution face in the digitization. And I actually, from a strategic standpoint, this project was very instrumental for me to learn about marketing, process optimization and innovation in a sector of a particular interest. But in addition, I think the CAP project really helped me also enhance some skills when it comes to lead a team, and manage a relationship among a team or a small group of five students. And that I think, was also one of the biggest learning and maybe the biggest takeaway that will stay with me after completion of this really exciting project.

Liesl Riddle:

So you were in Turkey, one of my favorite countries, and where I took my CAP students before. Is there something about... You talked about the way you got in terms of industry knowledge. Did you learn something about Turkey you didn't know before?

Vincent Villeneuve:

Absolutely. And I think that's the amazing story of CAP, and also something that makes me extremely GW proud. So I have a neat story with Turkey because my in-laws are in Turkey. And so I've been to Turkey many times in the past, mostly as a tourist or as a relative, so to speak. But I had only limited acquaintance with the professional world and what it takes to work in Turkey, maybe, that it is a very demanding workplace with very high expectation, from a technology color perspective. People are extremely savvy. And so I almost realized the dream, to work with Turkish stakeholders. That's something I was not expecting prior to joining GWMBA, and I was able to achieve it. So I'm extremely grateful for this opportunity, as well as for the assistance from professor [Acuse 00:10:37], and our great student advisor, Metta [inaudible 00:10:41]. Thank you.

Liesl Riddle:

Yeah. I mean, I think that's one of the great things about CAP is that we often are able to match, and in this case, we 100% matched faculty that are actually from those countries, with the class and with the projects. And even when we don't, these are faculty that have expertise or have done extensive on a given country. So you do sort of feel like you get more than that superficial, though that's still fun, tourism kind of experience. You get to go deeper than that. So I'm really glad you were able to better understand that country. It's very important also in your personal life as well.

Liesl Riddle:

So Allison, tell me about, what did you learn about either Sweden or about the industry that you were focused on that was a great takeaway for you?

Allison Van Fechtmann:

I'd say there are a couple of takeaways I had. The first one is that the Swedish companies, the way they're set up, a lot of them are very flat organizations. So we were working really closely with C-suite on the entirety of our projects, which is not something that might happen with all companies, and was a wonderful opportunity for us and my team.

Allison Van Fechtmann:

Another big takeaway is, and I did not know this before, that Sweden is second only to Silicon Valley in unicorns per capita. I don't know if you know what unicorns are, but they're companies that are valued at 1 billion or more. That was fascinating.

Liesl Riddle:

Yeah, it is so cool. And I think that's why we're really fortunate that Professor Anna Helm that teaches that course, we do a lot of different courses to Sweden, focusing on innovation technology in a lot of different ways in CAP and elsewhere, leveraging her expertise in that. So I'm glad that was helpful for you.

Liesl Riddle:

Mike, what was your takeaway? Did you learn something about Ghana or was it more industry-specific knowledge?

Mike Tadesse:

For me, it was actually an exciting opportunity because I learned about Ghana and the country that, apart from the Nigeria's of the world, Ghana is actually growing in tech space, which was very exciting to learn. But I also have identified that there's a huge talent retention and talent acquisition issue in Africa. And I got to understand in depth about that, because a startup could, in America, or in a developing country, you can hire a talent. Over there, you have to train the talent as well as retaining the talent becomes tough. So for a startup, not only government regulation, not only infrastructure issues, but also talent retention could be very difficult. And so I got to see in ways how we can potentially close the dots, where that tier could potentially solve that as well, which was a great experience. I'm Ethiopian, and I always think Ethiopia, but this allowed me to look elsewhere, not just East Africa, but as well as the West Africa and understand the needs.

Liesl Riddle:

Well that's very inspirational actually. And I'm really glad that you got that experience and that broader perspective. You know, you guys, I'm curious about how did you manage this virtual world? Sarah's going to tell a little bit more about this in a minute. We normally don't do CAP quite exactly way. We don't usually stay virtual the whole time. So you are working with a brand new team, you've been working with the same team most of the year. So you have this new team, distance environment, new client, new faculty member. How did you build comradery? What was the group dynamic like? So Vincent, you want to talk first, share a little bit about that?

Vincent Villeneuve:

Yeah, thank you. Well, first of all, big shout out to my teammates, Archinal, Liesl, Lungile and Trevor. They were the best teammates that I could possibly dream of. But apart from that, we had a team with five different nationalities, spanning on four different continents, although most of our team was based around DC.

Vincent Villeneuve:

I think one of our great advantage is that everybody was so motivated, I think, by this project, that it created a great emulation, and everybody was really eager to meet on a weekly basis, but also actually have more meetings than we even needed. And we found extremely useful, I think, after a couple of weeks into the project to spend some times also meeting without a specific agenda, just also to discuss and catch up on various issues surrounding the project that would be of specific concern for one of each other team members. And I think that slowly, slowly, yeah, we built our CAP team among ourself.

Vincent Villeneuve:

But that being said, I think the format of the project helped also really, because we were gathered by complete chapters. So on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, we were able to meet in smaller number than with our whole cohorts. So I think we also, beyond our team, we had strong links also with the other CAP Turkey projects, and that really helped, I think-

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Vincent Villeneuve:

... projects. And that really helped, I think, creating, enabling environments. I'm not saying this because I was so proud of and so fond of [inaudible 00:16:15], but just because I was really amazed by what the CAP project brought to me. I think I really learned from everyone in our class, every question that people asked, every insights that were provided by our guest speakers, and all the support from our faculty. It was really awesome.

Liesl Riddle:

Mike, was your team as similar or different?

Mike Tadesse:

It was very similar, but mine maybe, I was in the beginning, I was in a hospital. I had surgery. And so when my team was assigned, I wasn't able to see it. I was thinking that we would be working with the same leadership group, and I was kind of disappointed because we had really built an amazing report. But then I was able to meet with my group and they were very supportive, and I was so happy with the people I was assigned with, just to give them a huge shout out. Thank you to Ronna, Alex, Halim and Courtney.

Mike Tadesse:

We worked very well. We set up a call in the beginning. We set up expectations for the team, and time limits, and also leadership roles. And so I served as the vice president role, but I wasn't really stuck to the role, because whoever had the time, whoever was good at something chose to go on. So we didn't really have any problems. So we complimented each other very well.

Mike Tadesse:

Apart from that, like Vincent says, for me, the CAP Ghana team, the entire cohort was also supportive because I had friends in other teams, and I was able to learn Ghana opportunities from healthcare and other perspective, like selling furnitures and stuff that I never even thought were being produced in Africa. I was able to learn. Our professor was great. Sarah was great. And so I think overall we've, I don't know, I really enjoyed the CAP.

Mike Tadesse:

I was scared in the beginning because when I signed for GMBA, knowing that I was going to possibly have this surgery during this time, I didn't know how much time I was going to miss given that it was virtual. It kind of helped me out a lot because I didn't need to travel to Ghana. And so there's nothing but positive things that I would say about my experience with my team or CAP Ghana, or this CAP project overall.

Liesl Riddle:

Well, great. So Alison round us out. Was your team similar?

Allison Van Fechtmann:

Yes. I also had a wonderful team experience. Again, massive shout out to Emma and Naya and Greg. It was such a safe team dynamic, I would say. It was very collaborative. We had different strengths, and we could play to those strengths and help each other where we were a little bit weaker, and help build up the team that way.

Allison Van Fechtmann:

I would say one major thing that I think was really helpful for our team was the midpoint peer feedback. We maybe had a little bit of difficulty communicating at the beginning, but we did the peer feedback, and I would say discussing how we wanted the team to function made such a big difference. And once we went through some of our team expectations and how we wanted the team to function, it got so much more collaborative, and it was much better.

Allison Van Fechtmann:

We also spent a little bit of time trying to get to know each other outside of the team, outside of the project, which was such a good move on our part because I think getting to know each other on a more personal level made it a lot more collaborative. And when we did have to have discussions, it was much more comfortable for us.

Liesl Riddle:

Just exceptional stories. I think it really speaks to the comradery and the collegiality that really exists within the Global MBA. I mean, it's a specially selected group of people. And we don't just choose people based on their academic performance. Through interviews and other means, we also are trying to put together a group of people that will really be good as a unit. It's almost as if you're identifying one big, large team that then we'll kind of go into sort of separate subgroups.

Liesl Riddle:

So I think those really positive dynamics come out. It's certainly not easy, particularly in a virtual environment, and all people in all teams always have bumps, but it sounds like your teams all really overcame lots of different kinds of challenges in some great ways.

Liesl Riddle:

We're kind of short on time, so I want to boil this last question down for the students, down to just kind of one issue. And that is, when Global MBA students are thinking about CAP, it's often very hard to make that big decision about which project to choose, because you have countries to choose, you have industries to choose, you have faculty members perhaps to choose. So there are lots of different... Or where your other friends are going, and what other classes they're going to work on. So if you just had to pick one, what is the number one decision-making factor you think you would recommend GMBAs, Global MBAs to think about? What do you think Allison?

Allison Van Fechtmann:

I would say taking stock of what you want to do post-grad, and picking up projects that really closely aligns with that. Because then, I know for me, I worked in a biotech company, and now I think that played a big role in me getting a summer internship with a biotech supplier. So I think it was the project for me.

Liesl Riddle:

Oh, that's very cool. Michael, you were shaking your head. So tell us a little bit, do you agree with that?

Mike Tadesse:

I was agreeing to that part, but just to change it a little bit and maybe Professor Debass that's listening, foresight. I use that to change my perspective of my career goals that I've seen in the past. But future industries and countries that could potentially have a high growth impact. And so I chose Ghana and mobile money specifically based on that, in case I end up in Africa whereby I want to get involved mobile money side or FinTech side. And so all of that. And so foresight is something I learned at GW that I think could be key to future GMBAs.

Liesl Riddle:

Yes, we have professor Thomas Debass who teaches in our business and society series often, and sometimes in other departments, and is really a strategic foresight expert. And I know you really enjoyed that class. He's going to love to hear that you were able to make that connection across the courses. So Vincent, is this your theme too, or do you feel differently?

Vincent Villeneuve:

Absolutely. I can only agree with Allison and Michael. So I think that it would be critical, I think, in selecting your CAP project, or applying for your CAP project, actually, to choose the project that you're the most interested in, and that helps you also go outside maybe of your comfort zone. If you have some professional skills, don't count on them too much for this project. But look at something that will build-

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Vincent Villeneuve:

Too much for this project, but look at something that will build your future skills for your career that is ahead of you. And then in terms of country, I think, it's just about, I think, choosing the country that you're the most interested learning about. Although I have to say they are all very interesting, all the countries and all the projects. So I think my advice for future, maybe, MBA students is more to choose GW instead of other universities, because, well, you will be delighted by all the opportunities among which CAP is really one of them.

Liesl Riddle:

Now that really worms warms my heart, but all of the compliments about the types of projects that we've selected, the clients that you're working with, all those kudos goes to Sarah because Sarah spends tireless months, even almost a full year ahead of time, she's already looking at the incoming class that's coming in behind you, as we get to know them and have our first conversations with them, she wants to know what are the industries that they're interested in? What countries are they coming from? To try to start thinking about what clients we should start finding. So Sarah, tell us a little bit about what is the CAP program? This was all a virtual experience, what is it really like? What was it like prior to COVID? And hopefully we can return to that in post-COVID, this sort of traditional structure of the CAP program.

Sarah LaRosa:

Certainly. So typically we would have three to five classes of students traveling abroad for the final two weeks of the semester as sort of a highlight experience. So in addition to the virtual meetings and communications that they had with their global partners throughout the semester, they're able to deliver the final presentations and complete some of the final research in country. Thankfully with the virtual program this year and last year, we were still able to deliver fantastic recommendations and all the learning objectives of the course were achieved. And so, very grateful for that. But typically, like I said, two weeks abroad for students to be in country, experiencing the local market. And I can say, it's 20 plus countries that students have had an opportunity to visit in the past, ranging from Brazil to Germany, Mexico, Rwanda, Vietnam, and everywhere in between.

Sarah LaRosa:

So we really strive for diversity in terms of the geographies, but also in the types of organizations that we're engaging. So our students have worked with small family companies all the way up to Fortune 500s and everything in between as well. So it is mostly due to students' varied interests. We're trying to identify companies that align with the career goals and professional interests of students. And the students today have mentioned, learning not only about their specific project and global partner, but learning a lot alongside their peers in the class about all the other areas and opportunities.

Sarah LaRosa:

So we want it to be really comprehensive and touching on as much as possible so that students are broadening their knowledge in a way that is really unique and only possible through this type of unique experience. But as far as the types of challenges, today, we heard about some marketing challenges and product challenges, but students have also worked in human capital, growth planning, operations, branding to name a few. But like I said, it's really dependent on the interest of the students. Depending on who's coming, we'll work hard to identify opportunities that align.

Liesl Riddle:

And the wonderful thing about actually going out and traveling is that the students spend around 10 days or so in country themselves, with their faculty member and fellow students getting to go around and really absorb the local community, that culture. There's all kinds of a study tour kind of built into that where faculty take students around to meet different stakeholders that would impact, or have some additional light to shed on the solutions that the teams are trying to put together. And so you can really, again, sort of get more grounded in that local environment. And of course have lots of fun, right? There's group dinners and breakfasts and guest speakers that come in and you get to go do fun things and do tours and all that kind of thing together. So, I mean, I just have so many fond memories of my time teaching in this program.

Liesl Riddle:

And I am really looking forward to us being able to explore the world with great students like you all. And hopefully we'll be able to get you guys on a plane too and out to another country when we get out of just all virtual environment.

Liesl Riddle:

Well, thank you all for joining me and GWSB proud today. We certainly are proud of our CAP program, but we are really proud of our students and the team that puts all of this together. So thank you all for joining me.

Speaker 1:

Thank you.

Speaker 2:

Thank you.

Vincent Villeneuve:

Thank you.

Speaker 3:

GW. What it meant to me. Capital, go and make that history.

Speaker 4:

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

Speaker 3:

-the Blue, shaking in they boots, team come through. Come through. GW, what it mean to me. Capital, go and make that history. I got a couple of scouters instead of me-

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