(music)

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.

Liesl Riddle:

Welcome to the podcast studio. Today, I am so excited to be able to share with you the audience more about this new MBA program we just started this year in 2021 at George Washington University School of Business. And I'm joined in the podcast studio today with Dr. Donnelly, who is a professor of Information Systems and Technology Management here at the School of Business, who is the faculty director for this new program. And I'm also joined by Greg Simmons, who is the program manager in the office of university programs at the Department of Homeland Security. So, really the impetus of this program really began back in 2020, in September of 2020 in fact, when GW School of Business was recognized by the Department of Homeland Security as a Center of Excellence in security technology transition. So Greg, could you maybe share with our audience a little bit about what does a Center of Excellence mean and how is GW center similar or different to others that exist in the United States?

Greg Simmons:

Thanks, Liesl, I really appreciate that, and I'm excited about being here to talk about the program. And it's a really good question about what is a DHS Centers of Excellence and the role that the GW has taken as being part of that organization. The Congress set up and had a desire that DHS have at its disposal university-based research in order to address the critical questions that affect the missions of DHS. There are many, they go the gamut of surveillance, intelligence obviously, but also networks trans-criminal missions. So, we want to base university-based research in order to answer those questions.

Greg Simmons:

So in that regard, there are 10 Centers of Excellence, all focused on critical questions and missions of DHS. One of the critical questions and one of the critical items that was observed in the recent months was the question of technology transition and the barriers to getting concepts out the door, into the hands of the operators of DHS. And so to address those barriers to transition that we have observed, the idea was that maybe we needed to come at an approach using the tools that an MBA, a master's of business administration could bring on management processes, data analytics, financial innovations, all to address some of the chief things that we see in the barriers to transition, which are management processes and cost overruns. So, GW was competitive process as it was selected as the lead for the latest Centers of Excellence to provide that research, university-based research and capability that we need to have better outcomes.

Liesl Riddle:

So, we've launched the first cohort so far of this program in January of 2021, who is really the audience? When we were designing this MBA, who is the audience? Is this just for DHS and within for whom is it really designed for?

Greg Simmons:

Well, that's another great question. From the very beginning, Liesl, we understood in government that government does not have the best ideas, especially in the area of transition in technology. We understand from Moore's law says, "Technology train changes every 18 months." And so the best solutions are coming from the captains of industry [inaudible 00:05:04] maybe 30 or 40 years ago, innovation was within government. So, we wanted to set up a program that would integrate students from many sectors, government and non-government sectors into one cohort so they could learn from one another, and get the best practices and the knowledge and skills and those attributes from each other, and to be able to take those skills back into their workplaces. And so, this program was intentionally set up, not just to be a government education training opportunity, but to be a whole of a process of non-government and government students. So, we look forward to that and we're happy that this integration has occurred.

Liesl Riddle:

Yeah. I always sort of describe this program as kind of like an incubator, an industry-level incubator within the program, right? Because the intention is to bring people with different sets of resources together to co-innovate, right? And let's try to break that down a little bit. For somebody that might be listening that is in the private sector and says, "I'm in security technology." Or, "I want to break into security technology." What might be in it for them to choose this MBA program over maybe other options?

Greg Simmons:

Well, I would say, Liesl, for somebody coming from the private sector and they may be interested in opportunities in the government complex, the security ecosystem, there are some things to be learned. We speak a different language as well, and it's not all about innovation obviously, but we need to learn from each other. So, by coming into this cohort, a student would learn the nuances of working with public monies in public organizations, and some of the challenges that are faced with that. Ergo, on the other side, I guess, is for the government employees, they're going to learn from their classmates, the innovative ideas of how do you get concepts out the door and commercialize very quickly learning those agile concepts that the private industry is famous for.

Liesl Riddle:

So, in terms of DHS employees, how are they actually selected to participate in this program?

Greg Simmons:

Well, for DHS employees, that really hearkens back to objectives within the operational components of DHS, which they know the leadership in those components know their workforce. They have a desire to invest in that workforce and they have a desire to enhance the workforce. There's an acknowledgment that the skills that are needed to reduce those barriers to transition, they're pretty much are found in private industry, and they would be too expensive to recruit out of private industry and bring it to government. So, the idea is that operational components want to grow the current workforce or recruit the next workforce to be able to have these skills to come back and work on these concepts to transition them to the operational user.

Greg Simmons:

What I would say in the selection process, each component is a little different, but they all... It starts with their human capital offices and they announce and talk about the program, and they're vetted through their own selection processes because that's a significant investment to offer a scholarship, fully funded MBA to a government employee. So, there's an acknowledgment that this is a significant investment and we're looking toward the future of that organization. So again, the selection process goes back down to the component and DHS Science and Technology, we feel like we're facilitating that for the components.

Liesl Riddle:

And for our audience that may not be familiar with the term DHS component. What does that refer to?

Greg Simmons:

So, the components refer to the eight operational components of DHS which are comprised of, everyone knows TSA at the airport, but also Secret Service is a component. Let's see, ICE is a component of DHS. Coast Guard is a component of DHS. When I refer to the operational components, it's all of those elements that were brought together when DHS was created in the 2000s.

Liesl Riddle:

That's one of the things I enjoy when we visit the classroom is learning how everything is broad-ranging from Cybersecurity to FEMA and to, as you mentioned, the Coast Guard and all these other components, that often don't have a lot of interaction, at least in the roles that they play within the DHS, that it also gives them a chance to co-create and collaborate and across the components themselves. And I think it's important to kind of underscore too in terms of applying for this program, students from government agencies outside of DHS, students from the private sector can apply to GW directly. And we do have scholarships available, and so on that apply to this particular program. But if you are a DHS employee, there is a workforce development program that if you contact your human resources office, they can tell you more about the formal-

Greg Simmons:

That's right.

Liesl Riddle:

... selection process, right? That comes through that where it's really more sponsored.

Greg Simmons:

That's correct.

Liesl Riddle:

[crosstalk 00:11:33] MBA. Yeah. So, professor Donnelly, I know that this is a passion project for you because it speaks so much to your both academic, as well as your sort of practitioner background. So, first tell the audience a little bit about yourself and then talk about this curriculum that you've shaped for this program?

Richard Donnelly:

Thank you, Liesl and Greg, it's great to be with the two of you for this event this morning. Well, I'm delighted to be in my role as a faculty director, it sort of taps into things I've cared about for a long, long time. I started life as an engineering professor and enjoyed that all very much, but it became obvious that a lot of engineering failures were a result of management [crosstalk 00:12:26]-

Greg Simmons:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Donnelly:

... technology. And so over time, I made my way through 10 years in the corporate sector as a lab director and someone who got involved also in the global development of products by collaboration with other firms. That was a lot of fun, but somehow the enjoyment of education drew me back. And lo and behold, I found that at GW, a program on Management of Science Technology and Innovation, which was looking for someone like me. So, that was kind of a match made up with the right statistical outcome. And I quite soon became the director of the Management of Science Technology and Innovation program, which drew students from both the MBA world and the technology-oriented programs within the business school.

Greg Simmons:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Donnelly:

So, I've been pursuing this whole business of how to do a better job of managing technology. We haven't all that often use the technology transition terminology, but it's a very good one. We instead talked about innovation as the sort of overarching process involved in moving from a concept of a service or a product to something that was actually functioning effectively in the marketplace. And of course, that involves a huge chain of activities that span many of those in the business school, and accordingly, it was great to be a teaching technologist from the platform of a business school. It was a lot of fun for me and my colleagues.

Richard Donnelly:

I won't bore you with too many details. I was asked to found the executive MBA program at GW, which was the first one in the Mid-Atlantic. And one of the things that we made sure of was that there was some emphasis in there on technology ventures, technology entrepreneurship, technology innovation, and especially with a global flavor, which is the way technology tends to be developed these days. With that as background, I was unknowingly preparing myself for this role, which came later in life, and I still teach full time. I've been the chair of the Department of Information Systems and Technology Management, in fact, I founded that department. And when Liesl and I chatted one day about things coming along, she said, "Now, I want to talk to you about this new opportunity that I'm getting excited about." And a couple of years later here we are.

Richard Donnelly:

So, what's fun about this for me is, as you might be able to tell from that little vignette, I like getting things started. And so here we are with an opportunity to start this amazing program that really is, I think unlike very many others anywhere in the country. And it just so happens that GW is sort of

perfectly positioned to do this, not only in terms of the breadth in our school, but the fact that we have other science and technology departments in the university, and we sat about five blocks from the White House and the executive office buildings. So, we're also inevitably linked to our Federal government as both an inspiration and a source of research findings and of course, contract support for developing new technology.

Richard Donnelly:

And as a result of that, our faculty have almost just by absorption an understanding of the public-private partnership that it takes to advance technology these days. So, that's what we're going to try to build into this program. We are just off the ground now by a few months, and it seems to be going well, we'll tell you more about that with our follow-on comments.

Liesl Riddle:

Well, it's an interesting curriculum, isn't it? Because the students take all of the core courses that you would typically receive in an MBA program, financial accounting, in marketing, in finance, and organizations and human behavior, and so on. But also they have a second half of the degree where it's really focused on a lot of these technology transition, innovation types of topics. So, Greg, if you could share a little bit about why did DHS sort of requested several different topics be covered in this particular program. Can you speak a little bit about what those are and why that's important to DHS?

Greg Simmons:

Liesl, great question. And this gives me the opportunity to kind of brag about why GW was also selected because again, technology changes every 18 months. So, the rules are different than what government is trained for. We are trained for operating in series, on fixed schedules that are out to five to seven years, and so you can see we're already behind. So, the things that GW brings to the table are instructions in commercialization, innovation, business enterprise, and chiefly intellectual property law, and management, it resonated with some of the things that we were seeing that our workforce was lacking. As we are developing technology from concepts, we're in the same marketplace where private industry of other governments, national industries are in that same space, so we need to have a good understanding of the commercialization aspects and that intellectual property aspect. And that's where GW just is leaps and bounds ahead of the competition.

Greg Simmons:

So, it was chief to those concerns that we were trying to go after, and that's what makes this different. You've got the core MBA that you're familiar with, but then laser-focused on these aspects that will help get technology concepts. We say security technology because that's the type of technology that's going to help do our mission, but this could be applied to any technology, you're going to need these aspects to be able to reduce those barriers.

Liesl Riddle:

Yeah, that's a good point. Professor Donnelly, tell us a little bit more about, first of all, why is GW School of Business such a good fit with some of these topics? And how does the faculty expertise kind of become showcased in the technology management side of this degree?

Richard Donnelly:

I'm happy to do that. Let me start with the MBA portion of the curriculum, which is an essential part of it. We have some of the top-ranked departments in the various MBA disciplines in the US system, especially highly ranked is our international business area which Professor Riddle is a member of the faculty from. And that gives a perspective on one of both the advantages and challenges of developing technology because it is done in many parts of the world, and sometimes the most useful technologies have components or sub-components that come from companies around the world. So, the international angle is an important one for DHS and its quest to become better and better at technology transition. And as Greg said, we wanted to include that and other similar kinds of MBA core disciplines. But if you think of it, the MBA has always been a generalist degree. And some people call the traditional MBA a just-in-case degree. You study a bunch of stuff just in case you might need it someday.

Richard Donnelly:

So, even if you're an HR professional, you study logistics and supply chain, and there is some wisdom behind that, and you can see it in part when you recognize that MBA has become involved in such things as technology transition.

Liesl Riddle:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Donnelly:

So, we're delighted to have about half of our program, the core MBA courses taught by a wonderful faculty who are used to teaching senior people. We could find other universities in the country that also were very good at the core disciplines of the MBA, but weren't experienced in dealing with it in the real world setting so much. And here at GW, we're proud to say that a lot of our faculty have either a stint in the private sector, in the governmental sector, or they advise and consult to them, and so have a good understanding of what that's all about.

Richard Donnelly:

We married to that half of the curriculum, a custom-designed curriculum for the purpose of enhancing technology transition. And as Greg said that the security does introduce some special features, but it doesn't move it into a completely different realm. So, for those who might consider this program from the standpoint of learning more about technology transition and commercialization for purposes other than security technology, I think there's a lot to benefit from there. We begin our foray into technology management with of course on management of technology and innovation, which our students are just about to start in two weeks, our first to pass through that. And along with that introductory subject, we have a course in technology entrepreneurship, which the US is great at, but with more and more competitors around the world and some of them have ideas that are a little different from the way we've done it traditionally in the US, so that's of course, a good thing to look at always.

Richard Donnelly:

We have a course in technology commercialization, which will focus on projects, and that will give our students a chance to actually pursue a project in technology transition. We have an intellectual property course, which as Greg mentioned is a very central topic in this whole area. And many of you may not be aware, but GW has one of the best intellectual property law faculty in the country, in the world, probably. And that's in no small measure because we have great people who have come from the Patent and Trademark Office, which is within the view almost of the campus. We'll also be looking at questions

of managing of technical projects and some contract issues because much of what the government does in technology is done through contract relationships. So, that becomes a specialized topic towards the end of our program.

Richard Donnelly:

Technology is changed rapidly, as Greg said, Moore's law introduced the idea years ago, that if you were going to sit still, you were going to fall behind, and so we have a course on emerging technologies, which addresses some of the new technologies that will inevitably have greater and greater influence in technology transition, such as artificial intelligence, for example. So, our faculty have a... [inaudible 00:26:43] to join with us in this exciting new program, and I can tell by their enthusiasm when you add that to their talent, this is going to turn out great.

Liesl Riddle:

So, talk a little bit about the format. How is this program delivered? Are these students working? Are they full-time, are they part-time, how's this all working out?

Richard Donnelly:

Yes. The students work full-time. They maintain their responsibilities in the DHS component structure. We have kind of maybe a two-part participant group, but some of them are professionals, senior professionals. Some of them are high-level managers, and they often have the experience of working separately, but maybe not so often together. With an organization as complex and large as DHS, the networking challenges is a pretty significant one. So, one of the things that we hope to accomplish with our courses by the nature of the interaction in class is a networking accomplishment, which we think pays dividends. And that also stands behind the idea to open this program to participants from the private sector-

Liesl Riddle:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Donnelly:

... who may have similar challenges or may even work with DHS in some cases. And having that crosstalk, we think will be very effective. We meet once a week. The program is a combination of about 25% online courses and 75% in-class. With the opening of the nation's campuses to in-class, we'll be doing a lot more of that in the remaining time in this first cohort. The cohort takes about two and a half years to go through the program. They take six credit units or two normal-sized courses per term. And that turns out to be kind of a optimum way to still be able to do a responsible job on the job, and to study and get through the program in a reasonable period of time. So two and a half years is not unusual for our employed graduate students.

Richard Donnelly:

There's also a recognition in this case that our students are a very senior group, an experienced group, and so we choose faculty who are experienced themselves, and can comfortably interact with students who ask very challenging questions, and make very probing comments and so on. And it's actually fun for the faculty we choose.

Liesl Riddle:

When you really speak to that idea of building community within the class, but also, I think what's really special about the program is that there are lots of aspects in sort of the co-curricular space that have been designed to bridge the divide between the class itself and helping grow their social capital by helping them meet others in DHS, meet others in the technology industry writ large to help them sort of think about the future of their career, how they want that to develop, but also how they want to innovate and create. I'm really grateful that our career center is building a community of practice. We have another podcast episode about what is a community of practice also, but it goes into more depth, but essentially, we're bringing together mentors from different parts of the technology environment. So within DHS, within other federal agencies, but also from the private sector to help mentor students as they begin to think about their career, maybe work on some pro bono projects and go through sort of a whole professional development process that I think is really unique and special for this program.

Liesl Riddle:

We host industry round tables where we bring in experts from all sorts of different technology fields, again, inside and outside of the DHS environment and some very international representation to come in and speak in small groups to students. We have meet-and-greets where we've so many alumni that work in security technology inside and outside of DHS. It's just amazing to me, but it really speaks, I think volumes to our expertise in this area. And so we bring the alumni back in our meet-and-greet environments, and have our students mix with our alumni, with our faculty, with our staff, and kind of talk about cutting edge issues and the technology security technology and the transition space. And of course, they have their George Talks Business to listen to where we also bring a lot of captains of industry in this area to come speak about the future of security technology and technology in general.

Liesl Riddle:

So, but I think we've put together and it's a testament to you, Professor Donnelly for how holistically you've thought about how we're going to educate the whole person, provide intellectual capital, but also that social capital to really help enrich students' careers and their way of thinking about the whole industry, which I think, again, goes back to that sort of incubator like experience. So, we talked a lot about sort of programmatic intent and envision, and this is a new program. So, I kind of wanted to end this podcast with a question to both of you about, imagine where we're five years in the future, our first two classes have graduated. What do we hope for in terms of how they will think differently or act differently or innovate differently because they've come out of this program? What's that vision look like to you, Greg?

Greg Simmons:

For us in government, we hope to have a cadre of people that are back in the workforce, that are able to be flexible, you could even use the term agile, that they are biased toward collaboration and innovation and reaching out across networks, looking at issues from multiple points of view, and prime to embrace data-driven decision-making. All the things that private industry has been focused on many, many, many years, but government, maybe not so much. So, we look to those skills being embedded and changing the culture, one program at a time. So, maybe five years, you establish these concepts, and maybe when you come back 20 years later, these old government could be as innovative and agile as some other industries in Silicon Valley, you never know. So, that's our vision.

Liesl Riddle:

So, professor Donnelly, do you have anything you want to add to that vision that's from your perspective?

Richard Donnelly:

Well, I might just add that in an area as a sort of dependent on advances in technology as the one that we're talking about in this program, we expect to be revising our curriculum continuously, not so much in the core conceptual focus of the various courses, but in the new case examples and the new technologies that will inevitably have influence. I've been reading that artificial intelligence is expected to... Now, this past had it, we've had a couple of passes previously where it hasn't seemed to quite come through as effectively as we expected, but this time it does feel a little different, and there's an expectation that artificial intelligence will make its way into the process of management of technology of decisions on investment in technology through the venture capital system and so on.

Richard Donnelly:

So, I guess one of the things I'd see is that we'll be continuously changing as our new cohorts of students come in. We'll probably expand our reach to faculty haven't had the chance to participate yet. And that is one of the richness is that we can offer at GW, a real strong bench to pursue. And I would emphasize, again, what Liesl said about the amazing alumni community that we represent.

Liesl Riddle:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Richard Donnelly:

Much of it centered in the Washington area and with very high positions often represented in the various agencies. So, will be tapping into those people as well for guest speaker roles, for mentorship roles, for case examples, and so on.

Liesl Riddle:

Yeah. What I hear in both of your answers is really is innovation, right? We want the students that come out of this program to really innovate and innovate differently than they were before they went into the program, but by virtue of offering this program and the nature of its program, we too on the GW side, look at this as a motivation and source and inspiration, really of our own innovation and our own agility. Well, thank you both for joining me in the podcast studio today. I hope that we've inspired the innovators out there to take a good hard look at this program, it certainly is a special one. And thanks to both of you for all of your contributions to the program.

Richard Donnelly:

Thank you.

Liesl Riddle:

(music).

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.