Liesl Riddle: Host

Milinda Balthrop: Guest

Serena Kapur: Guest

Craig Rowlings: Guest

[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's 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.

Today in the online studio, I am joined by three amazing GWSB alumni, Milinda Balthrop, Serena Kapur, and Craig Rowlings. All three of them are engaged in something that's very special at GWSB and that is our community of practice program. This program is based out of our F. David Fowler Career Center and is available to undergraduate and graduate students. Milinda, if I could start with you a little bit, can you tell us a little bit about your connection to GW then and now?

Milinda Balthrop:

Oh absolutely Liesl, thank you. Well, a long, long time ago back in the 90's, I was a GW student who majored in international affairs with a passion for serving others and, and definitely giving back and through my experience at GW, I decided to go into a career path in international development and that led me somehow to business school and through business school, I definitely had the heart to serve and decided to serve clients in the area of consulting.

Well, while I was at IBM, GW reached out to me, asked me to come in and start teaching some consulting-oriented classes. I really fell in love with teaching students and then that led me to an assignment here at GW leading the consulting community of practice, and that is where we are today.

Liesl Riddle:

Oh, that's great! Well, and you have two people that have really had a deep experience with the community of practice here. Serena, tell us a little bit about your experience with GW then and now.

Serena Kapur:

Yeah of course! So, um I recently graduated from GW in 2019 um and when I was there, I honestly didn't know what I wanted to do. Um I found that through career fairs, I found that consulting was definitely something that I wanted to do. I loved helping people, but you know, I found that there was this gap and um a lot of undergrad students had, you know, really wanted, had really high, had their sights set high on a lot of these amazing companies that weren't coming to campus. So, I reached out to my faculty and I, I reached out to them for help and I ended up getting connected with Angela as well as Milinda and they were incredible and they really believed in undergraduate students and that that's when uh the COP was really developed for undergrad students, and um after graduating I started my career in consulting at Accenture and I'm really happy.

Liesl Riddle:

 Oh, that's fantastic! What a great, great success story. So, Craig is the, you were part of the graduate version of communities of practice, so tell us a little bit about your connection to GW then and now.

Craig Rowlings:

Yeah, thanks Liesl. I tell you, I'm very GWSB proud, so great to have an opportunity to talk here. I loved my time at GW. I was a member of the MBA class graduating in 2018 which feels like an age ago, but uh the benefit that I've gotten throughout that entire time was just phenomenal. Um so as a student I was introduced to this program. I was, I, yeah, I had a firm conviction back then that I had no idea what I really wanted to do um, but being introduced to the, uh to the COP program I, I started it with one line alone that I was told is, if you want to be a consultant you've got to be an expert at becoming an expert. That drew me in immediately. I thought, yes that sounds like something I'd like to do. Moved through the program and it just added so much additional value to the MBA. Now I am in a consulting role at a firm called Riveron. I work within the financial advisory practice helping clients on a daily basis, especially through the COVID time. A lot of complexity that we handle, and I'm a mentor of the COP program too, so I come back, discuss my, what I've learned, my experience with the students and really enjoy coming back to give back to that program, especially what it gave to me.

Liesl Riddle:

 You know, this is what's so exciting to me, I've been looking forward to this podcast that we've had scheduled for a while now because I just love to do interviews like this with, you know, the community that comes back. That's one of the things I find really special about, uh, GWSB is that we have so many alumni that find ways to come back and spend time with the next generation of students and make good connections for them, mentor them, participate in the classes, and that's one of the things why we wanted to create this podcast is to really give people a sense of what it's like to be part of this sort of amazing community, this family that is GWSB. Well, Milinda clearly the communities of practice has been a big success. I mean, Serena and Craig have gone on to do amazing things, but you could tell a little bit more to our listeners about what really is a community of practice? What are its component parts and what's really been some of its history?

Milinda Balthrop:

 Sure, I'd like to describe the community of practice as a community of support that surrounds a student and prepares them for market readiness and that can be market readiness um in any career field. And so today we're focused on consulting, but we are looking to develop communities of practice for finance, for security, technology, and beyond. Wherever there's an interest in terms of our students and an interest in the marketplace, we will create hopefully a community of practice. Um so but there are three components to the community of practice. The first is skills training for the students led by industry professionals like Serena, like Craig. The second is one-on-one mentorship for students again that gets them ready for that career field of their choice and the mentorship is led by industry experts who are very often GW alum. The third area is one of my most favorite, which actually um we're going to start up in the spring and that is where students get the opportunity to take everything that they've learned in the fall through the skills training and apply it in a real-world work setting, working with real clients. And so those are three pro bono consulting engagements in the case of the COP for consulting.

Liesl Riddle:

Well, that's fantastic. So, students are building their resume, right?

Milinda Balthrop:

Absolutely. They get a chance to take those experiences working with teams, working directly with clients to solve some of the clients' toughest challenges and those clients are non-profit clients and for-profit clients and they take those experiences, put them on their resume, and they get a chance to talk about those experiences in interviews.

Liesl Riddle:

Craig, did you get a chance to work on a pro bono project as part of your COP?

Craig Rowlings:

I did, yeah. It was actually a very valuable experience and it happened to be finance related, which was within my field. Admittedly, I think uh throughout the experience there was uh a lot of back and forth between the client where I was learning to see, you know, how to actually ask the right questions to get the right answers from them and it turned out to be a lot of good skills building with regards to the resume like you mentioned so it was something that I could talk to when I was sitting in the interview room uh with Riveron when I was eventually applying.

Liesl Riddle:

Well, that's exciting right? Because it really does get you ready for, you know, that, that interview uh interview experience. Uh Serena, did you work with a client or were you just in a having, just a mentorship kind of experience?

Serena Kapur:

Yeah so, I helped manage um some of the projects and helped be more of a mentor. Um I was there when we first started um the pro bono projects from an undergraduate perspective and I thought that that was so special because um students at that time, like it's really hard to get client facing roles like even for an internship. So um I thought it was incredible and I'm glad to see that it's still going strong.

Liesl Riddle:

Oh that's, that's, it sounds really, I mean, I want to sign up! [Laughter] Craig, tell me about some of your other friends that went through this program, you know, you shared with us your experience. What were some of the other success stories from your group?

Craig Rowlings:

Well, I think it was going back to what Milinda alluded to. It's been created as almost a family atmosphere, so we go through this together, similar to when you join a firm. The consulting firms often have classes. It's the same as private equity, for example. You go in and you climb the ladder, so we all became very close. Still talk to a lot of folks, um that were in the COP with me. One of the most notable success stories, I think, was a friend of mine, very international background, so coming to the U.S. it was quite difficult for him when he was applying to jobs to really kind of get the traction with the potential employers to understand exactly what his background was, what he'd done. And it wasn't a language barrier, it's just that his background was not in the U.S. So, the success story there is that he has landed a fantastic position at CVS, a strategic role within data analytics and it was the COP that really kind of took him that extra mile, that it gave him the skills necessary, that they were looking for, so that's one of the big success stories. But ultimately, our entire class um within the COP got employment and it was what they wanted uh with I think less than uh two months after graduating so great success fact all around actually.

Liesl Riddle:

You know, one of the things I think is really cool about the COP is that I've seen so many of our especially the full-time MBA students really come to the program because they are career switching. You know, they're not just going to a full-time MBA program to just move up the ladder in their existing firm. That's more our part-time MBA student or online MBA student and so on, but our full-timers increasingly so many of them are actually, I am x today and in two years’ time after this program I want to be y and sometimes x and y are actually much farther apart. They're more like a and z, right? [Laughs] And so and I think you had some examples of folks in your, in your class there that I know that they were doing significant career switching and the COP was fundamentally, you know, the critical thing I think for them that helped them make that connection and help them, you know, transfer those skills, you know, into that, that next new career adventure. Um and that's the thing that's so rewarding for me to see um in uh for our students because it's a lot of change that is expected in a short period of time for many of our, our students that are career switching and this is such a critical piece of that, of their success stories. Milinda, what are some of the um workshops and sort of skill building areas that you all do in the COP?

Milinda Balthrop:

Within the COP, specifically for consulting, since that's the one that's active and ongoing uh there are really four critical areas that you, in terms of skill building, that you need for consulting. Uh one is analytical skills, right, how to look in at a business problem, how to break it into pieces and how to, you know, how to solve it. The second area is around communication and presentation skills. All consultants, you know, at some point in their career, they're either building slide decks or they're presenting to clients or they're presenting to management, so we train students how do you put together a slide deck, how do you make the story engaging, and how do you tell that story to clients in a way that they understand the recommendation that you're trying to communicate. And then they want you to come back for more in terms of uh support to them. The third area is around teamwork. In my career in consulting, and it goes back 15 plus years, I can only think of one experience where I worked on a project by myself. The rest of the time, for all of those years, I worked in teams, teams of junior consultants, teams of senior consultants, senior managers. And so, teamwork is critical uh as a critical skill to learn for consulting. And then the third area is really around project leadership and project management. For all of the pro bono projects, they typically need to be led by a project manager or an engagement manager which mimics the way that projects are run in the consulting industry. And so, we train students on, again, managing teams, delegating client relationship management, all the skills that you need in order to make sure that your team is successful and that that project is successful for the client.

Liesl Riddle:

So, Serena, tell me a little bit about what your mentorship experience was like because I, I, this all sounds like class to me. It sounds like I'm learning stuff and I'm actually creating deliverables. So, what's that sort of social networking piece like in a COP?

Serena Kapur:

Yeah, so my mentorship experience was pretty unique because um mentorship was the first reason that I actually even got involved with COP in the first place. Someone told me about it and they said, "You should reach out to Milinda and you should reach out to Angela." And so because of that I got more involved and it's interesting because I had the fortunate um experience to see the other side where I was able to share my experiences with students especially my senior year and try to help them get, achieve their career goals and even now I see that, and I think it's such a beautiful thing because I'm able to share with them my struggles and through the recruitment processes like my ups and downs and how it wasn't just an easy path to getting to where I was. Um and by sharing that I think uh the mentees or students are able to see, hey it's tangible, hey this is something that I could really do in the future, and that's what I think is so beautiful about mentorship because even now when I'm in uh in consulting, in the in the consulting world I seek out mentors who can help me get to where they are. And um now I'm able to also act as a mentor and as a mentee and I think it's just a beautiful reciprocal process.

Liesl Riddle:

So, Craig, tell me a little bit about what it's like now to be on the other side, right? You've crossed over from being a student in the program and now you're on the other side of the table. What's that like?

Craig Rowlings:

I miss being a student, I'll say that. Um but I, just going to what Serena said, that's such an interesting point which I couldn't agree with more being on the other side, being in a firm and it doesn't have to be consulting. Seeking out mentorship is, is an art. It's not something that you can just study and know how to do. It's a refinement that you have over time and now that I'm out of the MBA program it's just occurred to me what kind of a benefit I got out of the COP, learning how to network in such a way that you seek out these mentors and that they're open to it. I think, Serena, that was such a wonderful point that you made there and on the other side I'm absolutely loving the firm that I work for. It's, I love the work that I do. I, I love the people that I work with. It was hard to get in, uh it was difficult rather because it was six rounds of interviews, again six rounds of interviews that the COP, step for step, set me up for. So I, I knew exactly what was coming, I got those awkward questions like tell me how you'd get to the square root of 80. Um I mean really you know certain items like that throughout the process become a little obtuse but I, I really felt like I was prepared and not just prepared for the interview process. The moment I started, I was able to hit the ground running at Riveron. First day I was there, put to work, and since then it's just been up and up. And I really feel like the MBA um and the COP just launched me into a different universe uh in that regard. So um yeah very, very different to what it was pre-MBA um and during, but uh all for the better.

Liesl Riddle:

Wow that's such a great story and a great thing to hear. Milinda, what are some of the companies that we're working with in the COP?

Milinda Balthrop:

Liesl, I am so pleased at how the COP has grown since its inception. We started with, I think, 10 students and now we have over 110 students and the numbers keep growing. And for all of those students we need more mentors and more companies because our students are interested in working in a wide range of companies. Definitely, we have some of the big-name companies, the McKinseys, BCGs, Deloittes, IBMs, Accentures, and we also have some of the boutique consulting firms or specialized consulting firms like Riveron that does financial consulting as well as CMG and others. There's so many companies, I don't want to leave any out. So, I'll stop there because I don't want to upset any of our other mentors who may be listening to this podcast, but we've got over 50 companies represented across the 70 plus mentors that we've got involved in the COP.

Liesl Riddle:

Well, and you're building, you're building more COPs too, right? So you're going to need more of those kinds of connections so if we have an alum or other corporate partner that's listening to this podcast and says, "Wow you know I want to work with, with students like Serena and Craig. You know, how do I make this happen? Um you know, what's the process?"

Milinda Balthrop:

Yes, we want you, that's the message, and the process is for them to reach out to us through our uh gwsbcop@gwu.edu email and we would be happy to meet with you, to talk with you more about the program and to get you engaged.

Liesl Riddle:

That's great! Well Serena, do you have any sort of final words of wisdom to share with undergraduate students that might be thinking about participating in the COP?

Serena Kapur:

Yeah, I mean, I think it's a wonderful process and Milinda is one of the biggest champions there are out there and it's, it's amazing to see that we have mentors and alumni who really do invest their time and effort to help students get to where they want to. I don't think any goal is too small, or too big, sorry. [Laughs] And COP really helps you get there because it's just a beautiful network of giving back and I encourage everyone to join and try it out if you can.

Liesl Riddle:

Craig, we've got a lot of prospective MBA students that will be listening to this podcast and so is there anything you want to say to them about, because you know their, you remember what that was like. You're sitting there looking at lots of different MBA programs trying to weigh the pros and the cons of each one of them. Is there anything about COP that is unique and distinctive compared to what other business school programs are doing in your mind?

Craig Rowlings:

Yeah, I'm actually really happy to answer that question, so I'm glad you asked it because uh first of all the MBA at GW was actually almost a no-brainer for me. Yes, I looked at other MBA programs, but after visiting GW's campus I was, I was pretty sold pretty quickly. So, I could say that for any prospective students, visit the campus, have a look at what's happening, and you'll be sold very quickly. But with regards to the COP, remember that you're going to business school. You're going to get a great education, one of the best educations in the world, at GW's business school. What I will say is that if you want to be something very specific, a consultant, management consultant, marketing, etc. that's, you're not coming to marketing school. You're going to business school so yes, you're going to get all the best business education but if you want to refine that down into something where you're looking to specialize in a specific career, the COP just adds that extra layer on that prepares you not just for the interview process but for the career path itself. And that was my experience, and I would highly recommend it. I think it's a pioneering and innovative pathway to success after, after your studies.

Liesl Riddle:

Well, thank you Milinda and Serena and Craig for joining me today. I, I really enjoyed hearing more about what's under the hood in this great communities of practice COP program and Milinda, I hope we're going to be having that many more firms join us. You've done such a great job at attracting partners and alumni to, to participate but here's towards bringing many more new COPs to life here at GWSB. Thank you all.

Milinda Balthrop:

Thank you, Liesl, and thank you, Serena and Craig.

Serena Kapur:

Thank you.

Craig Rowlings:

Thanks for the opportunity.

Liesl Riddle:

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.

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