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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.

Well welcome to GWSB Proud today. Today I am so lucky to be joined by my boss, and my dear colleague Dr. Anuj Mehrotra, welcome to the podcast.

Dr. Anuj Mehrotra:

Well thank you for having me on this podcast Liesl, I'm delighted to be here.

Riddle:

Well it's great to have you here in the studio, the first question I wanted to ask you though is what does a dean actually do, what do you do all day?

Mehrotra:

Well I think it depends on who you are, some people think I don't do anything at all! But seriously speaking [Liesl laughs], I think the one of the most important jobs for a dean is to provide leadership for the school for developing a vision, developing a strategy, and to have some agreement on the values that are going to drive us. So as you know, for example, the last year we spent time on trying to define our values very well, which are captured very succinctly in the word “spirit,” where the first letter is really the most important one in my mind, and it happens to be the first letter in the word spirit, is that we'll put “student” interests first in everything that we do. And of course there are others, which you are very familiar with, “p” being “preparing” our students best for placement in today's marketplace. The “i” of course, celebrating our “international” community, international programs and our diversity and inclusion. The “research” is the feeding the last the letter “r,” and then finally the the next “i” being the “innovation,” and you yourself have been at the center of innovating the curriculum, so you are very familiar with that and a lot of different ways of innovating in a university atmosphere, of course. And the final “t” being doing all this “together,” because as a dean you're really working with many many different stakeholders, which are not just our students, not just our faculty or staff, but our alumni and the community, at large, overall. The second part that I think a dean really needs to be paying attention to and does very well, is academia generally tends to be risk averse, and to manage risk well, so on how to be able to manage risk well is to take advantage of the shifting demands from the marketplace, being innovative in that marketplace, making sure that our research is informing appropriately as well as our students are getting the best shot at becoming leaders globally, and for the foreseeable future, at least, is very important. So the management of that risk, and finally of course, to make sure that we are always creating and adding value to anything, and that is the job of the dean in my mind. But given the complexity of working with different you know stakeholders, you really have to like and be able to open to a lot of different perspectives.

Riddle:

So the job of a dean sounds really big and really hard, did you always want to be dean? Was that like, did you, when you were a little boy, did you think one day I want to be a dean? So walk me through that sort of career story…

Mehrotra:

Oh boy, oh no, I come from a family where higher education was always an important aspect, and to quite frankly growing up and even through all college and later on in a family, which has a lot of connections with higher education, being part of higher education was the richest lifestyle to my imagination. I mean if you think about it as a professor, as anybody working in a university atmosphere, you're surrounded by the best minds and they keep challenging you, they keep changing you, and it's just a very very rich lifestyle. It keeps you young, so sometimes when you only realize you're old when you look yourself in the mirror because you're already almost always surrounded by folks who are constantly being you know, who are constantly innovating, who are constantly young, and they are challenging you with new ideas. So I don't think I started my career thinking I would be dean. I didn't even know what a dean was, and what that was accidental to some degree. I was given a chance at my previous institution to first become my department chair, and I started learning about what kind of impact you can make as a department chair, and it was a lot of fun, it's a different type of fun than being very immersed in your research, which is also extremely satisfying. Suddenly from an academic institution where as a faculty member you had a lot of freedom to be able to do what you wanted to do, as a chair you were responsible for collective interests of our department, and as we went through and as the marketplaces started shifting, there was so much fun in trying to be able to create the programs. For example, in your role in my previous institution I was doing similar things where we were being creative in responding to marketplace and doing these things and it was a natural evolution at some point having done all facets of that, I've been in the dean's office one way or the other for 15 years now. It was just a very appealing concept to be able to take that to the next level especially in today's date, when things are changing so fast and where there are so many disruptions. It's just a very fun job to be having the ability to get people around what may be a common theme, to be able to make the progress in higher education. So it's for that impact it's that's why it is fun and that's why sometimes you do get bruised by having to work with many different opinions, but it is a lot of learning in that, and so that is what has drawn me to be dean.

Riddle:

Tell me a little bit about your research...

Mehrotra:

So my research, you know I got my PhD in operations research. I was originally you know, my Bachelor's was in engineering, but I ended up migrating towards operations research or management science because of some excellent professors that I had who just created that interest in that field. My research has primarily been in large scale optimization, so it has gone from not just optimizing in private sector, but also looking at applications in the public sector as well, and it has been quite very varied. So for example, I have worked in the technology firms to be able to make sure that they are optimized, for example, their supply chain is optimized or their production is optimized, and things of that kind, to very different concepts of looking at the the political congressional districts and trying to see how should we be actually forming congressional districts, and what would be in optimization, what optimization would lead to. And that has been the most fun thing, I remember writing a paper called “Taking the Politics Out of Districting,” which was desk rejected once by management science because saying there is no such thing as taking the politics out of this, out of restricting. So I, and now in DC, I completely realized that of course so we changed the title to “An Optimization Based Heuristic for Developing Congressional Districts” and it got accepted, so there you go. So but it has been in large scale optimization and analytics.

Riddle:

Well and you're not just a dean and a professor at the school of business, you're also a parent of a GW student as well, so in that sort of role in combining those sort of two experiences, walk us through if you had a prospective student and a prospective GW parent with you, where would you take them on campus and why?

Mehrotra:

Well that's an excellent question and I think I really am a proud parent of a GW student here. I'll tell you what because I have myself only spent 16 months here or so, and there are a lot of things which are appealing to me as well, so I'll share those and they have been kind of appealing to my daughter, and we have discovered the campus together, we have discovered the city together, to some degree right. So I think first of all it is, it's an amazing feeling to be in the heart of Foggy Bottom, so to speak right,. So if you start you know thinking about what is surrounding us, and from a business school perspective, obviously all the major institutions like the World Bank, and the IMF, and the IFC, they're amazing, right. For if you started thinking in terms of just being in the city, with you know, this city has so much history and so much going on, with the Capitol, the monument, the White House, the Mall, the museums, so all of that of course is just on the periphery of the university. So that's very attractive, but when you come in closer, and this is exactly how we were coming in, we were looking around because we were lost when we were driving, and we looked at all of these things, and then we ended up being on the campus, for example right, and it is a true urban campus without the overwhelming size of some of the other urban campuses in big cities. So this has got all the right ingredients, it has the campus feel, and on the periphery on one side you look at the Elliott School, you go into the City View Room and you're overlooking the Capitol for example, or you're walking down that street and you are now passing through all these you know institutions which are, which you only read about, or you look in the movies for example. Or you walk on K Street where I was living and right there there is the IFC, on the other hand. So as you zoom in closer at the end I really like our buildings, I mean if you start going in school by school, each one of them has some real interesting characteristics. So our own school for example, with a trade room right in front, with the finance investments lab right in front, that is very appealing to me, to come in and say that speaks of what the business school should be doing and that's an example of that, and I think not every school has that. What is also fun for me to be honest is I had never been in an urban campus, as we go through these buildings, I discover the basements and I discover all the restaurants for example, and that's fun because there are so many different cuisines which are available and ability to eat in various buildings that is part and parcel of an urban experience. But I will tell you what you know some of the things that I would always advise anybody who's doing a campus tour to go through now, one, two things. So I'll take two extremes of course. Food is very important, so now more recently we have this Potomac Square where there are these four food trucks which come through you know on a lunch and dinner, they rotate, and it's a six dollar meal for a student, and I'll tell you what I have had many of those six dollar meals because they are very appealing meals to me as well. And just last week for the first time I actually visited our new innovation center in 2000 Penn Avenue and that's a space to really look at and this is exactly what the University is good at and it's doing, and that innovations space where the students have the cold common area, as well as they have 100 rooms, three of which are GW rooms, just amazing. You just feel how the vibration there of what's going on, so that's a fun space to visit as well.

Riddle:

Well it's a fun place to learn, so now you're having a conversation still with this prospective student, and prospective parent, what are you going to tell them is distinctive about GWSB’s different programs whether it be undergraduate or graduate. What's distinctive about learning here?

Mehrotra:

So I think many things come to mind. Of course being surrounded by all the institutions I mentioned, like the World Bank etc., are extremely important because first of all in any, whether you're a graduate student or an undergraduate student, you are going to rub shoulders with all these dignitaries, all these fun people who are who you read about or you see on television on a regular basis here. So that part of learning, which is taking place outside the classroom, is just an element of being right in the center of where we are. So that's a great thing, in terms of curriculum and in terms of other things they have very innovative things that we are doing, which make it a very fun experience. So as an example, we talked about, we have talked about in the past, about our response to the shifting needs of the marketplace at the graduate level, where we have these stackable certificates that can help you earn a Master's degree. Now at this point, given the offerings that we have, we are the most flexible, most customizable and most accessible set of graduate programs portfolio anywhere in the country. We are really also trying to look, and if you look at the exponential side of what we are requiring of our students in terms of whether they are the consulting abroad projects, whether we are looking at the undergraduate level where we have shifting from a first-year development program to a four-year development program, really making sure that our student is set up for success, which is right outside, of course, of the state-of-the-art curriculum that our faculty, and we have some of the best world-class faculty, because of our location we are able to attract them here which they are do which they are of course teaching in the classroom, but it is the outside of the classroom, the co-curriculum things, the experiential learning opportunities, the international opportunities, that our students have. And being in a city which is where they are surrounded by being able to take advantage of all the institutions, as well as the cultural immersions, the diversity of the city itself. So for example, I don't know how many times I have just been blessed to be able to go for a free show in Kennedy Center. So these are some of the best performing artists from all over the world, having a free show every day at six o'clock in the evening. Now maybe one seat will be less because I have announced it here, but it's a great way to be doing that. Not only at the Kennedy Center, we don't have to go far, even in our own Lerner Center the number of events that student organizations and the number of people that they are inviting, and the shows that they are putting up, it's an amazing array, so this is full of life and that's what is what is appealing to me.

Riddle:

You've done a really great job reaching out to corporate partners, can you tell us a little bit about your strategy behind that, and why is it so important to have them present here in the business school?

Mehrotra:

So there are multiple reasons Liesl, why corporate partnership is very important for us. So I always think of, it's an easy one to think of in terms of, for example, if you're a medical school you must have a hospital to practice, I think for a business school you must have the entire community to really practice, but the corporate partnerships does a lot of good things for our school. It really first of all, aligns with the idea of putting student interests first because they are in a position to be able to inform us of what is happening in the forefront, in terms of what the curriculum needs are, what the co-curricular needs are, they help us shape our curriculum to keep making sure that we are changing our curriculum with the shifting demands of the marketplace, and we are kind of staying ahead of the curve. Then of course having those conversations with them, we are in a position through our corporate council also being able to take advantage of putting our faculty’s research and informing them of what we are doing, so it helps that connection and reduces that gap between academia and the corporate world, and that also leads to them being informed about what we are doing research-wise and also what our students are up to, so they are in a better position to start looking at our student interest by offering them internships or having more placement opportunities and opening doors, or providing just mentorship to our students. And in some cases of course it's our students you know, we can showcase to them on what they are up to, fun things that the community would like to learn from some of the very very good things our students are up to, and that gives us an opportunity to. It's the whole concept of combining all of these things, and then it helps us we as a university and as a school have the power to convene some of the best conferences for example, but we can't do them unless they also connect with the community, and the corporate partners can help us connect them with the community better. And not only in terms of informing what the conversation should be as seen from their lenses, but also being in a position to help get the right speakers and things of that kind so it's a very you know, a symbiotic relationship between the community and the corporate council and the school of business and that's what we are after there.

Riddle:

Well you've also really engaged the board of advisors too, I think in a new way, can you maybe talk a little bit about who are the board of advisors and what role do they play in the business school?

Mehrotra:

So the board of advisors of course is a set of very committed folks who are either alumni or parents or otherwise friends of the school, who have who really have given, who some of them have unfortunately, or fortunately for them, made it their day job, and they really are committed folks who give extremely good guidance, good advice, and it's the same kind of things where it is difficult on a regular basis to engage a set of people so busy and so successful, to be able to get that advice on a consistent basis. Because oftentimes administrators change, oftentimes staff changes, but this is the board which is able to inform and have that continuity, and have the best interest of the school at heart and inform them as well as advise them. So I have been very fortunate to have a very good set of board of advisors who have been a source for me to go to with questions, with advice, and in some ways they do some of the things that the corporate council does as well, but from a global perspective because they are coming from all over. The corporate council that we have built is more about the DMV area, but the board is actually more global, and they are in a position to be able to inform from a variety of different lenses as to what we are doing and help us achieve those things. And many of these board of advisor members are also connecting us with speakers for our George Talks Business Series for example, which is another way to connect with the community that we have launched for a year now, we have had a couple of semesters of that, that has gone on. But also to be able to overall help us raise the appropriate funding for certain things and certain initiatives that we aspire to do, and we must do to be able to continue to make progress. So they are again, an extremely important set of people for the school, a very important stakeholder for the school.

Riddle:

You've given us a really good overview, I think, of all the different stakeholders and how they sort of interact with the school, whether it be corporate community, partners, alumni, faculty, staff, students, parents as well. If you really were to look at GW as a whole, and think about your time here, this you know this is a podcast really about how all the different stakeholders see GW, and what really makes them proud to be part of this sort of multi-stakeholder community, what's that one moment that you really can say is your GWSB proudest moment?

Mehrotra:

Well Leisl you know me, my proudest moment will always be around students. I have been so impressed with some of our student organizations and students who have come into my office and talked about what they are up to. And very recently we had a group of three ladies who are in GW Women in Business organization, and they presented for, I gave them only three minutes to present their case of what their aspirations are. And what a fantastic job they did in front of our corporate council, and it has those moments, I don't want to single one out because there are many of these, including a lot of folks who have been launching companies and their pitches that we have heard and what they are doing is is amazing, but if you were to ask me what is my not GWSB but GW moment, I have to tell you, the most this is beyond belief, when we, when I was sitting on the Mall and our Commencement on the Mall, that was an impressive thing to see all our GW graduates on the Mall and us sitting on the deus there, and looking at that, that's that's difficult not to visualize over and over again. You can never forget a moment like that, so that has been, not necessarily my proudest, but certainly some one of my most memorable moments.

Riddle:

Well thank you so much Dean Mehrotra for joining us here in the studio for GWSB Proud.

Mehrotra:

Thank you Liesl, for having me.

[Music]

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.

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