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ALUMNI

Gabrielle Hibbert '17

INSIGHTS

BLOCKCHAIN IN BOSTON: COMBINING TECH AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

AN INTERVIEW WITH GABRIELLE HIBBERT
BY CLAIRE HOGAN

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, students are looking for advice on how to advance their careers in the changing job market. Look no further than Gabrielle Hibbert, whose winding career path took her in several unexpected directions. From her role as a research assistant at AidData, Gabrielle went on to work at Open Data Watch, an international nonprofit based in Washington, DC, before discovering a passion for blockchain technology. Now, Gabrielle is working on a master's degree in Sustainable International Development at Brandeis University, focusing on the use of blockchain technology for international development. Gabrielle called me from Boston, and I asked her about her career path, her time at William & Mary, and her advice for students interested in international development.

Where are you in your career right now?

I definitely want to preface this and say that I thought that my career path was going to be extremely linear and to follow in a very traditional manner. I graduated from college, I got an awesome job afterwards working for Open Data Watch, and I loved it there. But there were a couple of life-defining forks that took me to where I am today. After working at Open Data Watch, there was a point where our team sat together with our boss who said, "we love you guys, but this is the end of the contract" and for me, I didn't have that much real-world experience. I was kind of thrown into DC with not too much to grab a hold of. I had a great apartment, I thought I had a great job, and I had to kind of navigate my early 20s, which made me grow financially.

I basically did the whole thing where I had a bunch of unpaid internships on the Hill, and I worked in a couple of coffee shops. I remember during that time, I felt like I wasn't using my degree, because before that, working at Open Data Watch, I was extremely lucky and privileged that I was able to use my German and Russian degree in the public policy arena. After that, I hopped around, I worked at various nonprofits, and I had to ask myself what I wanted to do. I think having that pause and talking to myself about what I really wanted to do has helped me navigate where I want to go in my career. Right now, I'm in a graduate program completing a Master's in Sustainable International Development at Brandeis, with a focus on using blockchain technology for international development, and I love it. It's a great program. A lot of my cohort is international, and I've learned from my cohort, and they've learned from me. It's been an amazing, eye-opening experience.

How did you become interested in international development in the first place? What did you major in at William & Mary?

I come from a Naval and State Department family, so I basically have traveled the world. I knew going into William & Mary that I wanted to focus on languages. So I signed up to do a major in German and biology, at first. I hated biology, but I ended up sticking with German, and I actually added on Russian and Post-Soviet Studies. I ended up taking a lot of Soviet and post-Soviet foreign policy courses and German and Western European policy courses.

How did you learn about Blockchain?

There was one course I took: an online module focused on international development and blockchain. I thought, "oh, this is super interesting, I have no idea what blockchain is, let me take this course." I had promised myself, going into my master's program, that I would take a course to learn something new outside of what I knew. So I took the course, and that changed everything for me. I've really shifted my career from thinking about foreign policy to thinking about foreign policy implications within the new emerging tech fields. I feel like my career has been all over the place, and one thing that I definitely want graduating students to know, and current students even, is that your career path doesn't necessarily have to be linear. If you give yourself time to explore new avenues, you're going to

was given so much responsibility in what I was producing and what I could help out with. My project managers were amazing people to work with, and I felt like those three years at GRI have helped me immensely, not just in learning how to work with a team and learning how to basically code data and work with data. It has made me incredibly prepared for my grad program. I think going into my program, I was feeling a little bit of impostor syndrome, I wasn't sure if I would be ready to do grad school, but then, half a semester in, with all the stuff I learned at GRI, things clicked. I felt like I was leading class discussions, I had so many rich experiences from GRI that I brought to my classroom in Boston. I never would have thought I'd be that prepared. So working there has helped me both in my academic life and in my professional life.

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grow tremendously. It wasn't easy, but I honestly really love what I'm doing now. I never thought that I would be doing foreign policy work and tech in the same world. All the things I've learned in domestic and foreign policy have helped me immensely drafting policy briefs and memos about blockchain that I've given to people in the tech sphere. It's such an interesting skillset to have when you're working in tech, and in the beginning, I thought that those worlds were just separate, but now working in that space, they are very much complementary.

How did your time working at the Global Research Institute prepare you for the professional world?

Coming into college, I didn't really have that much work experience. But at GRI, I felt that I was actually taken seriously as a new, budding researcher, and I felt like I

Do you have any advice for current undergraduates who might be interested in international development or public policy?

My advice would definitely be to try out anything. I know that's very broad, but if a student thinks that they're good at languages, go and take a language class and see how you feel, because that has weight in the policy realm: they need foreign language speakers. Or if you are really into economics, then try that as well. Develop your skillset, and whatever your skillset is, it can take you extremely far if you cultivate and develop it. Additionally, I would say if a student is interested in public policy or foreign policy, I mean, no brainer. Try and apply to GRI.

After earning her master's degree, Gabrielle hopes to combine her international development skills with her passion for Blockchain technology.