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 **FROM CARBON CREDITS TO COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS: A DARDEN GLOBAL CLIENT PROJECT REFLECTION – HIGH ATLAS FOUNDATION, MOROCCO**

Natalie Merrick

From Carbon Credits to Community Partnerships: A Darden Global Client Project Reflection – High Atlas Foundation, Morocco

*The Global Client Project (GCP) course provides students with hands-on experience delivering business consulting services to international non-*

*governmental organizations and social enterprises. Over the course of the project, students apply core business frameworks to solve complex challenges while navigating the cultural, economic, and operational realities of global markets. By combining classroom learning, independent research, and in-country field experience, GCP bridges theory and practice in a meaningful way.*

*In this article, Darden Executive MBA (EMBA) Class of 2026 students Jake Perron, Mike Hurd, and Shafiq Rashid share a behind-the-scenes look at their experience working with the High Atlas Foundation in Morocco.*

## **Meet the Team**



*Jackson (“Jake”) Perron, Michael (“Mike”) Hurd, and Shafiq Rashid*

Jake, who holds a B.A. in Political Science and Classical Studies from Davidson College, is a strategy and operations professional at QinetiQ US, where he works across finance, supply chain, and program management to support complex, cross-functional initiatives. As a Darden EMBA student, Jake is focused on developing his strategic leadership skillset. Through the GCP engagement with the High Atlas Foundation, he explored how mission-driven organizations can better communicate and scale sustainability initiatives. He aims to build a

career in strategy-focused roles, with a long-term goal of executive leadership, helping organizations align operations with growth and impact.

Mike is a Data Scientist at Crimson Phoenix, where he supports federal clients. He holds a B.A. in Middle Eastern Studies (Persian) from the University of Utah and an M.S. in Business Analytics from Darden/McIntire. He continues to build on his technical and analytical expertise as a Darden EMBA student. As a U.S. Air Force veteran who served eight years as a Cryptologic Language Analyst, Mike brings a strong combination of technical depth and mission-oriented leadership. He is a certified PMP and Scrum Master with expertise in Python, SQL, machine learning, and executive-facing analytics.

Shafie is the Director of Validation Services at Quality Agents, a biotech consulting firm and Co-Founder at ezVal, a software startup building a paperless validation platform for the life sciences industry. He holds a B.Sc. in Biological Systems Engineering from Virginia Tech. While at Darden as an EMBA candidate, he serves as the Vice President of the Executive Student Association (ESA) and is involved in the Tech Club (and Foodie Group). With over 10 years of experience in compliance operations and stakeholder engagement, he brings a practitioner's perspective to strategy and client management and a long-term focus on scaling ezVal and pursuing operations leadership within professional services.

### **The Starting Point**

All three of us were drawn to the international nonprofit angle and the opportunity to work on a real strategic question facing a mission-driven organization. We had heard strong things about prior GCP projects, and when we saw the High Atlas Foundation listing, it stood out. HAF is a Moroccan nonprofit that has planted over five million trees, operates 15 nurseries, and supports farming communities across 50+ provinces through reforestation, women's empowerment, and water infrastructure.

The timing was fortuitous. We were already planning to visit Morocco as part of Darden's October 2025 Global Residency, which gave us the opportunity to meet the HAF team in person before the project officially kicked off in November. The early exposure allowed us to see HAF's operations, meet the team, and gain a better feel for the country before the desktop research phase even began, further strengthening our excitement to work with HAF on this project.

The project brief asked us to help HAF expand its carbon credit program to U.S. and EU universities. We were to: identify target institutions, analyze demand drivers, build a pricing framework, and develop marketing materials. The mission and scope excited us.

### **From Case Method to Client Reality**

Darden's case method gave us a strong analytical foundation for structuring problems, pressure-testing assumptions, and building recommendations under constraints. GCP

stretched those skills into less predictable territory, where the scope continued to shift, and stakeholders had their own constraints shaping what was feasible.

The project continually evolved as we incorporated inputs from multiple sources: background research on the voluntary carbon market, HAF's own financial and operational data, and conversations across UVA. We spoke with Ethan Heil and Erika Herz at UVA's Sustainability Office, who gave us the institutional perspective on how universities are rethinking offsets. We also spoke with Julian Carta at UVA's International Studies Office, who administers the existing HAF contract and gave us the operational view of how pricing was set, how emissions are tracked, and how invoicing works.

Together, these conversations showed us that universities are increasingly cautious about offsets and looking for more direct, measurable environmental and social impact. UVA no longer counts tree-based offsets toward its institutional carbon goals, instead framing its HAF relationship around co-benefits and flight emission mitigation. That alone didn't change our trajectory, but it led us to highlight the non-credit stewardship offering alongside the carbon pathway in our prep materials for the January workshop. It was one of several inputs that helped us refine our approach before heading to Marrakech.

Where it truly felt like consulting was during our J-Term visit and the work that followed. We presented interim findings to HAF's leadership, adapted in real time when the workshop schedule shifted, and returned to the U.S. to synthesize everything into updated deliverables. That cycle of research, stakeholder engagement, feedback, and iteration was a real consulting engagement, more condensed than typical, but equally rigorous.

### **How the Work Evolved**

The strategy gradually took shape, informed by insights gathered at each phase. During our January workshop in Marrakech, several threads came together. On Day 1, we sat down with HAF's CFO and senior leadership and learned that the carbon credit commercialization was further out than the project brief had suggested. HAF was pursuing multiple certification pathways but had not yet sold verified credits. Commercialization was still a future milestone. At the same time, HAF was navigating the loss of USAID funding, making revenue diversification more urgent.

That conversation crystallized understanding on both sides. It was a shared realization, perhaps a bigger shift than we initially expected, but it was built upon work we'd already done, testing our assumptions throughout Q8. The question shifted from "how do we help sell credits?" to "how do we help HAF clarify how it can partner with educational institutions that care about sustainability, stewardship, and experiential learning, even when offsets aren't the primary focus?"

Our workshop plan didn't survive contact with reality, either. Day 1 went as planned, but Days 2 and 3 were replaced with field visits instead of the presentations we had prepared. We

adapted, used the field time to gather firsthand insights, and later held a working session with key HAF staff at the office. It was a good reminder that plans are simply starting points.

We had initially developed a dual-path strategy: Path A targeting EU offset buyers and select U.S. institutions and Path B focusing on U.S. impact partnerships. After the workshop, based on stakeholder input and our analysis, the strategy evolved further. At that point, we moved fully toward the mitigation and stewardship route, where the most immediate opportunity for HAF existed.

## **The Global Context**

The January onsite visit gave us something desktop research couldn't. We spent time with HAF's CEO, Yossef Ben-Meir; CFO, Taoufik Alioui; program manager, Mariam Ait Hafid; communications manager, Kaitlyn Waring; and broader operational staff. We visited nursery sites, met with cooperative members in their communities, and saw the Rising Roots youth leadership program, an 18-month cohort for young Moroccans ages 18–35 that combines reforestation, social entrepreneurship, and leadership training.

What struck us most was the scale and ease of HAF's global reach. Partners and volunteers span continents, and nearly everyone we met spoke three or more languages. The diversity of exposure in a single week was remarkable.

What makes HAF distinctive in Morocco is its community-led work. Rural Morocco faces real structural challenges: 75% of rural households earn below the national average and less than 2% of the country has tree cover. HAF's approach centers on infrastructure built and managed by the communities themselves: nurseries, irrigation systems, and cooperatives. The women's cooperatives producing saffron, cactus oil, and textiles are economic engines. Seeing the work firsthand helped us better understand operational realities, identify meaningful impact metrics, and spot opportunities for student engagement rooted in real community needs.

One surprise was how much more detailed and internationally connected HAF's operations were than they appeared during Q8, when our primary interaction was with the CEO, Yossef Ben-Meir. Being on the ground and engaging with the broader team revealed an organization of much wider scope than our remote research had suggested. It reinforced the key lesson we kept coming back to: get on the ground as early as you can.

## **Team Dynamics and Leadership**

Natural roles emerged quickly. Mike, with his data science background, became our research engine, identifying high-quality datasets on university sustainability commitments, digging into carbon market landscape, and refining analytical approaches to ensure materials were ready for HAF review at every milestone. Jake led the financial deep dives, analyzing HAF's data and building projections at each stage. Shafiq set the overall direction of the project, conducting deep background research to establish context, identifying next

steps, coordinating interviews with UVA sustainability stakeholders, preparing materials, and maximizing our time in Morocco as the schedule shifted.

There were no real disagreements. Everyone could see the others putting in the work, which built trust and kept collaboration strong throughout. We settled into a steady rhythm, meeting weekly on Monday evenings to review progress and prepare for our biweekly Wednesday check-ins with HAF. That dynamic carried into a great week in Marrakech, where we spent time working, traveling, exploring the city, and reconnecting with our local guide from the October Global Residency.

### **Looking Back and Carrying It Forward**

The most meaningful takeaway: good strategy work sometimes means delivering something different from what the client initially asked for, and doing it constructively, with evidence, in a way that ends up being more useful. HAF came to us seeking help selling carbon credits. We delivered a strategy to position their entire value proposition to universities that care about sustainability but are moving beyond traditional offsets.

Being able to provide them with something immediately actionable while building a framework for long-term growth made the work feel genuinely meaningful and worthwhile.

We delivered six comprehensive decks covering partnership strategy, outbound marketing, student visitor materials, cold outreach, target market analysis, and pricing. We also built a mock university landing page, a carbon footprint pricing calculator, and a filtered list of universities primed for HAF outreach based on our institutional commitments and sustainability goals.

Our aim was to leave HAF with a scalable framework that supports long-term partnerships while staying true to its community-first mission. The deliverables were the output, but the real value came from the thinking behind them: the research, the honest conversations, and the willingness to challenge our own assumptions along the way.

**Our advice for future GCP students:** put in the hard work. Do the research. Get on the ground as early as you can. Surface your assumptions and challenge the client's goals, respectfully, but directly. The experience will stretch you in ways you won't expect.





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