McCormick: Todd, why were you interested in helping to create NUvention: Web?

Warren: I had the opportunity to teach at McCormick while on a leave from Microsoft in 2001, and when I left Microsoft in 2009 I came back and taught a software engineering course. Dean Julio M. Ottino connected me with Mike Marasco, and he described what he had done around NUvention: Medical Innovation—combining students from different disciplines and looking at entrepreneurship holistically. That really excited me. In my career I have gone back and forth between the technical side and the business side, and one of the things I thought Northwestern could do well was look at the multidisciplinary approach that goes into making a software product and give students the experience to learn project management techniques and methods and collaborate with business students.

McCormick: Bob, how did you become involved?

Plaschke: I met Mike Marasco at a dinner four or five years ago out here in California, and we were talking about ways that I could contribute to the University. I said I'd love to be able to help more folks to come out here and get in California, and we were talking about ways that I could contribute to the

McCormick: What do you think makes NUvention so successful?

Warren: We have this amazing ingredient that is the Northwestern students. We also push students to work together and to have something tangible at the end of the course. That gives students the experience of failing forward but also the opportunity to see they can have impact beyond what they thought they could at the beginning of the course.

Plaschke: I think the combination of Todd and Mike as leaders and as facilitators is what makes the course unique. I’ve seen these kinds of efforts elsewhere, and they are successful, but they don’t have the same passion and enthusiasm that Mike and Todd provide. And Todd’s particular background adds both credibility and realism.

McCormick: You’ve both had successful careers in computer and mobile technology. Why take the time to help teach the course and coach students?

Warren: I think there’s an opportunity to see what’s happening in the market through the students’ eyes. That benefits me. Seeing how students look at markets and how they behave gives me a window on coming web trends. Plus, there is great satisfaction in helping students explore more deeply and become much better prepared for whatever they do—start a company, go to graduate school, or go into a medium- or large-sized company.

Plaschke: My wife and I both attended Northwestern, but living in California we can’t as easily get back, so it was a way to stay connected and give back. It’s grown to be much more. I’ve learned a hell of a lot from the students. They are far more connected to trends than I am. I look forward to it as a two-day tune-up and training course on current trends on the Internet.

What has been unexpected is my ability to retain, attract, and pull in really bright students. This has been, from my company’s perspective, the biggest success. We now have four interns from Northwestern over the summer. We had two interns last summer. We have two full-time Northwestern students. All of these folks have been affiliated with NUvention: Web. It’s been a fantastic source of human capital for us. Each of our employees has demonstrated their capabilities in front of me and has been recommended by faculty. It’s my little secret.

McCormick: What have been some of your defining moments in teaching and coaching in this course?

Warren: For me, an unexpected thing was recruiting the advisory board. I thought it would be great to have some alums from industry give feedback to our students at the end of each quarter. That group has really become an important source of advice for the class and a good set of industry contacts for me. Getting to know other alumni I didn’t know and understanding how successful many of our alumni have been in high tech—that’s been a great moment.

The second thing has been seeing how students change and grow during the course. Take Groovebug, for example. At the end of the first quarter the advisory board didn’t like their concept very much. The day after they met
with the board, the team really wanted to meet with me to figure out how to regroup and work better. Seeing how the teams respond so resiliently—that’s been a defining moment.

The unexpected thing is having alums come back after a year and seeing how students hang on every word of someone like Nikhil Sethi (electrical engineering ’10), who is having success with his startup. That’s been an amazing experience.

Plaschke: I think the defining moment for me was seeing the Groovebug group come back at the end of the sequence. I don’t think any of us had any sense of how they would take our feedback and what would pop out. I remember sitting and looking at my fellow advisers. We said, “Wow, not only is this presentation incredibly well done, this is a real company.” It’s a real company created in an academic course. You typically don’t see such high quality. And suddenly people were saying, “I’ll actually fund that.” They’ve really cracked the code on that.

McCormick: What does the future hold for NUvention: Web?

Warren: We’re going into our third year. We will continue to recruit a great set of students. The demand for the class doubled from the first to second year, and it will be a high-demand course again this year. Mike has done a great job of thinking through all the things we can do to extend what’s happening in the course.

I think NUvention alumni will continue to play a larger and larger role in the evolution of the course. What I’d like to think is, in 10 years there will be a set of NUvention: Web alumni who get together and will be some of the titans of the Internet business at that point. Just like how there is a purple mafia in Los Angeles [in the entertainment industry], there will be a purple mafia in Silicon Valley and in Chicago that are driving the industry forward.

Plaschke: I think this is only going to build on itself. I think the quality will continue to improve because better and better students will apply, and Mike and Todd will be able to put together even more compelling teams. At some point the secret will have gotten out, and there will be more venture capitalists from Silicon Valley showing up.

This experience is authentic. For me, having to deal with everyone out here, it’s very nice to have some authentic, hardworking students who actually want to learn. I hope that as the course becomes more successful it doesn’t lose its Midwestern orientation.

Plaschke: When I was at Northwestern, you got your degree, you found a place to go that would then give you the skills to apply what you had learned, and you would expect that process would be three to five years. After that, you could go off and do what you wanted to do. And therefore, all my course work was incredibly theoretical. And for good reason: that was the way it worked.

What’s breathtaking is the pace in this course. Not only is there some good theory laid down, but students immediately get to apply it. It’s just like a startup. It’s a wonderful laboratory. This program is wonderful for all of the classic skills around building a company and thinking through value propositions and what customers want and shaping the product and failing and rethinking it, but an equal number of lessons are learned on the interpersonal side—what it means to work on a team and make the team work.

Warren: As teachers, we sell a course on software entrepreneurship, but a lot of what the students get is learning about collaboration across disciplines. I think it gives them quite an advantage to have had that experience in a safe, academic setting.