BusinessWeek recognizes McCormick programs as world-class

Every week Luke Nogales ends his work week like this:

He leaves his job as a researcher for Procter and Gamble in Cincinnati, drives five hours to a friend’s house in Joliet, Illinois, does some last-minute reading before going to sleep, wakes up early to drive to Evanston, spends the day in classes in McCormick’s Master of Product Design and Development (MPD) Program, meets with a group of team members, and finally makes the five-hour drive back home.

It’s a demanding way to spend his weekend, but Nogales is not complaining. “The program is energizing,” he says. “I really enjoy it. It motivates me to make that long drive.”

Nogales is not alone in his cross-state pursuit of professional education. Many of the midcareer students who make up the Master of Product Design and Development Program fly or drive from far-flung locales — including California, Texas and Tennessee — to get what Northwestern offers: a specialized MS program that provides an education in product design and development.

While product development may seem like a highly specialized niche, people — and businesses — tuned into the increasingly influential world of design are paying attention. The MPD Program, along with Northwestern’s MMM Program, was named one of the 30 best design programs in the world by BusinessWeek magazine. Northwestern was the only university to have two programs listed.

“Industry is still learning what a product design and development program really is,” says Rich Lueptow, one of the codirectors of the MPD Program. (Greg Holderfield, a highly respected designer, joined the program as the other codirector early this year.) “The field has been active for a number of years, but many businesses are just beginning to understand that there is value in design.”

The MPD Program began more than eight years ago in response to industry’s demand for a program that trained managers in product design and development. At that time an MBA was the only available business degree, and when it came to product design, MBA programs just weren’t cutting it: Walter Herbst, clinical professor of mechanical engineering and director of the MPD Program, knew firsthand of the mismatch between product designers and traditional business school programs. Years earlier he had sent two of the top engineers at Herbst Lazar Bell, his design firm, to an MBA program — only to lose them to another industry. “They both went into banking,” he said. “It was a horrible wake-up call.”

McCormick designed the MPD Program specifically for midcareer product developers, fashioning a curriculum that balances business-oriented courses like management, finance, and marketing with engineering-oriented courses including design, statistics, and innovation. Each course was created specifically for MPD students. “On the surface we might look like other programs, but we’re not,” Herbst says. “In other programs students have to find courses — in the engineering school, the business school, the fine arts school — to customize their degree. Here, every course is specific to the program.”

The MPD Program admits 38 students a year and offers classes on alternate Fridays and Saturdays. Since students are at their jobs one fewer day than usual over two weeks, the program requires a commitment from both students and the companies they work for. The curriculum consists of 23 five-week courses taught by both Northwestern faculty and practicing design professionals that give students range and depth in everything from materials selection to accounting. “We don’t get students who are just in it because they want another degree,” Lueptow says. “They love product development, and their employers want them to be more productive.”

For Nogales the program provides a way to learn the business side of industry without overlooking its design aspect. “I initially wanted to do an MBA,” he says, “but there wasn’t a program that focused on creating products.” This program is a great balance of engineering and business, and it emphasizes the process of creating products. It helps me see the big picture, how the whole system works.”

MPD students range from medical doctors to jewelry designers, all with years of technical and business experience. Faculty and the program board tweak courses and subjects to keep up with real-world demand. “The business world is getting flatter,” Herbst says. “Whether you are talking about a company in Milwaukee or a company in Beijing, the main question is, How do you compete? We think we’re the answer.”

“MMM Program: from manufacturing to design” The MMM Program began as a partnership between the Kellogg School of Management and McCormick more than two decades ago.
“Design thinking means that you don’t mean designing a product; it could be designations. In this case, design doesn’t necessarily feature a full-year, three-quarter course.”

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