Last September the Northwestern Alumni Association honored 18 accomplished graduates at the 77th annual Northwestern Alumni Association Alumni Awards. Among those honored were three McCormick alumni: DAVID ECKERT (’77) and AVA YOUNGBLOOD (’79) both received Alumni Service Awards, given in recognition of loyal service voluntarily rendered to the University; and DANIEL LIPINSKI (’88) received the Merit Award, which recognizes those who have distinguished themselves in their particular professions or fields of endeavor.
David Eckert arrived at Northwestern as a freshman in 1973 ready to study engineering – but not ready to become an engineer. “I always thought I would go into business, and I thought engineering would help discipline my thinking and teach me how to analyze and understand the challenges I would face in my career,” he says.

Eckert’s two older brothers paved the way for him (both had received materials science and engineering degrees from Northwestern in the early 1970s), and Eckert knew that “Northwestern was, far and away, the best school anywhere close to where I was in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.”

Four years later Eckert would leave Northwestern with degrees in mechanical engineering and economics.

Now, more than 30 years later, Eckert can safely say that the skills he gained at McCormick did help him along the way. His successful career in improving performance and value in businesses ranging from manufacturing to waste management has garnered him a reputation as a CEO whom people instinctively figure out how to create value, and “get it done.”

“The analytical part of it draws heavily on an engineer’s approach,” he says. “In a business situation, that type of thinking is far more disciplined and effective than the approach nongeeks take. Compared with those nongeeks, you are much better at understanding finance or marketing or how a business works is pretty simple.”

In between business ventures Eckert found himself looking for a way to give back to Northwestern. “You get to a point where you have the perspective to see how important your Northwestern education has turned out to be,” he says. “You have a desire to give back and get a little closer to the University.”

Eckert is chair of the McCormick Advisory Board and has served in many different alumni roles: acting as a member of the Northwestern Alumni Reunion Committee, the board of the NU Club of Boston, and the Leadership Circle Regional Council. “They all build on each other,” he says. “I think of feel like family.” Indeed, Eckert has passed the Northwestern tradition down to his own family. Both of his sons are Northwestern alumni.

Eckert recently took a new position as CEO of Safety-Kleen, a leading North American used-oil recycling and re-refining, parts cleaning, and environmental solutions company. He says he’s still committed to serving the Northwestern community. “There’s no downside to serving,” he says. “It’s fun, and it’s meaningful. You get to meet a lot of good people, have good times, and form lifelong friendships that you wouldn’t get any other way.”

Ava Youngblood always had a talent for math and science when she was growing up in Chicago. But she wasn’t set on engineering until she participated in the National High School Institute Chernus program, in which she spent five weeks one summer taking engineering classes in Tech. “From that experience I chose Northwestern,” she says, “and I never looked back.”

Youngblood (shown above with McCormick Dean Julio M. Ottino and his wife, Alicia Loffler) studied chemical engineering, but when she helped create the Northwestern chapter of the National Society of Black Engineers, she realized her fort was in running organizations. “I liked the idea of developing and running organizations, and I loved solving problems,” she says. Though she started out in a technical position, she quickly moved into business operations at Amoco.

“Engineering is one of the best disciplines that a person can engage in if they are going to be involved in solving problems,” she says. “It allows you to take concepts and ideas and apply them. You don’t just learn the information, you see how it works. That’s real learning.”

After spending 19 years at Amoco, Youngblood became a senior vice president with the executive search firm Deborah Snow Walsh. In 2002 she broke out on her own and started Youngblood Executive Search. “I use my ability to solve problems every day,” she says. “Finding the best talent to fill a particular position requires that you analyze the opportunity, identify people who can meet the requirements, and go about recruiting them. It’s a very processed way of thinking.”

Nearly 20 years ago then-dean Jerry Cohen invited several black alumni, including Youngblood, to analyze the school’s high rate of attrition for black students. After talking to faculty, administrators, and students, Youngblood and her fellow alumni made recommendations. Consequently, about five years later, McCormick was recognized as one of the top schools in the United States for graduating black engineers.

“That experience showed me how alums could have an impact on the University,” she says. “Northwestern played a very critical role in my life. The faculty and administrators in Tech took an interest in me and made sure I could be successful. It was a very positive experience, and I realized I could help give back.”

Since then Youngblood has remained active in alumni endeavors. She has been president of the Northwestern Alumni Association, a member of the Chemical and Biological Engineering Advisory Council, a member of the Women’s Board, and a University trustee. Most recently she was on the search committee for the new University president, and she continues to serve on the McCormick Advisory Council.

“It has been great,” she says. “To those whom much is given, much is required. It’s allowed me to give back, and it has allowed me to be a part of how Northwestern changes and grows. It’s exciting to stay close and see what’s happening.”

Daniel Lipinski has many memories from his time as a mechanical engineering undergraduate in the 1980s: long evenings in the sub-basement of Tech, camaraderie with fellow students, and a teacher so memorable — Analytical Dynamics instructor John Walker — that Lipinski and his friends named their intramural floor hockey team after him: the Johnny Walker Fan Club (which, they assured everyone, had no relation to the whiskey). More than 20 years later, Lipinski, now a congress-man for the third district of Illinois, can reflect on how his engineering degree has helped him over the years.

“My education at McCormick proved to be very valuable in that I was well trained in logical thinking and analysis,” he says. “I try to gather as much reliable information as possible and work through various solutions. But I understand that legislating is not just a science; it is also the art of figuring out what is possible and how to make it happen.”

Lipinski (shown above with his wife, Judy) never practiced as a traditional engineer. After graduating from Northwestern he went on to get his master’s in engineering economics from Stanford University before getting a PhD in political science from Duke University. As an assistant professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame and the University of Tennessee from 2001 to 2004, he found his engineering background prepared him for the numerical analysis and problem solving required in his research.

As a member of Congress, Lipinski uses his science background (something very few members of Congress can claim) to bring a new approach to two of the committees on which he serves: Transportation and Infrastructure and Science and Technology. Lipinski says his engineering degree helps him bring a logical approach to studying issues and examining the effects of legislation.

On the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, where Lipinski has been working for more than a year to pass a six-year, $500 billion surface transportation bill, he is able to “understand what goes into building roads, bridges, runways, locks, and dams and the technology involved in air, land, and water transport.” At a time when the nation’s infrastructure needs major funding for overdue work (more than $2 trillion by some estimates), Lipinski says the innovation of engineers is necessary.

“Our ability to succeed as a nation depends on our ability to ensure the fast, safe, and efficient transportation of people and goods,” he says. “That is why it is essential that engineers continue to strive to make breakthroughs in developing new innovative technologies and solutions to address the challenges and deficiencies we face in our transportation systems.”

As chair of the Science and Technology Committee’s subcommittee on research and science education, Lipinski draws on his firsthand experience of science education in crafting bills such as the America Competes Act and initiatives that improve collaboration between universities and the federal government.

“We desperately need new engineers to take the places that will be left as a generation of highly skilled and experienced aerospace, electrical, automotive, and mechanical engineers leaves our economy,” he says. “America must continue to lead the world in the basic scientific research required to spur innovation and new economic growth. But we need more than new ideas. We need to turn our discoveries into new products, processes, and jobs.”

Lipinski still finds time to stay in touch with Northwestern. He keeps up with McCormick’s latest nanotechnology research and participates each year in the William O. Lipinski Transportation Symposium (named for his father, a former Illinois congressman; see page 3 for more on this year’s symposium).

“I also make sure that I attend at least one football game and usually one basketball game a year,” he says. “I am a die-hard Wildcat fan and wish I could be there more often, but I also watch and listen to as many games as I can.”

—Emily Ayshford