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# Inspired to Give Back

ERNST & YOUNG'S **DAVID NICHOLS** USES HIS EXPERIENCE AT NORTHWESTERN AND CONSIDERABLE PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS TO OPEN UP OPPORTUNITIES FOR OTHERS.



Looking back, David Nichols ('91, KSM '00) can pinpoint the exact moment that changed the trajectory of his life—the last-minute decision to attend a session with two Northwestern alumni speaking to high school students in his hometown of St. Louis.

The compelling and authentic way they discussed their experiences impressed Nichols. He liked what he heard about Northwestern's interdisciplinary approach and how the University excelled on many fronts. By the time they finished speaking, Nichols knew Northwestern was the only school for him.

He spoke with the alumni afterward, and they told him applications were due at the end of the week. They offered to interview him the next morning if he was serious about applying. That night, he rushed to fill out his application by hand. He met them the next day, and the rest is history.

Now a senior principal at Ernst & Young Consulting Services (EY), Nichols traces his successful career to that life-changing interaction with two Northwestern graduates. "I hope my involvement helps students down the road," Nichols says of his engagement since 2007 as a member of the McCormick Advisory Council. "If I share my experience, and it helps them on their journey, or if I can make their experience better, that's my way of giving back."

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## Enduring impact

When Nichols arrived on campus to study electrical engineering and computer science, he was awed by how talented and smart the students were. He met people from all over the world, including his roommate, Emile Kfourri ('91), who had come from Lebanon and became a lifelong friend.

Another who made a lasting impression on Nichols was Janet Rutledge, one of the first Black female engineering professors

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at Northwestern. Nichols was interested in Rutledge’s research on signal processing using neural networks and worked with her on an independent study project.

“She was the most pivotal professor I had at Northwestern,” he says. “The outstanding impact that she had on me gave me confidence personally and professionally.”

He credits Northwestern with teaching him to be analytical while encouraging him to develop other parts of his brain. “We weren’t just engineers—we were thinkers,” he says. “That’s one of the unique aspects of Northwestern. It showed us we could do anything with our degrees.”

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## Developing expertise

After graduating, Nichols joined Andersen Consulting, now Accenture, because it allowed him to build business acumen while leveraging his technical experience. Within 10 years, he became a partner and continued to develop his skills through the Kellogg School of Management’s advanced business management program. He became global managing partner of the firm’s service-oriented architecture practice and grew its revenue from \$62 million in 2004 to \$1.7 billion in 2007.

Nichols loved the fast pace, variety, and collaborative culture of professional services, but after 18 years, he wanted a new challenge. Beginning in 2009, he served as president and COO of PPM Global Corporation, where he worked in the world of leveraged buyouts, until he sold his interest in the company.

In 2011, Nichols returned to professional services when EY asked him to be their Americas technology and digital transformation leader. He used his computer science and digital expertise to help senior executive clients bridge the gap between business and technology. He went on to serve as EY’s inorganic growth leader, where he was responsible for acquisitions as well as innovation and alliances.

Each successive position helped prepare Nichols for his role today as senior principal, where he leads EY’s services team for major clients and steers growth opportunities through innovation with key external companies.

Driving digital transformation and creating an innovation culture are his areas of expertise. “It’s a fantastic role because you’re having strategic discussions with some of the most senior business executives about how to grow and optimize their businesses,” he says.

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## Channeling gratitude

Throughout his career, Nichols has relied on lessons he learned as an engineering student. “Northwestern has a culture of teaching people how to think to solve problems,” he says. “There have been many times when the path was unclear, and I had to figure it out myself. Drawing on my Northwestern experience allowed me to succeed.”

Nichols uses his success to help others by serving on Chicago-area nonprofit boards and working to increase diversity and inclusion at EY and in the broader community. He channels his gratitude for his good fortune into giving back.

“The professional opportunities I’ve had are beyond what I ever thought possible,” he says. “Those pivotal moments that changed the trajectory of my life were all personal interactions that I had with people because they made themselves available. I hope I can do that for someone else.”

SARA LANGEN