ELEVATING ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION

Hayes Ferguson sets sights on the future with a new vision for the Farley Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation.
As a journalist in Mexico in the 1990s, Hayes Ferguson learned to translate while covering events like the Zapatista uprising in the southern part of the country. She used her Spanish skills to interview sources, and driven to share what she’d discovered, would then translate the sometimes-complex content from those interviews into stories for the American news media.

That desire to inform has followed her throughout her career, from journalist to executive to entrepreneur-in-residence. Now, it drives her latest commitment: director of Northwestern Engineering’s Farley Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation.

“I’m at a point in my career where I can impart what I’ve learned to students,” Ferguson says. “We live in a time where innovation and entrepreneurship are more important than ever, and Northwestern has extraordinarily talented, driven, bright students who have good ideas. We want to arm those students with life-long entrepreneurial skills that can serve them in myriad ways.”

Translating diverse skills into a rewarding career

After five years as a foreign correspondent for The Times-Picayune and the Newhouse News Service, Ferguson returned to the United States in 1999, at the dawn of the dot-com era. She was awarded a one-year fellowship at the University of Michigan, where she studied a range of topics, from law to coding. She then moved to Chicago, connected with the city’s startup scene, and ultimately met the founder of what would become Legacy.com, a global network of online obituaries.

“A lot of people thought putting obituaries online was weird, but with my background in newspapers and interest in storytelling, I thought it was something important,” she says. She joined the company’s founding management team and spent 15 years there before it was sold to a private equity firm.

During that time, she taught a few courses at the Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications and realized she loved teaching. After her stint at Legacy.com, she became an entrepreneur-in-residence at The Garage at Northwestern, where she mentored student teams and built programs like Propel, which provides networking, mentorship, and immersive learning experiences for female students.

Through the program, Ferguson mentored students like Ana Cornell (‘22), who is building a business around an at-home DNA testing kit. “I count myself lucky to have met Hayes Ferguson when I did,” Cornell says. “Her advice and expertise are invaluable to young entrepreneurs, and I credit the high degree of success I’ve had with my startup to her mentoring, advising, and connecting.”

The right fit at Farley

With Ferguson’s position at Farley, she stays within Northwestern’s entrepreneurship ecosystem while taking on more opportunities to guide curriculum. Though she says students often have a far better grasp of recent technological innovations than she does, Ferguson knows successful businesses require more than good ideas: they require business plans, funding, and perhaps most importantly, a good team.

That’s why she is excited about Farley’s innovative, team-focused, cross-disciplinary curriculum that pulls together both graduate and undergraduate students and its connections with other Northwestern schools. For example, a course called Consulting for Wearable Tech brings together student teams to work with companies spun out of the Querrey Simpson Institute for Bioelectronics. John Rogers, Louis Simpson and Kimberly Querrey Professor of Materials Science and Engineering, Biomedical Engineering, and Neurological Surgery and a bioelectronics pioneer, leads the class.

NUvention, the center’s flagship suite of courses, puts together diverse teams to learn the entire startup company process, from idea to execution. The courses cross several domains, including analytics, medicine, and energy. As the director, Ferguson is part of the team teaching NUvention: Web + Media, and she has plans to expand course offerings in the future.

“Farley has such a solid foundation, but I see it as my responsibility to take the center to the next level,” she says. “I’d really like to continue to ramp up our collaborations with partners within Northwestern and beyond our campus. My vision is that Farley will be the premier academic center for entrepreneurship and innovation, recognized across campus and beyond for our contributions.”

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