DU Alumnus Appointed Tech CEO
by Kristin Kemp

Forty-one million people across the globe use Symplicity, a web-based employability platform that helps schools, nonprofits and businesses manage their career services activities. Matthew Small (BA '95, political science) intends to raise that figure even higher. With more than 20 years of law and technology experience in the higher education sector, Small recently became Symplicity’s President and CEO.

Ever since he was an undergraduate student at DU, Small has found success by being nimble and open to risk. As a freshman he simply knew he was interested in foreign politics, so he followed his passion: he eagerly worked on research assignments as a political science major, landed a gubernatorial campaign internship and studied abroad in Israel. When he visited campus last spring to meet with current students, he said that those experiences proved pivotal for his corporate and international legal work.

“It was 2002. Bottom of the tech bubble, not a single IPO. And I was newly engaged. But my fiancée and I decided to jump off the cliff and go for it,” said Small of his decision to leave his technology law practice to become in-house counsel of a then small education technology company: Blackboard.

Two years later Small was overseeing Blackboard’s 2004 public offering, valued at $400 million and seven years later Blackboard’s sale valued at $1.7 billion. Today, 75% of US colleges and universities and more than half of K–12 districts use Blackboard. Small went on to relocate to London as President of Blackboard International, and he’s been a leader in the ‘EdTech’ sector ever since.

Beginning his career as a technology lawyer, Small was in private practice at the law firm of Testa, Hurwitz & Thibeault LLP. He negotiated a broad range of technology company transactions, including public and private mergers and acquisitions, equity and debt financings and public offerings.

When he left private practice to go in-house at Blackboard, he quickly moved up in the company and the company grew just as quickly. As head of Blackboard International, he and his family had the opportunity to move to London. But it wasn’t his first experience living abroad.

“Studying abroad in Israel while at DU changed my approach to international relationships in business for the rest of my career,” he said. “I highly recommend to all students today that they study abroad. It was a pivotal experience for my whole life.”

In addition to overseeing Blackboard International, Small previously had numerous responsibilities at Blackboard including operations, marketing, HR, legal, business and corporate development, publisher relationships, mergers and acquisitions. He led several major
company transactions, notably Blackboard’s initial public offering in 2004 and sale in 2011, in addition to leading 30 EdTech acquisitions while at Blackboard. In fact, in 2008 he was named one of Inside Counsel Magazine’s top 10 MVP GC’s in the US. Plus, he made the regional list of “Top 40 Lawyers under 40” by Washingtonian Magazine (2006) and Top 40 Graduates of the University of Connecticut (2008).

It was his deep understanding of the EdTech market and his early work with technology law that led him to take the leadership position at Symplicity. “I am very excited to connect students with employers, bridge the skills gap and address the employment strategies of universities, agencies and employers,” said Small of becoming CEO.

Though his entrée into the EdTech was via law, as an undergraduate student Small wasn’t initially sure he wanted to enter the practice. In fact, he was drawn to DU because it offered a breadth of academic programs, encouraged academic exploration and—of course!— because it is located near the Rocky Mountains. After he obtained his bachelor’s degree from DU, he enrolled in a unique 4-year JD/MBA program at University of Connecticut where he earned both law and business credentials.

Twenty-one years later, Small returned to campus in the spring of 2016 to spend a day guest lecturing in political science and business courses. He was presented with the University’s “Master Scholar” award, granted to successful alumni who return to campus to share their wisdom with today’s students. His mother, Barbara Small (DU ’67), joined him on campus.

“The nice thing about a political science degree, similar to English or history, is that I did a lot of research and persuasive writing,” said Small. “Those skills I learned as an undergraduate were very helpful in law school, business school and in real-world business. Even more than I thought they would at the time.”

[Photo: Small is presented a Master Scholar Award while on campus in April]