



# Nurturing New Ventures

TECHNOLOGY ENTREPRENEUR **DENNIS YANG** USES HIS EXPERIENCE TO HELP OTHER STARTUPS SUCCEED.

When Dennis Yang ('95) joined online learning platform Udemy as president and chief operating officer in 2012, it was a small startup with about 15 employees. By the time he left as CEO in 2017, the company was worth nearly \$1 billion with more than 15 million students and 20,000 contributing instructors around the world.

"We democratized access to education and were able to grow extremely quickly by serving an unmet global need," Yang says.

"We also built a company culture and an organization that people had tremendous pride in, where they developed individually, professionally, and personally."

Yang understands the challenges of learning new skills to perform well in any position. After earning a chemical engineering degree at Northwestern, he worked as a consultant, teaching himself how to interpret advanced financial statements. He went on to work in venture capital and with a startup before pursuing an MBA at the Stanford Graduate School of Business to learn about sales, marketing, and business strategy.

Afterward, he expanded his skill set in product manager roles, then later served in expanding operational roles before joining Udemy, where he found his niche. "I fell in love with the mission," Yang says. "This product was designed for people like me who are curious and want to learn. With a tremendous amount of hard work and luck, we had incredible success."

Yang leveraged that experience to launch his own education technology venture, Modal Learning, with fellow Udemy executive Darren Shimkus in 2021. The online learning platform helps companies develop employees' technical and AI skills. Its courses provide project- and lab-based learning supported by coaches and a community of learners and practitioners.

Today, Yang focuses most of his time as an adviser, investor, and board member to early-stage companies in technology, mentoring fellow entrepreneurs and nurturing startup ventures.

"There's no playbook to tell you how to do it," Yang says. "It's very experiential, it's brutal, and frankly, it's not meant for everyone. Since I have the benefit of going through that experience, I love to give back and share that wisdom."

He credits Northwestern with helping him develop the tools to build entrepreneurial ventures. "I learned problem-solving skills, structured thinking, and grit to get through periods of constant learning," he says.

"The process is uncomfortable because you're always on the edge of growth. That engineering mindset is incredibly valuable, but you also have to develop sales, empathy, and leadership skills."

Crediting his success to his Northwestern experience, Yang gives back by serving as a Northwestern Alumni Regent and member of the Farley Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation's advisory board. His recent gift also established the Yang Family Curriculum Development Fund to support expanded entrepreneurship courses and workshops as well as experiential learning opportunities.

"I feel lucky to be where I am today, and with that good fortune, you feel an obligation to give back to the next generation and share the lessons you've learned along the way," Yang says. "I'm a huge believer in entrepreneurship, and I'm more than happy to do everything I can to support that at Northwestern. It's a highlight for me."

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