By Natalie Missakian

Running a Business

With a goal of giving back, a husband and wife establish a scholarship that reflects their passion for athletics and supports students who are majoring in business.

When it comes to hiring, David McHale, ’82, gives an edge to the student athlete. He knows many of the traits cultivated on the athletics field are the same ones needed for business success: cooperation, perseverance, ambition, and decisiveness—not to mention the time-management skills required to juggle a grueling practice schedule and demanding college course load.

But he also knows he can’t just hire someone simply because they were a star quarterback or track standout. High-performing athletes may possess the makings of high-performing employees, McHale says, but they need to marry those qualities with a strong academic background.

So admittedly, there’s a bit of self-interest behind McHale’s financial support of student athletes at Southern. He sees them as the next generation of leaders at Northeast Utilities, where McHale serves as executive vice president and chief financial officer.

“It’s not all philanthropy. There’s a method behind my madness,” he jokes. “I’d very much like to have a rich and deep field of talented kids to recruit from.”

To that end, and to give back to the university that played an instrumental role in his own success, McHale and his wife, Shannon, have established the David R. and Shannon H. McHale Endowed Scholarship at Southern. The scholarship will help an undergraduate student in the School of Business who is a member of the men’s or women’s cross-country or track and field team and maintains at least a 3.0 grade point average.

The focus on the track program is a nod to the McHales’ lifelong passion. David ran for the Owls from 1978-81 (photo at left) and continues to run competitively. Shannon, the only woman from Connecticut to qualify for the Olympic trials in Houston this year, has 20 marathons under her belt, including Boston and Chicago. Athletics are also a big part of the West Simsbury, Conn., couple’s family life. The pair met through running and have passed on their love of athletics to their children (they have six between them, ages 18 through 11).

“The nice thing about Southern is they’re very much willing to work with you to personalize a giving approach,” says McHale, a member of the SCSU Foundation Board of Directors and chairman of its Finance Committee.

Tom Phommalinh, this year’s scholarship recipient, said the financial boost came just as he lost a part-time tutoring job at a local high school due to budget cuts. He said since the economic downturn, his parents have been struggling to make ends meet while putting him and his sister through college.

“This is the first year that I didn’t have to pay anything out of pocket [for tuition],” says the 20-year-old business administration major, who grew up in New Britain, Conn. Thanks to the scholarship, he hasn’t been in a hurry to get another job, choosing instead to concentrate on his schoolwork.

“I was putting in about two to four hours, four days a week, tutoring. I would have to get up early, go to work, go to class, and then go to practice. With track it’s about three to three-and-a-half hours a night. It was tough,” says Phommalinh, who aspires to become a management consultant and perhaps own a small business.

As a former economics student and member of the track team at Southern, McHale can relate. He remembers how demanding it was to meet his team obligations while keeping up his grades. “I had the luxury of not having to have a job. Not everybody’s that fortunate,” he says.

McHale says a key contributor to his own success was the chance to experience the workforce before graduation through a student internship, so he wants others to have the same opportunity. His internship at Northeast Utilities helped launch his 30-year career at the company, something he doubts would have been possible if he were forced to also hold down a part-time job.

As a college senior, McHale logged 20 hours a week doing economic research for the company. With his foot in the door, he made a name for himself and in 1982 was offered a full-time job as a research analyst. Today, he oversees treasury, accounting, investor relations, financial planning, information technology, purchasing, and more for Northeast Utilities, which operates New England’s largest utility system.

In establishing the scholarship, McHale, who received Southern’s 2010 Distinguished Alumnus Award, says he hopes to set an example for other alumni who are in a position to support the institutions that helped them along the way. “I think that successful people should give back to the university that put them in a position to succeed,” McHale says.

Left: Shannon and David McHale. Right: Tom Phommalinh.