A most unusual dean

DU’S ENGINEERING–COMPUTER SCIENCE LEADER BRINGS ENTREPRENEURIAL BACKGROUND TO ACADEMICS

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J.B. Holston has worked right where economic development, technology and Colorado’s future have played out for a decade, but it might have been easy to miss him.

The 58-year-old is dean of the University of Denver’s expanded Daniel Felix Ritchie School of Engineering & Computer Science, where he aims to make a more diverse student body more deeply connected to technology and industry trends. Academics might seem an unlikely job — Holston’s prior career was in international business and entrepreneurship.

“I’m definitely the least traditional dean in the country,” he says with a chuckle.

Prior to DU, Holston established the Blackstone Entrepreneurs Network in Colorado, a program backed by the New York City-based private equity giant to help the state’s thriving mid-sized startups grow into bigger companies. He previously ran Denver-based software startup Sitrion, worked at other startups and nonprofits and quietly behind the scenes in Denver’s political and economic development circles.

“For me, it’s about how do we take the next step and grow the Colorado economy,” Holston said.

It made perfect sense to Holston to take the job when DU Chancellor Rebecca Chopp reached out to him about the engineering program. (The school is named for Daniel Ritchie, a former DU chancellor and benefactor.)

Holston had recently helped lead a quiet effort to recruit GE’s headquarters to Colorado. The massive company was considering its options outside Connecticut, and Holston had ties to the company – he’d been a young executive in international business development for GE and its NBC broadcasting unit in the 1980s and 1990s.

The Denver area remained a candidate site for GE’s headquarters until its final three choices, Holston said.

“That’s pretty darned extraordinary when you think about where we were 20 years ago,” he said.

Boston ultimately drew GE’s new headquarters, partly because its academic and research institutions are the best in the world.

Impressed with Chopp and her vision for DU, Holston grew convinced the private university could help shape the state’s economic future, he said. Closer ties between the school and industry would involve DU’s pipeline of students more directly in the innovations companies seek, helping business and the state’s workforce to thrive.

The Denver resident and father of two adult children cut an interesting professional path before he and his wife, Anne Murdaugh, a politically active lawyer, came to Colorado in 1997.

Holston grew up in Cleveland and southern California, where his dad was program director for a Los Angeles radio station. Holston studied English literature at Stanford University and landed a couple year later at the Boston Consulting Group helping businesses develop strategy. Then he spent a year in Paris, studying at the Sorbonne, living on a houseboat and writing a novel he never published.

His background helped him win a job at RCA, the electronics and media company in New York City, just before it was bought by GE. By the late 1980s, Holston was working in international business development under famed CEO Jack Welch for GE and its NBC unit (NBC is now part of Comcast Corp.).

Ziff Davis, a media company, recruited Holston away from GE. From Munich, Germany, he helped it launch Yahoo in Europe before he and Murdaugh decided they should raise their family in Colorado, he said.

“The emphasis of combining hard work and play and money – not like what you see on the coasts – that was important to us,” he said. “We thought Colorado had a lot of upside.”

He still does.