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A Show of Hands



Over generations, Student Senate has grown into its role as an indispensable force for student representation.

Story by Amelia Benner '09



One of Student Senate's crowning achievements was its backing of the Hansen Student Center. The Senate, circa 2002 (above), now holds its meetings on Hansen's upper level.

It's 7 o'clock on a wintery Sunday evening, a time when most students are curled up in their dorm rooms with the homework they neglected over the weekend. Most are unaware that, across the snow-frosted campus, a group of their fellow students are gathering to speak on their behalf.

Those students straggle a few at a time into the second-floor meeting room above Hansen Student Center, talking animatedly as they unzip their coats and shed layers of scarves. Behind the long table at the front of the room, another group settles into their chairs, the women straightening their skirts and jackets, the men tugging at ties and shirt collars. A young woman steps up to the podium, raps it once. "I now call this meeting to order at 7:04," she says, and the chatter tapers into expectant silence.

Tonight they are debating the first-year advising and class registration process. To an outsider, the discussion might seem sterile, almost trivial, carefully framed in the exacting language of *Robert's Rules of Order*. But underneath the formality there is passion, dedication, and, above all, a steady belief in the importance of what they do.

This is Student Senate, the most powerful student organization on the IWU campus. For nearly a century, Illinois Wesleyan's student government has organized events, advocated student rights, and mediated between students and the administration. It has weathered scandals and criticism alongside success and acclaim, but it has never wavered from the goal articulated by its forefathers in 1915: to become a "clearing house for student plans, ideas, and sentiment."

Cooperation and improper conduct

The organization that would become Student Senate was born with lofty ideals. The new Student Council, according to the 1915 *Wesleyana*, was founded to "promote University spirit, provide a clearing house for student plans, ideas, and sentiment, give the students a larger representative voice in the affairs of the school, and provide a responsible organization through which students and faculty might be brought together in mutual, helpful co-operation."

Not all IWU students, however, felt the need for self-governance.

When plans for a student council uniting the (now extinct) literary and law schools were proposed in early 1915, law students rejected the scheme. *The Argus* reported that the student council proposition passed with a 135–15 vote in the literary school but was defeated in the law school by four votes.

“The lit. school will have a student council to manage its own affairs and the law school can be run under its old plan,” declared one *Argus* staff writer, who obviously aligned himself with council supporters. “The proposition was proposed to both schools, and the blame cannot be with the lits. We desire the co-operation of the lawyers, but we have gone more than half way.”

The new organization elected its first members (four seniors, three juniors, two sophomores, and a lone freshman), and in February adopted a constitution and the rather unwieldy name “Student Council of the Literary Department of Illinois Wesleyan University.”

“One point worth noticing in the election was the entire absence of politics,” *The Argus* reported approvingly. “The best persons from the different classes were, without exception, elected.”

In addition to planning campus events, the group began to address student concerns to the administration and, as the 1925 *Wesleyana* dryly noted, “crystallize and make effective the sanest of undergraduate opinions.” As a Methodist-affiliated institution, the University expected its students to maintain exemplary behavior. The Student Council often allied itself with the administration in matters of student conduct, and took measures to ensure that their fellow students lived up to the Illinois Wesleyan standard.

However, Student Council found itself at odds with the administration on at least one occasion.

In 1912, administrators had banned students from holding dances, which they felt were “contrary to the standards and laws set down by a Methodist institution.” But even threats of dire punishment from University officials could not subdue the youthful exuberance of the Roaring Twenties. By that time, Greek chapter houses were regularly holding weekend dances with live bands. This emboldened Student Council members, who held an all-campus dance in Memorial Gymnasium. The Board of Trustees reacted with horror, certain that all-school dances would “lower the moral and spiritual plane” of the school. Despite their elders’ disapproval, Student Council ultimately triumphed, the board dropped the matter, and the dance craze continued unabated.

By the early years of the Great Depression, Illinois Wesleyan students felt that the Student Council was insufficient to address their concerns. In the early 1930s the organization quietly changed its name to the IWU Student Union. But the most significant shift came in the spring of 1933, when a massive constitutional revision took effect.

Unlike the days of Student Council, when the members selected leaders, the Student Union president would now be elected directly by the student body. In addition, students gained the power to overturn a Student Union decision by submitting a petition signed by 50 of their classmates, which would require the union to call for a campus-wide general vote on the issue.



A cartoon from the 1934 *Wesleyana* depicts the Grind, a fall mixer that gave freshmen and returning students a chance to meet on the dance floor.

The new Student Union was also three times the size of the Student Council, with class representatives joined by one delegate from each Greek organization as well as the editors of *The Argus* and *Wesleyana*.

It seemed that the goal of giving students a “larger representative voice” had been fulfilled at last. Over the next few decades, student government would focus its energies on making sure that this voice was heard.

The height of scandal

Illinois Wesleyan’s post-World War II years, as reflected in the pages of the *Wesleyana* and *The Argus*, seem idyllic: the annual Sig-Pi Rope Pull, Wednesday night Vesper services in the chapel, the popular Greek–Indee Sing. Student Union and its successor, Student Senate, presided over this world of school spirit and all-American enthusiasm.

In 1956, Student Union members again revised the organization’s constitution. Under the new system, representatives were chosen from the four classes only, and the practice of electing members from each Greek chapter was abolished. The 1957 *Wesleyana* reported that the newly renamed Student Senate hoped to lay the foundations for a “stronger and more effective student government.”

Despite the new constitution, Senate’s focus remained on campus events. “Senate ran all of the school’s activities, invited musical acts, and planned all the entertainment,” recalls 1958–59 Senate President Roger Colton ’59. There were dances, intramural sports competitions, and religious activities to plan, but above all, there was Homecoming.

“Homecoming was the focus of our year,” Colton says. “We’d spend almost the entire second semester of the year before planning it.” The Senate Homecoming committee spent months organizing hall decorations, the bonfire, and the dance, as well as the annual parade.



The 1958 Sigma Chi Homecoming float depicted a Millikin bluejay crushed by an IWU football player on a spinning top. The prize-winning float came under fire when a rival fraternity alleged that it violated the 15-foot height limit imposed by Student Senate.

The 1958 Homecoming parade would become the backdrop for one of Illinois Wesleyan’s most bitter controversies yet. The Sigma Chi float, described in *The Argus* as a “huge bluejay under a spinning top holding a Wesleyan football player,” was awarded first place in the male division. But at the Senate meeting on the following Monday afternoon, members of the Acacia fraternity protested that the float exceeded by several inches the height requirement of 15 feet and should be disqualified.

“I can remember walking into the Senate meeting that afternoon and being hit with this huge furor,” Colton remembers. Over 100 students turned out for the meeting, and the remainder were able to read a detailed account of the proceedings in *The Argus* later that week.

“It is certainly a violation of the spirit of the rule if not the rule itself,” opined then-Senator Dennis Stark ’59. “If this is denied, how many more times will it become the precedent for another infraction?”

“We measured our float and we’re girls,” protested Homecoming committee member Judy Primmer Larson ’61. “Why can’t boys measure theirs?”

The debate over the Sigma Chi float underscores another facet of

campus life in the 1950s: the power of the Greek system. “The Interfraternity Council was more powerful (than Senate) since Greeks’ houses provided a majority of the student housing,” 1958–59 Senate Treasurer Jerry Philpott ’59 recalls. “Greeks made up 65 or 75 percent of the student body.”

“There was a lot of political byplay in the Senate elections,” Colton says. “The fraternities and sororities would try to build coalitions to support certain candidates.”

Concerned that their votes might lead to repercussions in the Greek community, several senators suggested that the fate of the Sigma Chi float be decided behind closed doors.

“You wanted to run for a Student Senate office,” Colton replied. “Now’s the time to get behind it.” Before a room packed with students, Senate voted 14–4 to disqualify the Sigma Chi float.

It seems appropriate that the most significant contribution of the 1950s Senate occurred in the shadow of Homecoming. In October 1958, while the campus debated float-height requirements, IWU President Lloyd Bertholf quietly turned control of the annual student activity fee over to Senate. Student organizations would now have to petition Senate for funding instead of the dean of students.

At the time, the decision was hardly monumental. A brief mention of the policy change appeared in the Homecoming edition of *The Argus*, but was eclipsed by news of the float debacle. “There was no big to-do about it,” Colton says.

Today, however, distribution of the activity fee to the various student organizations is Senate’s most high-profile function. Mark Sheldon ’70, who served as Senate president during the late 1960s, says that Bertholf’s decision to grant control of the fee to Senate helped spark a change in the organization’s focus — a spark that would ultimately ignite the campus during the turbulent 1960s.

A question of rights

Ten years later, the innocence of 1958 had faded into memory. Protestors against the Vietnam War marched silently down Main Street, following the same route as the Homecoming floats of a decade before. Students flocked to political rallies instead of dances, and the bonfires that had once urged the football team to victory were now fed with draft cards.

“It’s a period that you can hardly imagine now,” says IWU Professor of History Paul Bushnell, who served as Senate’s faculty advisor from 1968 to 1970. “That whole generation was tuned into national politics and leadership in a way that students hadn’t been before.”

“They were very unusual times,” 1968–69 Senate President Mark Sheldon says simply.

While still addressing campus issues, Senate’s focus had widened. Echoing a nationwide trend toward student autonomy, many Illinois Wesleyan students began demanding what they saw as their fundamental rights.

“Up until this time, IWU had been very conservative in student affairs,” Sheldon says. “Chapel attendance was required, female students had a 10:30 curfew, and there wasn’t much student involvement in university decision making.” But the concept of *in loco parentis* — the University’s responsibility to act in the place of students’ own parents — would not survive the late 1960s and early 1970s. “Students started to press the administration to consider students as adults, not as children of the University,” Sheldon says. “It was a time of transition to students taking the lead.”

In 1968 the Senate Human Relations Committee issued a student rights statement, requesting increased student input in University administration, and the rights to student representation on faculty committees and to appeal administration and faculty decisions. The committee also pushed for greater freedom of expression, equal rights for minority groups and women, and the right of peaceable assembly on campus.

“Senate meetings were a big deal,” Sheldon remembers. “There was a gallery and students would come to have their say.”

The right to assemble peacefully was becoming increasingly crucial to students. Over the next few years, students would stage numerous civil rights and anti-war demonstrations on the IWU campus, and many Senate leaders could be found among their ranks.

“The administration worried about student involvement in anti-war protests, and especially how they might affect the University’s relations with donors and the community,” Bushnell recalls.

The student unrest that had been smoldering for years finally exploded in the spring of 1970. It was a volatile semester on campuses all across the country, as students reacted to the killing by National Guardsmen of four students at Kent State University on May 4. Senate president George Vinyard ’71 recommended lowering the quad flag to half-staff. University President Robert Eckley initially balked, but allowed the flag to be lowered after senators overwhelmingly approved the motion in a phone poll conducted by Vinyard. Groups of student activists guarded the lowered flag that week, and several verbal skirmishes occurred between them and more conservative University staff and students.



In the aftermath of the Kent State shootings in May 1970, IWU students helped organize a silent march through downtown Bloomington. Student Senate served as an intermediary between protesters and the administration as students reacted to news of the tragedy.

During those early weeks of May 1970, as Illinois National Guardsmen and Carbondale police fired tear gas at protesters at Southern Illinois University, Eckley began quietly drafting a contingency plan in case his own campus erupted into violence. His worst fears seemed realized a week later, when an early-morning blaze destroyed the stage at Presser Hall. Although initially feared the work of student protesters, two local juveniles ultimately confessed to setting the fires.

“Coming up to our graduation in 1970, the campus was practically shut down,” Sheldon remembers.

During these nervous weeks, Student Senate functioned as an intermediary between the administration and students. However, Bushnell says, Senate’s loyalties lay with the student protestors, whose anti-war and pro-rights stance reflected their own beliefs. Thanks to the financial independence Bertholf had granted to Senate with the student-activity fee 10 years earlier, Student Senate could create an environment in which debate and activism thrived.

“Senate was crucial to student interests and rights,” Bushnell says. “They had the funding and the independence to get students the kinds of programs they wanted to see. They brought some people to campus that the administration probably wouldn’t have asked.” These speakers included Fred Hampton, a Chicago leader of the Black Panthers, and socialist writer and editor Michael Harrington.

In many respects, the senators of the late 1960s and early 1970s shaped Illinois Wesleyan campus life as it exists today. In response to the Senate rights statement, the curfew for female students was abolished, chapel services were no longer compulsory, and students were given a place on many administrative committees.

Although the era of the protest had ended by the mid-1970s, Senate would continue to address the issue of student rights over the next few decades.

The bubble and beyond

Sometime during the 1980s or 1990s, someone coined the phrase “Wesleyan bubble” to refer to the sense of insularity that surrounds the IWU campus. The identity of this inventive malcontent has been lost to history, but the phrase has reached beyond mainstream acceptance to become a near-cliché.

But perhaps the phrase’s appeal came from the fact that it rang true. During those two decades, the focus of IWU students and of Student Senate itself was on campus issues rather than on the national issues of the 1960s and 1970s.

“It was a relatively non-contentious time,” agrees 1989–90 Senate President Amy Peterson Olson ’90. During the 1980s and 1990s, Senate addressed issues within the “Wesleyan bubble,” from alcohol policy to May Term, diversity to campus recycling. Each of these concerns was significant, and each impacted student life at IWU, but at times many students felt that Senate was insulated from campus opinion.

The 1983 *Wesleyana* washed down its coverage of Senate with a healthy dose of sarcasm. Senate had cut the budget for the *Wesleyana*, *The Argus*, and WESN that year — “student services that reach the majority of IWU students,” as one *Wesleyana* writer put it. “Arguing for an hour and a half on whether or not to give the cheerleaders money proved once again the Student Senate was ‘in touch’ with the needs of the campus.”

1983–84 Senate president Don Mizerk ’85 remembers this funding controversy as one of the major issues of his administration. “I felt that Senate had an obligation to spend the (student activity fee) wisely and provide a variety of entertainments, media, and cultural activities for the student body,” Mizerk says. “This money was not always spent very wisely and the students generally felt that they were not getting much for their money. I viewed Senate as a business. It had a job to do and had to do it much better.”

Minor Myers jr., who became University president in 1989, helped increase Senate involvement in administrative matters. “Up to that point there wasn’t a lot of continuity,” Olson says. When Myers took office Senate had a greater opportunity to “bring student concerns to the forefront and have a serious voice.”

During this time Senate also created the “Professor of the Year” award, addressed concerns about the lack of resources in Buck Library, and lobbied for increased hours in the Dug Out so that students could have a place to gather.

The need for a student gathering place was still an important issue 10 years later in 1999, when Senate issued the Initiative for Student Life. The document asked for a student center to be designated on campus and suggested the remodeling of the Memorial Gymnasium. Senate officials took a fact-finding trip to see the student centers of other small liberal arts colleges and reported their findings to the Board of Trustees.

“There was a great deal of tension between students and the administration at that time,” says Jim Matthews, associate professor of French and former dean of students, who served as Senate faculty advisor during that era. “Students felt taken for granted, that their voice wasn’t being heard.”

The University was already moving forward with plans for The Ames Library, and the trustees pointedly asked Senate President Mike Balsley '99 whether the students would rather have a new library or a new student center.



Senate leaders past and present examined a model of the Hansen Student Center when it was still under construction.

“The students need and want both,” Balsley replied, and the board contracted a feasibility study for the remodeling of the Memorial Gym.

“The project really took off when students and the board began talking to each other directly,” Matthews says. “It was admirable that students were able to sustain leadership for the project during four (Senate) administrations.”

Students were involved in every stage of planning for the project. “I like to tell people that there’s no aspect of that building without student input and approval,” Matthews states with pride.

The dedication of the remodeled Memorial Gym, now named the Hansen Student Center, was a major success for Student Senate. In addition to proving their ability to undertake a massive project from start to finish, the planning process

increased cooperation between Senate and the administration.

“I think a stronger sense of trust came about because of the planning and refurbishment of Hansen,” Matthews says. “The students showed the administration that they were capable of setting a course for the University, and the students learned what limitations of the administration were in terms of resources. It created a greater understanding between them.”

Trevor Sierra '05, now assistant director for Alumni Relations at Illinois Wesleyan, was a senator during the final years of the Hansen project and served as Senate president from 2003–04. He attributes Senate’s solid relationship with the administration during these years to the influence of Matthews, whom he calls Senate’s “strongest advocate.”

“Since we knew that the administration was working for the students, Student Senate didn’t have to operate in a very confrontational manner,” Sierra says. “We could meet with almost any administrator on campus, and know that student concerns would be met with sincere attention. That isn’t to say that Senate was able to persuade the administration on every issue, but there was an open dialog.”

Although the focus and influence of Student Senate have waxed and waned over its near-century of existence, one goal has remained constant. This is the goal that the founders of 1915 had in mind when they spoke of “a clearing house for student plans, ideas, and sentiment,” and it is the goal that current Senate President Kelly Petrowski '08 echoed in an interview with *The Argus* after her election last December.

“Senate represents the entire student body,” Petrowski says. “I’d like for students to know that Senate is there as an avenue for them to talk about the things that they have problems with.”