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Inaugural Address: The Liberal Arts in the 21st Century: Spotlight on Collaborative Engagement

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Eric Jensen

Inaugural Remarks

The Liberal Arts in the 21st Century: Spotlight on Collaborative Engagement

Let me begin by thanking and acknowledging the distinguished delegates, faculty, staff, students, alumni, family, and others in attendance, and welcoming Senator Bill Brady, Representative Dan Brady, and mayors Tari Renner and Chris Koos. I thank the impressive line of Illinois Wesleyan presidents who came before me, including Robert Eckley, Minor Myers, and Richard Wilson. Dick and Pat, thank you both for coming, and Dick, thank you for your leadership and especially for your continuing willingness to answer your telephone (*Dick and Pat, would you please stand*). I thank the members of our Board of Trustees for your faith in me, as well as the larger Illinois Wesleyan and Bloomington-Normal communities for the incredibly warm welcome you have extended to us. I am truly honored to have been named Illinois Wesleyan's 19th president.

I have some personal thank-you's to give, beginning with my wife Elizabeth. She has a winning combination of both patience and impatience with me—patience for those things that deserve nurturing, and impatience for those that don't—and we agree, for the most part, on which is which. We are true partners in this journey. I thank our children, Joseph, here today as the official representative of the College of Wooster; and Jessica, attending as the official representative of Earlham College. I'm proud beyond words of both of you and so glad that we could share this as a family. I'd also like to thank my dad, watching remotely, for being the role model that he is and always has been. Thanks, Dad.

Elizabeth and I are fortunate to have many of our family and friends here today, including my sisters Kris Bahl and Beth Montblanc and their

families. Friends and mentors not with us here--Bob Trice, Lou Rossiter, and the late Bob Fritts--each helped me to understand first, how to follow (not an easy task for a lifelong professor) and then how to lead. Bob Archibald and Dennis Ahlburg have been research collaborators, mentors and friends in my transition to administration. To Kathy Murray--Illinois Wesleyan alumna, Whitman College President, and the person who first told me, in no uncertain terms, about this great place, thank you.

To our other friends and neighbors from Virginia, Minnesota, and elsewhere, thanks for coming. It is great to see you all! And a last, **large** thank-you on behalf of everyone here this weekend for all of the hard work done by the inaugural committee, chaired by Becky Roesner and Kent Cook. The members are listed in your program, and will be at the reception following this ceremony, but at this time may I please ask the committee members to stand and be acknowledged?

As happy as I am to see everyone here today, I have to confess that my initial instinct was to forego this ceremony. As a longtime professor, it definitely was not an attempt to avoid speaking to a captive group. Rather, it was an "aw, shucks" moment coupled to an initial misconception that this event was about the new president. I was corrected, gently, by more than one person on this matter, and came to understand that inaugurals are at their core about institutions. More specifically, they are celebrations of **transition, and stability**; of **continuity, and change**.

Inaugurating a new president helps us to come together as a community, to marry a long and storied history to an exciting future. It allows us a chance to celebrate unabashedly a place that we love, and especially to shine a light on the people who have both given and taken so much from Illinois Wesleyan—not just to highlight our spectacular students, but to show off the many accomplishments of our alumni; to acknowledge our talented, dedicated and hardworking faculty and staff; and to thank trustees, donors and other

friends of the university who have been so generous with their time and their resources. You've seen some of this over the past few days, and I'm grateful to the many alumni, faculty, staff, students, and others who participated in the various events.

It falls to me over the course of this talk to say a bit about our history, to describe the present landscape of higher education, and to outline my sense of our shared future.

Georgia Nugent, past president of Kenyon College, describes the special nature of institutions like Illinois Wesleyan well:

What appears to produce the extraordinary result of a liberal arts education is the particular combination of **matter and manner**, a broad-based curriculum with specific pedagogical practices in a context that also contributes to learning.

Illinois Wesleyan has a long and proud history of educating students in this tradition. We've seen some of our distinguished alumni in person as part of this weekend's festivities, including **Juan Salgado, Marcus Dunlop, Kevin Dunn, Demetria Kalodimos, Dave Kindred, Stephen Ondra, and Carlina Tapia-Ruano**. They are here as representatives of the many thousands of accomplished alumni of this institution, whose successes in turn reflect the talent, commitment and dedication of Illinois Wesleyan's faculty and staff over the decades. The strong buttressing that supports all of this is the work of generations of committed donors and other friends of this place.

We're now in a period of change in higher education. I'll admit to having only halfheartedly researched this claim, but I'd be willing to bet that most if not all of my predecessors have said something along those lines as they were being inaugurated. Yet most observers would agree that the current challenges facing higher education are different, both in their nature and

scope, than many we have seen in the past. Let me explain by beginning with a parable from Todd Rose, of the Harvard Graduate School of Education:

In the early 1950s, at the dawn of jet-powered flight, the U.S. Air Force confronted a troubling problem: Its pilots could not keep control of their planes. At the worst point, 17 pilots crashed in a single day. The military initially pinned the blame on "pilot error" and elevated its recruiting standards and changed up its flight school — to little effect.

(It turns out that) in 1926, Army scientists had measured the size of hundreds of male pilots ... and used the data to standardize all cockpits and controls to fit an average-size airman (in the name of efficiency)

Enter the heroes of this story—as is usually the case, (at least in my stories), the statisticians. On the basis of 10 individual body size measurements—arm length, waist, and so forth, and defining the average pilot as one in the middle third on all 10 dimensions, not a single pilot—not **one** of the 4,063 airmen then flying—was average sized. Subsequent to this study, airplane cockpits were made adjustable, to fit pilots, and pilot performance, well, "soared" (to be clear, that's Rose's pun, not mine).

I tell you this story, not as someone of nonstandard dimensions (though I will admit that this tall podium was built with me in mind), but because I agree with Professor Rose's subsequent claim that much of higher education **forces students to fit the cockpit**. To be fair, our forerunners had little choice but to do so. After the Second World War, the influx of GIs undoubtedly energized higher education, but also placed a premium on large-scale production of college graduates. Schools had more students than they could handle, and the arrival of baby boomers in college only served to ramp up the pressure.

Today, our higher education model, to greater or lesser extent at any given institution, maintains elements of the one that evolved to deal with crowds. This is true even at liberal arts institutions, though they, for the most part, made smaller accommodations to scale.

It's also the case that, at the moment, we have some demographic breathing room, with the number of US high school graduates projected to plateau for at least the next decade. That's an opportunity, perhaps, but "breathing room" is an obvious euphemism. With a declining pool of applicants (and little growth in family income), there is an undeniable need for colleges and universities to differentiate themselves in order to attract students.

Some institutions, notably those public institutions dependent upon diminishing state support and private institutions with declining revenues, seem likely to face difficult futures. But other institutions, including ours, are in position to stake out a portion of the educational spectrum that focuses on providing not just a very high-quality education, but a distinctly individualized one that takes Nugent's "matter and manner" to the next level.

While Illinois Wesleyan's strong tradition of student-faculty collaboration, dating back at least to John Wesley Powell's time on the faculty, is a solid base on which to build, other similarly well-positioned institutions also are responding to their own equally strong needs to define a market niche. Whether the measured by the depth or breadth of student-faculty collaboration, the bar is being raised by many of our peer institutions. There is therefore some urgency to the matter. We risk arriving late to the dance by waiting to respond in kind, and **we cannot stand pat.**

It's worth emphasizing at the outset that, while deepening and broadening opportunities for faculty and students to engage collaboratively will enhance

our institutional status, it is **not** an elitist story. To the contrary, part of our task is to increase our accessibility to economically, racially, ethnically and geographically diverse students. Some of you may have seen recent reports of a study claiming that only 6% of private colleges provide sufficient financial aid to reduce the annual cost borne by their lowest-income students to \$10,000 or less annually.

\$10,000 is an important number, because that's roughly the total of Pell and other need-based grants available to low-income students in most states. We have not historically been in the 6% of schools hitting this target, but, if we are serious about having that economically, racially ethnically, and geographically diverse student body that I just mentioned, we should be. We **are** serious in this effort, and we've already begun efforts to increase our support to low-income students. Those efforts will continue.

Collaborative Engagement

So, to collaborative engagement, the title of this talk. What does it mean? In the broadest terms, it's the institutionally personalized initiative that we, the Illinois Wesleyan community, will formulate in response to a movement that is nationwide (but not uniform--more on that in a minute). It is a movement that is in part driven by demand, as prospective students and their parents include personalized academic experiences on their shopping lists. It is also, in part, a reflection of enabling changes on the supply side. Technology has entered post-secondary education in a variety of ways, some more successful than others. At its best, appropriately deployed technology can allow faculty and staff to focus on deep interaction with students.

The efforts being made in response to these systemic changes take different forms and go by different names at different institutions, but "signature work," as popularized by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, is emerging as a generic term. A defining trait is ensuring that all graduates

integrate and apply their learning to complex problems and projects in ways that make clear not just to potential employers or graduate schools, but also to the students themselves, the great things of which they are capable.

Though they often happen outside of traditional classroom settings and vary greatly in their content and design, signature experiences always involve tight collaboration between students and faculty. They are highly personalized, reflecting individual interests, abilities, and preparation. They require that each student assumes significant ownership of a relatively independent academic undertaking.

I said a moment ago that this is not happening uniformly across the country. Signature work requires a level of student-faculty interaction that is simply not feasible at many, perhaps most, schools, and so it will never be integrated into their curricula. Those institutions that **are** able to implement signature work initiatives, focusing and strengthening the quality of student-faculty interactions, will increasingly differentiate themselves from the rest, and are likely to enjoy distinct advantages in recruiting students.

The true power of collaborative engagement is that students' guided work serves to emphasize the enormous advantage that the breadth of a liberal arts education confers. **We are, in the end, training leaders.** Leadership positions are characterized by the need to think and work clearly, analytically, creatively, critically, and persuasively in environments characterized by subjectivity, ambiguity and diverse viewpoints.

This is a state of affairs that, I'm sure, sounds familiar to many of you here today. Those with a liberal arts background will understand the task at hand, and it shows in their subsequent careers. For example, while less than **4%** of all college graduates typically come from private liberal arts colleges, **10%** of

Fortune 500 CEOs and **14%** of all MacArthur Fellows were graduates of such institutions.

Yet we all know that the importance of a broad-based liberal education to subsequent success is not completely clear to a larger world (see for example Marco Rubio on society's need for welders versus philosophy majors). It's odd that this is the case, since liberal arts education has always, at least in part, been about jobs. On this question, Georgia Nugent says that:

...we encounter a frequently overlooked paradox of the American liberal arts college. It was surely founded on the principles of the *artes liberales*, those studies that are intended to develop the highest human capacities. But the original colonial colleges also were clearly "professional schools." They were explicitly founded for the purpose of educating the pastors who would be needed in this new world.

That same liberal arts tradition, training not just for a job, but training the whole person in preparation for leadership, continues today. I mentioned a moment ago that some part of the impetus for signature work consists of the opportunities and challenges created by technological change in higher education. In the plainest terms, **theory and practice are not separated by the gulf they once were**, not least because today's students are able to work and to learn outside of traditional classroom settings in ways that were difficult, if not impossible, to envision even a decade or two ago. The work of historians like **Edward Ayers**, melding historical research with broad-based digital collaboration, or of **Rebecca Frost-Davis**, on the teaching of humanities in the digital age, make good reading on this topic.

Among our highest purposes, and unquestionably the comparative advantage enjoyed by institutions like ours, is the fostering of **personalized, meaningful intellectual relationships between faculty (and staff) members and students**. In what may initially seem counterintuitive, appropriate technology

can be used to expand both the breadth and the depth of these interactions. If, for example, a significant part of students' work takes place outside of the classroom, faculty members are afforded both more time, and more varied opportunities, with students for coaching, discussion and mentoring.

While technology may expand the range of the possible, people--faculty and staff--will remain *the* essential element in our work, a fact that will be incorporated into our planning and our future staffing decisions. To be clear, as we broaden our efforts and re-imagine faculty responsibilities so as to include every student in this transformative work, we will do so fully cognizant that **this is a faculty-intensive effort that will require appropriate resources**. We've already begun work as a community on envisioning how we proceed together. While specific details will reflect our institutional personality, the outlines seem clear. There is little doubt that we will respond to our new choice set by continuing to identify opportunities that afford students a head start on fulfilled lives and great careers.

On that last point, allow me to emphasize something I've left unsaid to this point because it is so fundamental to the fabric of this place that it almost--almost--goes without saying. At the same time it is something that is such an essential part of Illinois Wesleyan that it deserves to be shouted from the rooftops.

It's this:

We will continue our notable focus on the whole person. I've had the pleasure of meeting a number of alumni these past five months, and it's clear to me that our alumni feel that their time on the Illinois Wesleyan campus--doing all that students do here--prepared them to live fulfilled lives and helped to forge them into confident leaders in their professions and communities.

We are in the business, at some level, of encouraging students in the development of their better selves—of helping them understand how, in ways large and small, to leave the world better than they found it. Minor Myers, the 17th president of Illinois Wesleyan, famously said,

“Go into the world and do well. But more importantly, go into the world and do good.”

That spirit remains alive and well at Illinois Wesleyan University, and will continue to thrive here.

Collaborative engagement will not just preserve this wonderful heritage, but enhance it. By blurring the line between what one studies in college and what comes afterward, we will allow each student not only to add significantly to his or her individual knowledge, abilities and experience, but simultaneously to do the things that matter to her or him. And through the very nature of their engagement in the collaborative process, we will both extend and enhance the lifelong learning capabilities of our students.

We have work to do and little time to waste, but our work is the happy task of doing more of what we are demonstrably good at. In so doing, we pass forward to future generations a thriving Illinois Wesleyan, a place that will continue to transform lives.

Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz said,

When you’re surrounded by people who share a passionate commitment around a common purpose, anything is possible.

This community shares a passionate commitment to Illinois Wesleyan University. **Our common purpose, the thriving evolution of this great institution, promises an exciting future.** Thank you all for being a part of it.