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From the President's Desk

This letter appeared in the Spring 2010 issue of the Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine

One of the unanticipated consequences of the financial challenges being faced by public and private universities is the call for a three-year degree. The logic behind this proposal is that we can reduce costs and increase efficiency if we move students through the collegiate experience in three years rather than four. I understand the motivation and recognize that there could be financial benefits that would be very attractive to some students (and certainly to their parents).

Most universities currently graduate a few students in less than four years, usually the result of receiving credit for Advanced Placement courses taken in high school or enrolling in classes during the summer. However, it is one thing to accommodate a few students who find themselves in this situation and quite another to build the collegiate experience for all students around the concept of a three-year degree.

One of the consequences of a three-year degree is that you squeeze most of the flexibility out of each student's schedule. I fear that most students would feel compelled to declare a major too early in the process or would find it very difficult to pursue multiple curricular interests, a characteristic of most students at Illinois Wesleyan. Finally, I worry that we would end up short-changing opportunities for students to learn outside the classroom.

In recent weeks, I have talked with several University students about service commitments they have made:

- Two seniors who have played key leadership roles in our local Habitat for Humanity effort and will help build the 15th and 16th houses this year;
- Fifty IWU students who have "adopted" Bent and Sheridan elementary schools and meet with third and fifth graders each week to help with homework and language skills;
- Two students who serve as officers in Student Senate and are learning invaluable leadership skills;
- Thirty-five students who studied abroad last semester and came to a reception at the President's House full of stories about how their lives had been changed;
- Two students who organized an informal but quite successful discussion among students, faculty and staff on the subject of world peace.

I find it hard to imagine that we would be able to sustain such activities if the primary motivation is to move students through college as quickly as possible. As I travel around the country and talk with our alumni about their Illinois Wesleyan experiences, I am struck by how many mention opportunities they pursued beyond the classroom that made profound and lasting differences in their lives.

As we look at ways to address the serious financial problems being faced by universities and by students and their families, I believe we are better served to look for solutions other than a three-year degree. For me, I would rather focus time and energy to build scholarship endowments that will exist in perpetuity and will provide future generations of students with the same high-quality educational experience we have offered in the past.

Richard E. Wilson