



2015

IWU President Wilson To Retire

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Recommended Citation

Schlenker, Charlie, "IWU President Wilson To Retire" (2015). *Interviews for WGLT*. 23.
http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/wgl_t_interviews/23

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President Richard Wilson: WGLT Interview, December 15, 2014

President Richard Wilson: Well I think the main thing, Charlie, is that there have been several major initiatives underway at Illinois Wesleyan in the last few years and we were able to bring them to closure. I feel like I'm leaving with no unfinished business in terms of projects. We were successful in the accreditation process two years ago, we completed a strategic plan for the university last spring, and of course with the Transforming Lives campaign, finishing up in July, this just seemed like a great transition point for me and for the university.

Charlie Schlenker: Other than those things you mentioned, what do you believe have been the keynote accomplishments of your tenure?

Wilson: This has been a very turbulent time economically for higher education and for private higher education in general. So I look back on the last decade and I think that my accomplishments are really tied to negotiating that turbulence and helping the university sustain the quality it's had for a long time. Second thing I'd say is we've completed two planning cycles during the time I've been here. Each one of those has sort of charted a new set of directions and priorities for the university and I'm very happy about that. And the third thing is in all the work we've been able to do in terms of private support for the university that's manifested itself and everything from a dramatic increase in the number of endowed chairs and professorships for the faculty, to scholarship support for the students, and of course, facilities on the campus.

Schlenker: So if Minor Myers was a builder and dreamer, you are a fundraiser and conservator and stabilizer, what does Illinois Wesleyan need in its next Chief Executive?

Wilson: The big challenge is, for the future, in part relates to demographics, in the sense that we know what's happening to a number of high school aged students, so that's one area. The second one is truly this university like most have become very global in their outreach and need to become more global in perspective. I think that we're constantly going to be challenged on how our curriculum matches against what we believe philosophically are the needs society and what students and their parents are interested in. Those are at least two or three things that I think will present the challenges for the next president.

Schlenker: It has not always been easy for you, you have had to preside over some wage freezes and hiring slowdowns as well. Are those things going to continue?

Wilson: These days, the challenge of keeping the budget balanced is always going to be on the desk of the president. I don't see any let up in that pressure. It's a combination of managing the endowment on the one hand, managing tuition on the other hand, and thirdly, securing private support for the annual fund. You take all of that revenue stream, and you map it against the various expenditures of the university and I think it's just gonna be a constant challenge, not just for private higher education, but for all of us who are involved in college university work.

Schlenker: You came to Illinois Wesleyan from the huge U of I system, you have repeatedly embraced and championed the liberal arts approach that Illinois Wesleyan embodies. You've alluded to this, but where is the position of that value in the consciousness of parents in today's upcoming students?

Wilson: I think Charlie, it's part of our course. It's a fundamental part of our mission and I believe sincerely that it's just as important today for students to have the kinds of experiences provided on liberal arts college campuses as it was, say, twenty or thirty years ago. But there's also tremendous pressure coming from parents and students that is much more driven by what are the opportunities for jobs in the market immediately following graduation. And so that tension, we're gonna live with that and I think that as a university, we simply have to continue to deliver our message that over the long term, students that are prepared with the kind of experience we provide on a campus like this one, will be well served over the arc of their years.

Schlenker: Do you have any regrets about the time that you had at Illinois Wesleyan?

Wilson: Not a bit, this has actually been the most fulfilling thing that I could imagine. I just feel tremendously blessed. Not only because I was asked to serve as President of Illinois Wesleyan, but that I'm able to finish out my career here. I leave with a great sense of satisfaction and fulfillment over the opportunity that I've been provided.

Schlenker: What did you most cherish in your tenure?

Wilson: Well, it always come back to people and I think it's certainly the students on this campus that are very talented, engaging, and excited about the future. It's the quality of the faculty and their dedication to what they're doing, it's a very loyal alumni base that we have, and we have here really a wonderful board of trustees, so it's this group of people that has really provided for me the inspiration at every step of the way. I couldn't have asked for more support.

Schlenker: Will the provost be an internal candidate for your seat?

Wilson: Well I have no idea, we just— I'm making my announcement and the search will unfold after the first of the year.

Schlenker: What are your plans for retirement?

Wilson: It's still a little early for us in terms of firm plans. Pat and I have certainly enjoyed living here in Bloomington, we are considering the possibility of making Bloomington our home. On the other hand, from a personal standpoint, I'd like to keep a hand in higher education in some limited way. I don't have anything specific to suggest, but I would like to find a way that I could contribute part-time to higher education in general, if not, higher education in the community or region. So, I'm just sort of open to options at this point. One thing I know for sure, I said to

some friends, you know I have three grandchildren on the west coast and three grandchildren here in Illinois, and Pat and I definitely are going to spend time with them.

Schlenker: Congratulations again, sir.

Wilson: Thank you!

Schlenker: Richard Wilson is the 18th president at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington. I'm Charlie Schlenker.