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President Eric Jensen

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IWU President Eric Jensen: WGLT Sound Ideas Interview, June 8, 2016

Eric Jensen: My first take away is that thank gosh it's the same rhythm as every other academic place. I have been in that rhythm basically my whole life. Whereat, you know, as soon as you get to May or maybe Memorial Day, you get into a... not a necessarily the same easy rhythm you did when you were a kid when school was out but a different rhythm...and you can sort of tackle the bigger projects and really get to work on them. As a professor it meant research or consulting or, you know, sort of the things that you've been waiting to put your hands on and I think the same opportunity is here now. So, it has been a great year...learned a lot...and I am still not fully convergent. There is still a lot of history to learn of the place but I am getting there.

Charlie Schlenker: What are the big projects that you are going to turn your hand to over the summer and in the fall?

Jensen: Well, we are hiring a new vice president for enrollment and marketing. It is a new position for us, and we are really looking forward to somebody who can tie together the many strands that it takes to be competitive recruiting not just in Illinois but nationally and not just to the students to whom we traditionally appeal but perhaps to a more geographically but also economically, ethnically and racially diverse group that we have in the past.

Schlenker: What qualities will make that person?

Jensen: Yeah, well... it is not just that...that person, but it is partly what we have to talk about as an institution with what that person is going to have to sell and then to put it crassly how they sell it. And so part of that is modern communication techniques. We have to get out there in front of students and really hit fifteen, sixteen and seventeen year olds where they live so that they...so that they notice us. Part of that is making sure that we are that place so when they look at us, they say, "yeah I...I want to do that." And one of the great things about a small place like Illinois Wesleyan is that, well, we're small. So we have tight interactions between faculty and students in ways that larger places are just not built to do. You can always find that student, who a colleague of mine referred to them as being on the "golden path"...they are going to be successful and interact well with faculty members no matter where they go. They could be at a larger place like here on the Illinois State campus you know it's built to be a different sort of institution but there are students who get a great deal of personal attention from faculty members. It's just that everybody can't have that level of attention and there are students that we really care about who really we know aren't good at getting that kind of attention for themselves. Like first generation students...they don't know how the system works. They are frankly...the evidence shows that they are a little intimidated by faculty members so they're not going to go and sit down and say, "hey help me work through this thing...help me get a deeper understanding of this thing that I am

interested in.” And we can do that so a lot of what we want to talk about on campus is how do you do that? How do you make sure not just those “golden path” students but every student that walks through that door gets that really deep personal level of attention so that we are bringing out of them their maximum potential...whatever it may be.

Schlenker: How are deposits running and likely enrollment based on that?

Jensen: Well they’re running well for as far as we know. The...the world has changed over the past three or four years. May 1st used to mean something. May 1st means nothing anymore. And so everything that we talk about now is still on the basis of what we think the rest of the recruiting season is going to play out to be. And like many colleges...our recruiting season theoretically could extend until about the first day of class in the fall. So we think we are in a 2% plus or minus but we don’t know at this point.

Schlenker: So have melt rates changed significantly over the last decade? Where people put in that first deposit and then say, “Uh, I change my mind?”

Jensen: No, that’s not really the driver. It’s that there are students who sit back and don’t make a deposit until later than May 1st. We expect that probably about 90% of our deposits will be in by May 1st and that looks like about what has happened. We’re getting a steady trickle.

Schlenker: To nail down a financial aid package though you really do have to make your deposit. So what kinds of...of students are waiting longer nowadays?

Jensen: Well it’s true... the less pressing your financial aid need is, the more flexibility you’re going to understand yourself to have and that’s probably accurate. The less financial aid students need often the more appealing they are to an institution. And so institutions are more willing to have conversations with them. But we are not necessarily seeing that...that it’s students who have small financial need... it’s that we are seeing students who have a range of opportunities who are still open to them and they’re trying to nail down where it is that they’re going to go. That’s why we were having conversations on campus about that... we will never make ourselves irresistible but certainly less resistible to students you know what we really want to talk about is how to draw students who are in many instances willing to come and willing to come for less discount than what they might have been otherwise been willing to come.

Schlenker: So, this is not only key to making enrollment targets the last little bit of 2 plus or minus 2%, these are desirable students from a cash flow perspective. In addition to their own merits as students.

Jensen: Well, yes and I think it...let’s be clear. We are not necessarily looking only at students who want to pay the full amount. Every point of discount that we offer to

students on that is worth not quite a million dollars to us in the end. And so what we would like to be able to do is...to think about well if we wanted to take a point or 2 points off of the average discount that was offered. That's not very much. Tuition is in round numbers...not...not quite 50,000 dollars. We're looking at...we're looking at then something...a discount point being about 500 dollars. So the question would be...is there a way we can make ourselves sufficiently attractive to the average student so that they would be willing to pay the extra 1,000 dollars? And that's not hard to envision.

Schlenker: This is Sound Ideas. I am Charlie Schlenker. We are talking with Eric Jensen, the president of Illinois Wesleyan University. Much has been made of the impact of the Donald Trump candidacy on many parts of American life. Higher education may face an impact of the candidacy regardless of whether he wins. Given Trump's stated desire to ban certain cohorts of international students from coming to the US...is there that concern...and do you expect a downturn in international diversity...because of this trend of thought in the US?

Jensen: I think the trend of thought of somebody being in a position to affect outcomes are two different things. And I'm not sure that...that those kinds of ideas...the kinds of ideas that Trump has talked about have permeated either into higher education admissions or to the students to whom we would like to attract. I think that with much of this, it's kind of a let's...let's wait and see...there's...there's campaign talk and then there is the way the world actually may be.

Schlenker: The biggest higher education piece of news in the last couple of weeks has been the Baylor sexual assault fräckis and the demotion and subsequent resignation of the president, then chancellor, Ken Starr. It indicates that higher ed is still going through this five year old evolution in how it handles sexual assaults and sexual behavior on campus. How do you see it playing out?

Jensen: I think that there are a couple of separable issues here. One is the...the inordinate impact that athletics has on some institutions. One of the wonderful things about Illinois Wesleyan and places like this is that we are a division three school. So we're banned at giving financial aid that is targeted specifically towards athletes and we have athletes are really, truly scholars. Our women's team just won their third national championship in track and field. Those athletes are some of our best students as well and so I think that kind of integration between athletics and academics that we see in division three schools in general and Illinois Wesleyan in particular we're on the list of academic all Americans right between Michigan, my alma amateur, and Duke is an example for places like...unfortunately...like Baylor.

Schlenker: Perhaps I did a disservice to the issue by highlighting Baylor at the start of the conversation...because certainly the investigations that are happening are not limited to the...to the big places. Knox is under investigation in Galesburg for its handling or for its not handling of sexual assault cases. So small institutions are a significant part of the more than the one hundred sixty one investigations that the

US Department of Education and Office of Civil Rights has opened. When such an investigation has been opened it tends to last a long time too. So how are even the smaller institutions paying attention to the moving needle conversation?

Jensen: We have a title nine coordinator who is our associate provost who takes these matters very seriously. When allegations come up we will always investigate them with an eye towards fairness and due process. You can't short circuit that. You have to have every party who's both the accuser and accused have a chance to have their say. And if the issue is that these procedures take a long time well that is partly a plus because we want to make sure that we are taking care to do things in ways that are often spelled out explicitly in procedures that whether there will be a lag of time between this happening and that happening to allow for sufficient preparation. We take them very seriously.

Schlenker: The length of time that due process takes though, comes with another risk that can't ban people from campus during that time until justice has been decided. That can place an alleged victim in a state of fear or stress. One of the hot points in procedural matters for many campuses is whether the accused has to undergo student judiciary proceedings in the same room as the accuser. And the accuser is arguing sometimes that there is stress to that involved having to be in the presence of who allegedly raped or sexually assaulted them. How does Illinois Wesleyan negotiate these fine points that are difficult on both sides?

Jensen: Our process as I understand it and I am going to offer the disclaimer that this happens at administrative level that appropriately I'm not directly involved with because in the end I am going to be the one...if there is a difficult decision...going to have to weigh the competing evidence. My understanding of it is that we take separate statements from the individuals and we use that as input into a process where our best attempt is to give all parties fair representation without direct confrontation.

Schlenker: There are also efforts spearheaded by the Illinois Trinity General to legislate procedural matters both in the police and in the training of university people. How is Illinois Wesleyan participating in that conversation?

Jensen: I am not sure where we are on that conversation. I know that there was...there was a piece of legislation that has been proposed in the current year that had to do with whether or not an institution could ask why an individual had been dismissed by a previous institution...who was trying to transfer into a given college or university in Illinois and the proposed legislation was that we couldn't ask. That we couldn't ask why it was...that they had to leave another place. There are obvious dangers there and it is my understanding that...that legislation is now a dead letter, so we are going to be fully compliant with the legislation that we are faced with but we are relieved that this is not a piece that we are going to have to deal with.

Schlenker: It illustrates how difficult it all is coming from a variety of sectors. The state sector...the federal sector...discussions within higher education as well...

Jensen: I think that's right and for me a lot of just as I started my...my education coming...one of the biggest things I have had to learn about is how the Illinois political system works and the answer for as far as I can tell is that it.

Schlenker: that is doesn't

Jensen: ...doesn't. We have a group of private college university presidents who went and met with the speaker as a group and with the governor as a group about two weeks ago and essentially we heard from the speaker that the problem is that the governor from the governor the problems of the speaker and we didn't really see what the path forward might be you know one of...one of the issues of that which I think many people see is that there are long term structural problems in Illinois. As an economist you know, these deficits at some point they're going to have to be dealt with. For example, the governor talks about the long game and trying to take care of these things and we as college presidents try to make clear well that we are your long game and in a very real sense we are cranking out the graduates that are going to be making a difference to Illinois employers in five years or in ten years. And if we are impeded in our ability to crank them out by among others the failure to honor MAP grants, that's going to have long term consequences in the same way that a failure to reduce a budget gap may have in the long run and of course you know there is the logical story and there is the political story and I think that so far the political story is...is winning the right word to use here? The political story is dominating the outcome for sure.

Schlenker: Much has been made about how public higher education has a brand and Illinois has been damaged by the budget standoff but how much is private education taking a hit as well?

Jensen: That's a good question. There are some privates that apparently are up in enrollment. It looks like some of the Chicago Urban...Loyola, DePaul...kind of institutions are up a little bit and the rest of us seem to be holding roughly...roughly steady. Where the students are not going to Illinois publics are going isn't clear. It's a rumor mill at this point. Did I mention that we are still not sure when enrollment is going to be in different...in different places...and I think that's true. I think currently the thinking...the thinking is that Iowa has been benefiting. That Missouri has issues and so Iowa, Minnesota, and to some extent even Wisconsin institutions are seeing more Illinois students but at this point that is anecdotal.

Schlenker: Okay...and how much is the MAP grant in certainty affecting you?

Jensen: We're reassuring our students that we are...we are in their corner and that they...we are doing everything that we can do for them. The students on their bills were curating a sort of unpaid debt into the spring so we put together a grant

program where we essentially wiped that debt off for the fall semester of last year. And in the spring semester we offered every student a combination of grants or loans depending on their financial situation to bridge the gap left by the state's failure to honor their commitment to MAP. And we have told both perspective students and continuing students that we are going to work with them...should we need to do this again in the coming year...what specific form that will take is up in the air but it is one of those things where it is the morally right thing to do and we want to shield our students from the shenanigans in Springfield to the extent that we can. It's not their fault and these...these are the most vulnerable students...if they are MAP recipients...they are relatively low income...they need our help...and it's also best for us financially to keep those students in place and so we will work with the students.

Schlenker: There is no free lunch... what Domino had to topple for you to make that guarantee and that flexibility for them?

Jensen: Well we do what...what a family would do...when faced with an unexpected expense...we had to dip into our savings...our endowment to do that. We have a very supportive board of trustees who are...who are understanding of the situation in Springfield and supportive of the students in the institution...so we're able to do that. And that's obviously finite...just like a family you've only got so much of the savings account you can draw upon and we certainly have limits to what we can do. Our limits are many other privates in the state are facing...probably tighter limits...and it's a very...it's a very tough situation.

Schlenker: Eric Jensen is the president of Illinois Wesleyan University. Thanks so much for joining us.

Jensen: Thank you Charlie.

Schlenker: I am Charlie Schlenker.