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Welcoming Remarks for Founders' Day Convocation
by President Richard F. Wilson

February 9, 2005

“By our patronage to Illinois Wesleyan University we not only bestow upon those we send to her halls of science the inestimable boon of a sanctified education; we aid in erecting an Institution of Learning which shall shed brightness on all the land around and send down floods of light and blessedness upon generations yet to come.”

This concluding paragraph of a Circular distributed early in 1851 represented the first admissions brochure for Illinois Wesleyan University. A thousand copies of this advertisement were printed and distributed throughout Central Illinois. The Circular noted that a preparatory school had already been in operation for six months and explained that the Trustees had hoped to hire a representative who would travel the countryside and make personal appeals to students to come to the college. Since they were unable to find a “suitable agent” for this purpose, they relied instead upon what we would today call a “direct mail” campaign - this one-page Circular, which advertises a “competent College Faculty, commodious rooms in the basement of the new church edifice,” and boarding for students at \$2 a week, including “fuel, lights, bed and bedding.”

Those who had founded this new college surely recognized that they had to make a case to the parents about just why it was important to send their sons - and at this early juncture it was only sons - to receive this instruction. They began with the patriotic approach, observing that “The great interests of our beloved country demand that our children should be educated.” Who could argue with that?

The harder sell came several paragraphs later in the following passage:

“We urge it upon parents to send us their sons and qualify them for the business, social and religious relations of life. Better forego their help upon your farms, and in your shops, and hire the necessary labor in which you now have them employed, and bear the expense of their education, than when you leave the world, leave them uneducated and unqualified to manage your estates, and accomplish your incomplete plans and purposes of life. The authors of this Circular were not above using a bit of fear mixed with a healthy dose of guilt in developing their argument, were they?

I believe it is instructive for us to recognize what I think I read in these words and in the history of this institution, stretching from that day to this one. And that is the passionate, unwavering belief in the transformative power of education. Underpinning all of these arguments on behalf of this new educational enterprise was the uncompromising sense that education was more than just important, it was indispensable.

The 30 founders of our University were pioneers in the truest sense. They were lawyers and doctors, teachers and ministers, tradesmen and mechanics and farmers. They were known collectively as “substantial citizens” of Central Illinois. And they all believed fervently that “the education of nothing less than the whole American mind...” was essential.

We can recall today that our Institution of Learning was formed to “shed brightness on all the land around and send down floods of light and blessedness upon generations yet to come.”

So, as we gather this morning to recognize our founding, we ought to pause for a moment in appreciation of all that has been accomplished.

Nothing has heartened me more in the past several weeks than listening to members of this community in various venues discuss their own thoughts about the future direction for the University. As we continue to work together on developing a plan to guide the University's work in the years ahead, we are asking ourselves important questions, basic questions.

As I have listened, I have heard a variety of opinions about our current strengths and our weaknesses. And I have heard different ideas about the particular directions we might take, about the priorities that we should adopt.

What I take away from these conversations, however, are not the differences. I am well aware that not everyone will agree on the specific goals that we should adopt. Nor will everyone agree on the order in which we choose to tackle those projects on which we do finally agree. That is inevitable and understandable.

All of this will work out in good time. We will arrive at our goals. We will choose carefully. We will move forward with confidence and with conviction.

What I now know without doubt is that we will surely agree on the basic premise that Illinois Wesleyan is a place of significance, a place worthy of the loyalty and devotion of generations.

We are surely a different institution today than when that flyer was sent around in 1851. Our campus today is far more than merely “commodious” and our faculty is, I daresay, far more than just “competent.”

But now, as then, I hope that you will sense the excitement of new opportunities and how critically important it is that we seize these opportunities. “We stand in a position of incalculable responsibility...” So begins the inscription on the Founders' Day Gates. Standing together, we must continue to cultivate this University so that we may continue to “send down floods of light and blessedness upon generations yet to come.”