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More Ways to Engage

Alumni Association leaders expand connections through regional and affinity groups.

Story by SARAH (ZELLER) JULIAN '07

Whether they are enjoying an on-campus reunion or a regional get-together, many alumni may be unaware of the thought and effort behind the dozens of Illinois Wesleyan Alumni Association events scheduled each year.

Founded in 2000, the IWU Alumni Association reaches across the country and the globe, uniting alumni for fun, networking and volunteer opportunities. “The association is open to all graduates and all current and former students who have successfully completed one semester of coursework at IWU, and there is no membership fee,” says Ann Harding, director of Alumni Relations.

A 25-member Alumni Executive Board helps set initiatives for the association as it seeks new ways to strengthen alumni bonds with the University and with each other. Executive Board members serve three-year terms and travel from around the country to attend two annual on-campus meetings, which are also open to all alumni. The board also has a representative on the University’s Board of Trustees. That representative, Tracy Wych '77, helps provide “a two-way flow of information” between the boards, says Marsha Guenzler-Stevens '78, who was elected president of the Executive Board last spring.



Alumni meet at a recent Minority Alumni Network event. The Alumni Association supports regional and young alumni clubs as well as affinity groups such as the Greek Alumni Network and the Pride Alumni Community. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

interests. “We discovered they wanted to make connections by more than just a class year,” says Scott Huch '86, the board’s chair of auxiliary groups. “That was really where we got the idea for the auxiliary groups.”

Guenzler-Stevens has been involved with IWU’s Alumni Association since its inception. “I think back in the day, alumni came back for Homecoming and it was terrific,” she says. “They were really good about keeping up with their classmates.” However, a series of challenges — whether related to location or lifestyle — has made it harder for many alumni to reconnect with campus on a regular basis. “What we’re doing now is trying to find ways in which we engage alumni at all kinds of levels,” Guenzler-Stevens says.

Board members noted the interest alumni had in meeting others who shared common backgrounds and

Those groups include regional and young alumni clubs, the Minority Alumni Network, the Greek Alumni Network, and the Pride Alumni Community for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. Most of those groups were added within the last four years.

“For the board, reaching out to other affinity groups is a long-term goal,” Harding says. “It takes some time for new committees to really grow legs.” One of the recent successes is the Council for IWU Women, which formed in 2006 and drew more than 40 alumnae from across the country for its annual summit meeting last spring.

Each group is headed by a different leader, and Huch oversees the process. “My duty is to always be asking, ‘What more can we do to help?’ and to try to be an advocate for all of those groups.”

To reach out to IWU graduates who reside far from campus, Guy Gebhardt, class of 1969, leads the board’s regional alumni clubs. “It mainly involves sharing ideas with regional alumni club presidents,” Gebhardt says. “Through conference calls, we talk about what we’re going to do and what works. Some things work in some cities better than others. A lot of clubs like to have one big event a year; other clubs like to have several events a year.” In his hometown of Atlanta, the regional alumni club sponsors a holiday party each December at a club member’s home. Activities vary by region, including connections for Titan away games or big-league sporting events, museum visits, events hosting guests speakers from the University and more.

“The farther away folks are from the Illinois Wesleyan campus, the more difficult it is to come back for Homecoming,” says Gebhardt. “Regional club events offer a way to not only meet and get to know fellow alumni in your city — they are also a great way to share common experiences about Wesleyan and to receive updates on new things happening at IWU.”

Especially rewarding to many Alumni Association volunteers is the chance to assist current students. The Minority Alumni Network’s new chair, Tony Gray ’98, enjoys mentoring students, as well as helping recruit prospective Titans in the San Francisco area where he lives. “The satisfaction is personal, it’s emotional,” he says. “Talking with the students, helping them with their career decisions or telling them about the benefits of a Wesleyan education — that’s when you realize why you do it.”



Marsha Guenzler-Stevens (above) formed the Council of IWU Women as a way to connect alumni with students. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Helping students is also what motivated Guenzler-Stevens to form the Council for IWU Women. “I want to make sure they have opportunities and access to a network of people who may be helpful to them in their careers or in internships. To me, that’s an exciting role that alumni can play. That’s what keeps me coming back, that investment in the next generation.”

In addition to helping current IWU students, Executive Board members said their dedication to the Alumni Association stems from lifelong feelings of gratitude to Illinois Wesleyan.

“It’s not a lot of time and energy — it’s a pleasure for me,” says Gebhardt. “This is a way for me to give back to the University. My IWU education allowed me to go on to law school, and the success and happiness I’ve achieved in life I attribute, in large part, to Wesleyan.”

Huch notes that financial assistance he received as a student helped change the course of his future. “Even with my parents’ very dedicated support, I would not have been able to afford an Illinois Wesleyan education if it had not been for the scholarships I received,” he says. “Those four years were some of the best years of my life. ... I feel an obligation to try to help Illinois Wesleyan.”

Plenty of other alumni feel the same way, Huch believes, which he attributes to the recent growth in attendance at Alumni Association-sponsored events. “If you look at Homecoming attendance over the last several years,” he says, “it has grown considerably. This is also true of events we’re doing out in the regions,” including a recent reception with President Richard F. Wilson in Washington, D.C., which drew around 50 participants. “We’re continuing to see numbers like that around the country,” Huch says.



As chair of auxiliary groups, Scott Huch (above, right) seeks to unite alumni by their common interests. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Still, the board isn’t resting on its laurels. “We know that we are not reaching all of the regions and all the interest groups represented by our alumni body,” Harding says. The Greek Alumni Network is just getting started, she notes, and the board continues to investigate ways to better work with groups such as School of Nursing graduates, former Titan athletes and alumni who attended Wesleyan’s fine arts schools.

Gray says the Minority Alumni Network, which traditionally draws many alumni who participated in the Black Student Union, is developing strategies to reach out to Latino and Asian graduates. More leaders within particular groups and regions are always needed, Gray adds.

“Right now, we have a few people doing a lot of things,” he says. “It’d be so much better if we had a lot of people doing a few things.”

Board members believe strongly in fostering worthwhile connections between alumni and their university.

“I think we all would like the alumni of Illinois Wesleyan to feel like they’re always part of the school and that it never leaves them, no matter where they are or what they do,” Gebhardt says. “I believe that’s the goal of everybody on the Executive Board.”