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Eric Jensen on New IWU Scholarship Program

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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with Eric Jensen, February 8, 2018

Mike McCurdy: Illinois Wesleyan University is dramatically increasing financial awards for McLean County High School graduates who choose IWU in Bloomington. University President Eric Jensen has announced a program to offer at least \$27,000 a year in assistance for enrollees from the local area and often more. This will help McLean County students to the tune of about \$3500 above the average award. GLT's Charlie Schlenker spoke with Jensen at the Shirk Center after the announcement Wednesday night. He says IWU wants to help the university be a special place through the initiative but there's also value to the community from focusing on local enrollment.

Eric Jensen: Well I think it's – there's at least two reasons come to mind immediately. One is that we are a part of this community and we want to express our commitment to Bloomington-Normal. It's a special place. It's a kind of a tight-knit community. You know, we've talked before, I'm still relatively new here but it's striking to an outsider how tight-knit it is, and it's a community that's very well educated. I think the best educated metropolitan area in Illinois so we've got a very strong base of from which to draw –families that value education that have smart, well-educated high school graduates coming out. From our point of view, also we're trying to build these interactive experiences for students where they have some ownership over their education... signature experiences, signature work, whatever you'd like to call that and that's going to involve interactions with people in the community. What better way to get those things rolling in a big way than we have students that are already also familiar with the... what's happening in the community.

Charlie Schlenker: What advantage does that get for, say, someone who goes into an internship if they are local as opposed to in a different community?

Jensen: Well, first off, it's more than an internship. It's really a sort of a high-content, a faculty-mentored kind of experience that involves also collaboration with outsiders in a way that an internship might. And I think part of that is identifying the thing that lights you up, you know, what is that that you know about a place that you realize, 'Well, I wish that were different' or 'I wish I could work on that issue' or 'I wish,' you know 'in some way that I could have a hand in that,' and I think that if you have people who have grown up in town, people who have got some familiarity with these things that they're in some ways more educated consumers and what those things might be. They may have been exposed to them in community service work they did in high school or in some other venue.

Schlenker: So what are a couple of examples of how that sort of background could make someone more effective in the interactions with faculty or in an internship or in a project out in the community?

Jensen: Well, I think the interactions with faculty... we're gonna count on our high-quality students to be, you know, sort of part of that no matter where they come from, but if you think

about maybe somebody who has some exposure to... I don't know... they went to the YMCA as kids and the YWCA has kids and the Y was interested in expanding a particular service and the question would be, you know, my example would be economics 'cause I'm an economist. I'll pick something I'm familiar with – that why I wanna know what the sort of market, what the sort of recoverable fees might be for a particular program that they wanna start to do some outreach in the community. Well, you know, we'd have students who were able to do that, who maybe even knew the people involved at the YMCA. We're gonna slot right in and with a level of trust and familiarity that somebody who came from outside wouldn't necessarily have.

Schlenker: Many internships for someone who's not in their home community require extra expense. Does this make it easier for them to accept certain kinds of workplace experiences?

Jensen: It could. Part of what we want to do is be able to help fund those kind of extra expenses as they come up. As we develop these signature experiences we want to be able to support our faculty and our students in doing things that have merit on their own. And if some financial concern is a stumbling block, we'd like to find ways around that. So hopefully that's not a huge concern. We're not often talking about extra living expenses. I mean, I suppose students could live at home while doing the internship. I'm not sure if that's the alternative that many would pursue.

Schlenker: We're talking current enrolment that is local is about 7%. This could bump it up from 25 to 35 kids to up to 45 kids per cohort you're saying. That doesn't seem like a big number but why is that a really meaningful number to you?

Jensen: Well, we're small. You know, what we do is very personal. In fact, we're proud of the fact that what we do isn't really scalable. We couldn't do what we do on a really large scale. So if you think about enrolment, pick around a number like 2000. If we have 10% of our students from McLean County, if we have that 50 a year, and I think it's probably and initially going to be lower than that – a number like that, but if we had that number, that's the significant share of the students from... from... that are enrolled here – who are local. We get about 10 a year from New Orleans. So we're gonna have 40 students who are from New Orleans. What a nice thing to be able to have the locals bring the New Orleans kids home for dinner and maybe the New Orleans kids bring the locals down there. Well, let's not say the Mardi Gras. They'd miss class but, you know, the... it could get a little exchange program going.

Schlenker: Is there a benefit to the community over a generational course of a life spent starting with an Illinois Wesleyan University education?

Jensen: I know a large number of people in town who are Illinois Wesleyan alums. They seek me out 'cause of my job. Everybody is very friendly and welcoming and the number of these people who have made enormous differences in town is remarkable. Let's start with somebody like Ed Rust and the impact of State Farm on the community. The number of people at State Farm who are Illinois Wesleyan grads is part of their... part of their careers is enormous and so I think

we've, through the years had a deeply formative impact on this community. A huge number of the key contributors to the community are Illinois Wesleyan grads – maybe a disproportionate number. I don't know enough of the community say that for sure but I think the notion that we can continue to that moving forward is important.

Schlenker: What is the tendency of home grown graduates to stay in a home community? Or what is the tendency of any graduate anywhere to stay in the community that they graduate from?

Jensen: What we know historically is that if you're at a place at the present time, you're more likely to have had some experiences prior, including potentially going to school or growing up there, or something like that. We're a mobile country, you know, people move in the US from place to place. If anything, I would guess that trend is gonna accelerate, you know. You hear these statistics that students are gonna do, they graduate in the next few years, they're gonna have not just different jobs but 7 or 8 different careers over their lifetimes. If those careers were separated geographically, I wouldn't be surprised. So I'm not gonna speculate on the future, but it's a fair guess, I would say that if somebody were educated here, they'd be more likely to stay than if they weren't.

Mike McCurdy: IWU President Eric Jensen speaking with GLT's Charlie Schlenker. Jensen says the university will pay for the awards through a four-year \$2 million fundraising campaign. Local support will bring total tuition down to about \$20,000. Jensen says that's only about \$4,000 more a year than Illinois State University tuition. You're listening to Sound Ideas on GLT.