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## Work in Progress

Nancy Steele Brokaw '71  
*Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu*

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# Work in Progress

**Five years after his inauguration as IWU's 18th president Richard F. Wilson looks ahead with confidence.**

**Story by NANCY (STEELE) BROKAW '71  
Photos by MARC FEATHERLY**

At this year's Founders' Day Convocation on Feb. 17, President Richard F. Wilson invited an audience of faculty, students and guests to take a long view.

“Although the past two years have presented many challenges,” Wilson said, “we only have to look back at the history of Illinois Wesleyan for perspective and confidence. One cannot ignore the fact that the times leading up to our founding in 1850 were, much like today, ones of great promise and yet posed significant challenges for the leaders of our community and the nation.”

For Wilson, and the University, the past two years have indeed been a challenge. During that time, the president has met often with faculty, students and staff to explain how Illinois Wesleyan was affected by the recent downturn of U.S. and world economies. He's also had to make tough decisions on ways to keep the University within its budget while preparing for its future.



**President Richard F. Wilson**

In announcing some of those decisions at this fall's first faculty meeting, he was met “not with skepticism, but with an expectation of leadership,” says Brian Hatcher, the McFee Professor and chair of the University's religion department.

“He deals with things with honesty and transparency,” says Hatcher, “and he wants people to know why they happen.” Hatcher recalls being impressed by those same qualities while serving on the presidential search committee that unanimously recommended Wilson's appointment in the spring of 2004.

With a Ph.D. in education and more than 30 years experience in private and public education, Wilson took office as IWU's 18th president on July 1, 2004. His official inauguration was held April 9, 2005. Since then, Wilson has had time to leave his mark on the institution in ways that reflect his personality and leadership style.

"I've watched over the past years," says University Trustee Susan Waring, "and in all areas, Dick Wilson is who he said he was. There's not a hidden agenda.

"I know Dick has had some sleepless nights because of the recent financial issues so many organizations are facing," adds Waring, a State Farm executive vice president who also served on the presidential search committee. "But he remains focused on giving students the education for which they came to the University."

"The recession has forced me and other college presidents to spend more time on financial matters," Wilson says. "And we often must choose between unattractive alternatives to solve a problem."

The investment strategy followed by the University in recent years provided some protection during the stock-market declines that cut many personal and corporate portfolios in half in 2008-2009. Still, the University's endowment value dropped by approximately 20 percent. Because a percentage of the annual operating budget comes from the endowment, its decline in value meant a large projected deficit for the 2009-10 fiscal year unless serious budget adjustments were made. In response, Wilson announced belt-tightening measures that included across-the-board operating budget reductions, a salary freeze, changes in selected benefit programs and a pause in hiring to allow time for positions to be reviewed and reauthorized.



**In the new Joslin Atrium, the president chats with students.**

Wilson remains determined to avoid the kinds of drastic steps — such as staff cuts and program eliminations — seen recently at many other colleges and universities. And, he is happy to note, there are several bright indicators on the horizon. Those include some investment recovery, an increase in the number of applications for admission for next fall and the launch of a capital campaign that so far has raised gifts and pledges of \$80 million from alumni and friends.

"We've addressed some long-standing budget issues for this University," says Wilson, "and we've established a base budget from which we can work. I believe we're in a much better position to address the challenges and opportunities that will

arise.”

Former IWU Student Senate President Babawande Afolabi '10 says he learned valuable lessons about leadership from watching Wilson handle recent economic challenges. “He’d rather deal with tough stuff now,” says Afolabi. “Otherwise, he says, it will come back to haunt you.”

While serving as a student representative on several University committees, Afolabi was also impressed by Wilson’s style of “consulting widely.”

“At some schools,” Afolabi says, “students have to fight to get their voices heard. Here, it’s expected.”

Afolabi vividly remembers how Wilson heard his voice in a much more personal way during his first-year orientation. An international student from Nigeria, Afolabi hit a financial snag that put his ability to attend Wesleyan in jeopardy. Feeling he’d run out of options, he scheduled a return flight to Africa. The night before his planned departure, he found himself at the front door of the President’s House.

“Mrs. Wilson let me in,” Afolabi recalls with a fond smile, “even though it was late. I got to talk to President Wilson and he was able to delay things a bit and I got my funding. Everything wonderful that’s happened to me was because of that night.”

Talk with Dick Wilson’s colleagues about his leadership style, and the same words often come up — “calm,” “measured,” “engaged.”

“He’s a measure-twice, cut-once sort of guy,” sums up Dean of Students Kathy Cavins.

“Everything is logical and methodical with him,” says Assistant Alumni Director Trevor Sierra '05, who has worked closely with Wilson since his days serving as IWU Student Senate president.

“President Wilson has an ability to see particular systems and structures and not lose sight of the big picture,” Hatcher says. “He’s conveyed a business side ... without reducing us to a big-business model, because that’s not what a university is.”



**As president, Wilson meets with campus guests such as environmental-justice advocate Dorceta Taylor (right), who spoke at this year’s Founders’ Day Convocation.**

That approach could be seen from the start of Wilson's administration. He led the Strategic Planning Steering Committee, which set goals for enhancing key areas such as teaching and learning, student development, identity and financial resources. Work groups were appointed to develop specific strategies to meet those goals, and the Board of Trustees approved the final plan in early 2006.

Many of those strategic goals are reflected in the five-year, \$125 million Transforming Lives campaign. Nearly 80 percent of the campaign goal will go to support student scholarships, need-based financial aid and faculty and program endowments.

"As you know, great institutions are never allowed the luxury of standing still," Wilson said at the campaign's opening gala in May. "This campaign is about helping our University transform lives. It's as simple and powerful as that."

Putting strong winds behind the campaign's sails prior to its official launch were \$73 million in donations and pledges received from alumni and friends. Of special note was an endowment gift valued at \$25 million — the largest ever received given to the University — made by Honorary Campaign Chairs B. Charles Ames '50 and Joyce Eichhorn Ames '49. Of that gift, \$10 million provides for a matching fund to create new endowed professorships that will honor and support outstanding faculty.

Keeping Illinois Wesleyan strong through faculty support reflects one of Wilson's key concerns as president. It's what he calls the "core of the University: the people who are here — students, faculty and staff — as well as the programs that we offer.

"As I travel around the country and talk with alumni and ask them about their experience here, it always comes back to people," he says. "It comes back to a professor or a staff member or a classmate who made a difference at a particular point in time. And so what we're doing in this campaign is simply building on that relationship and that concern for the core of the institution."



**The Illinois Wesleyan community turned out in full at the Hansen Student Center in 2004 to meet Wilson when he was**

**introduced as IWU's new president. He previously served as an associate chancellor and vice president at the University of Illinois.**

Another of Wilson's priorities is to make sure the University is helping students prepare for the demands of a rapidly changing society. Toward that

end, he remains committed to filling classrooms with bright young Titans who reflect the diversity of our country and the globalization of our world.

When he was Student Senate president, Sierra notes, "diversity was the number-one issue among students. And on that issue alone, Dick has been wildly successful. When you walk around the campus now, it feels like a different place."

"Students and staff want us to be seen as a global university," says Wilson, "and students want to encounter sectors of society they will encounter again when they leave here. Enhancing the diversity of this campus and the experience students have here has stayed at the top of my list."

Adapting to new challenges while embracing a set of strong core values is one of the things liberal arts colleges do best, Wilson says. "It's also an important reason why so many of our alumni are leading successful and satisfying lives."

"If you look at our history," he reflects, "you see a remarkable vitality, an ability to change, to bounce back from adversity and move ahead. Yet, at the same time, Illinois Wesleyan has held on to a strong sense of identity that was here from its beginnings."

When asked to reflect on his own role in shaping Illinois Wesleyan's history, Wilson refers to words carved on the University's Founders' Gates. "We stand in a position of incalculable responsibility..."

"All of us who are a part of this institution share that responsibility," Wilson says. "And part of the mission for this generation should be to carry that sense of responsibility out into our communities and our world."

"I think that's a legacy we can all embrace."