



Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017

Volume 18
Issue 4 *Winter 2009-2010*

Article 7

Winter 2009

Dollars and Dreams

Rachel Hatch

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag>

Recommended Citation

Hatch, Rachel (2009) "Dollars and Dreams," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, 2002-2017: Vol. 18 : Iss. 4 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol18/iss4/7>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the University and/or the author of this document.

Dollars and Dreams

As economic challenges grow for Illinois Wesleyan students and their families, so does the need for financial aid.

Story by RACHEL HATCH

The buzz of lively conversation and laughter fills the room on a typical fall morning at the Hansen Student Center. Between sips of coffee, Lynn Nicholson takes in the scene with a smile of appreciation. Retiring in 2009 after more than four decades as director of Financial Aid at Illinois Wesleyan, Nicholson recognizes the faces of many of the students who surround him. And he knows their stories.

During his tenure, Nicholson estimates he worked with somewhere between 11,000 and 13,000 students and their families — what he likes to call “the faces of financial aid.” Leaning forward, he recalls a recent conversation with one of those students. “He stopped by my office to talk about his aid package. He began by telling me that he was now able to concentrate on his studies and otherwise function the way a student should. He felt that he could comfortably handle his bills without wondering where his next dollar was coming from,” as he had at the large state university he’d transferred from to attend Wesleyan.

Nicholson knows how big of a distraction financial worries can be for a student who is already dealing with a full plate of academic and extracurricular challenges. Such distractions have become more common in the wake of a national economic downturn that’s created an unprecedented need for aid at colleges and universities across the country. Illinois Wesleyan administrators are anticipating the need to increase the University’s financial aid budget for the coming fiscal year to help address the rising need.

At Illinois Wesleyan, nine out of 10 students receive some form of assistance, whether through scholarship or need-based aid. Overall, more than half the student body requires need-based financial assistance, meaning they would be unable to attend school without this help. On average, these financial aid packages for IWU students total approximately \$25,000 per year.



Lynn Nicholson estimates he worked with somewhere between 11,000 and 13,000 students and their families during his tenure. He is shown above at his retirement party in 2009 and during his early days as IWU’s first director of financial aid.

“My role was the role financial aid served throughout the country — to make a college education possible for the kids,” says Nicholson, reflecting on his work to help create Illinois Wesleyan’s Financial Aid Office back in the 1960s. “I cannot believe the stories that I hear about what students have done with their lives, and what they have been able to do with their careers, because of the quality education they received from Illinois Wesleyan. IWU opened doors for them, and financial assistance opened the doors of IWU to them.”

Before 1965, Nicholson says, schools were generally on their own to find the means to help students who could not afford tuition. Along with limited state grants, Illinois Wesleyan relied on the generosity of alumni and friends to fund University-sponsored grant and loan programs along with student employment.

Circumstances changed dramatically with the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which vastly increased the amount of federal loan money available to universities. Federal aid was further boosted by the Education Opportunity Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965. These acts, for the first time, provided federal grants, low-interest loans and work-study programs for students.

Colleges suddenly had access to a large pool of funds available for financial aid, but with a minimum of guidance from Congress on how to access it. Prior to that time, Nicholson recalls how in 1963 — one year after he joined Illinois Wesleyan as its assistant dean of students — he was summoned to the office of then-University President Lloyd M. Bertholf. As Nicholson recalls it, “He said, ‘You have a degree in economics. Your charge will be to interview anyone and everyone who has control of any part of financial aid on campus. Bring everything together into a financial aid office. Organize it and make it work.’”

With a Smith Corona typewriter he kept from his college days and a 12-column accounting spreadsheet, Nicholson set up shop in his office with no support staff. “Financial aid as a profession was in its early infancy then, so everyone was really working on figuring out the nuts and bolts,” says Nicholson, who was among a core of administrators charged with building fair and comprehensive aid policies at schools across the United States.

By the late 1960s, the University provided between 600 and 700 students (about 60 percent of the student body) annually with need-based financial aid packages. Says Nicholson, “I spent a lot of time listening to parents and students, figuring out what they needed, and explaining that, yes, this place was affordable.”

Amanda Toney-Logan ’74 is among the many IWU alumni who Nicholson helped guide through the complexities of their aid packages as students. “Without financial aid, I would not have been able to go to Illinois Wesleyan,” she says.



Illinois Wesleyan students attended a rally in Springfield to encourage restoration of financial aid through the Monetary Award Program (MAP).

tradition we want to continue here at Illinois Wesleyan.”

The desire to give close individual attention to students’ financial needs has grown more challenging as the volume of that need increases. “Even 15 or 20 years ago, students were just not aware of what financial aid could do for them,” says Seibring. “An awareness of college costs has led to a greater awareness of financial aid.”

The growing gap between aid and costs of higher education has been identified as a key concern of the Obama administration, according to Ed Pacchetti ’91, deputy director of the U.S. Secretary of Education’s Office of Postsecondary Education. Pacchetti, who received financial aid while attending IWU, says, “Financial aid has never been more important to the future of our country to ensure our labor force can be economically competitive in a global market.

“The United States was once on top for the percentage of the population attending higher education,” Pacchetti continues. “We’ve dropped, and it is President Obama’s goal to bring that back up by 2020. One way to regain that top spot is to get students from the growing population of lower-income families into college and have those students stay in college.”

Sitting across from the head of Financial Aid could be intimidating, Toney-Logan recalls, but she knew Nicholson would always find answers to her questions.

“When I first met Lynn, he was so serious, but he always listened to me. And he did an excellent job keeping people in school,” says Toney-Logan, a former IWU trustee who is now a circuit court judge in Cook County, Ill. “He knew what had to be done and did it. It lifted the burden off of me and helped relieve the stress of school.”

That key idea of listening continues as a legacy of financial aid at IWU, according to Scott Seibring ’85, who became director of Financial Aid in 2007 when Nicholson stepped down to become assistant dean of enrollment management.

“Everyone knows Lynn has set up a foundation for financial aid that is invaluable for the University,” says Seibring. “But the part that has always impressed me most about Lynn is how he listened carefully to the concerns and issues of each student and their family. That’s a

According to a report issued by the non-profit College Board, over the past 10 years, grant aid per undergraduate student increased at a yearly average of 3.4 percent after adjusting for inflation. Forty-one percent of that aid was provided by colleges and universities, 32 percent by the federal government, 11 percent by states and 16 percent by private sources. At the same time, the report states, “student borrowing continued to increase, as did the gap between available resources and the overall cost of attending college.”

Illinois Wesleyan University provides 85 percent of all the financial aid its students receive — in total, more than \$25 million in grant assistance annually, along with its own funding of loans and campus employment. The remaining aid comes from federal and state programs. Recently, more than 430 IWU students were notified that the state did not have resources to fund Monetary Award Program (MAP) grants, which assist some 138,000 students across the state. In October, more than 2,000 of those students, including nine from Illinois Wesleyan, rallied at the state capital to save the MAP program. (At our press time, the Illinois legislature had voted to restore MAP grants for the spring 2010 semester, though the source of funding remained undetermined.)

Among those at the Springfield rally was IWU sophomore Ara Holiday. “It was incredible,” she says. “There was so much excitement.” In particular, she remembers fellow students’ stories about how their future education depended on the grants.

Holiday’s own MAP grant covers nearly \$5,000 of her annual college expenses. “My father died when I was 16, and my mother had to raise four kids on one income,” Holiday explains. “She took a second job, and always worked to get us the things we needed and wanted. This school was one of the things I wanted.”

Holiday works as well, spending 15 hours a week or more between campus jobs at the Office of Residential Life and as a psychology tutor. “It can be like taking another class, going over materials for the class so I can help tutor,” Holiday says. “It can be stressful when my load is heavy, but I’m glad I’m able to do it.”

Resourcefulness has long been a hallmark trait of Illinois Wesleyan students, says Seibring, but he worries about the toll. “Our students will find a way to make it work, but at what price?” he asks. “I think working toward your financial aid is great, but some students are working two to three jobs, up to 20 to 30 hours a week. That becomes too much and is a sacrifice to their education. Financial aid should not only allow people to attend the school, but attend with reasonable expectations.”

Another burden that’s increasing for college students is the amount of debt they are carrying. Even with the billions of dollars



Sophomores Ara Holiday, Kathryn Breisch, and Marqui Fairchild find a common cause at the MAP rally. As the need for financial aid grows, several sources for that aid are shrinking.

given out in state, federal and institutional money, the College Board estimates nearly \$2 billion in additional loans are taken out each year by students from government and private sources to help finance their educations. Currently, two-thirds of Illinois Wesleyan students incur some debt, with an average cumulative loan of \$24,234.

“When I went to school at Illinois Wesleyan, the University was able to find a way to meet 100 percent of our students’ demonstrated financial need,” says Seibring. “I think it would surprise a lot of alumni to know that Illinois Wesleyan, like a lot of other colleges, can no longer afford to do that. We have to look to students to fill the gaps with personal loans.”

Nichelson agrees. “We are concerned about students getting up to their eyebrows in loans,” he says. “They work, which takes time from their college studies. Financial aid levels the playing field and answers a growing need.”

Both Nicholson and Seibring have hopes that the University’s ongoing *Transforming Lives* capital campaign will help to alleviate some of the burden on students. Of the \$125 million campaign goal total, \$30 million is marked for student scholarships such as need-based Promise Awards, which are designed to bridge the gap between student need and University resources.

“Ideas like the Promise gifts are so exciting,” says Seibring, “because it will help us move toward the goal of meeting the financial need of all deserving students and to ensure that a rich diversity of students can attend Illinois Wesleyan.”

Nichelson concurs, adding it is his wish that alumni and friends remember that financial aid provides opportunity for real people. “After so many years of speaking with families and working with students, it is the ‘faces of financial aid’ that I think about,” says Nicholson. “These are people who will do amazing things, but need help now so they can do them.”