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## President Georgia Nugent Responds to Students/Alumni After George Floyd's Death

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WGLT Interview with President Nugent, June 5, 2020

President Nugent: Over the last week, um, we have been uh, thinking very hard about that reflecting on both what we need to be saying and doing as a university and its clear to me in retrospect that our statement was not uh it did not go far enough and it was not clear enough we did not uh in that message call out the brutal murder of Mr. Floyd um we did not say as exclusively as I now believe we should have said. Um we did not say that uh how clearly we abhor this kind of institutionalized violence um and we did not specifically say what is so important to affirm, that black lives matter, and um, looking back on it I think we were intending to make a statement that in some ways entailed those beliefs so we were not explicit enough about that.

Eric Stock: For those who say they have concerns or fears that they want to know where they can turn on campus if they feel they have become the victim of racial injustice or any injustice or if they happen to witness it uh for somebody else uh what do you tell them that the university has in place to address that and right that.

Nugent: well we have many different structures in place I mean I think I a positive as we look forward is that institutionally we have created many of the structures to address these issues. Um what we need to do now I think is reinvigorate those in a way but with so we have the um community diversity group we have the office of diversity we have the trustee diversity committee and many different structures like that. Specifically for incidents of bias or received wrongs or uh actions of that sort if you are a student there is a procedure for reporting bias through the dean of students office and those claims are always investigated and acted upon. If you are a concerned faculty member, uh the same is true through the office of dean of the faculty and the provost.

Stock: Going back to the initial contact on this where you had been asked about making a statement and said that typically you don't unless it particularly applies to higher education, if you could uh sort of walk me through your thought process on that and I know these are kind of unprecedented times...

Nugent: Sure.

Stock: ... but what was sort of your guiding principle on that to first leave it aside before taking it on and then the uh initial statement that left some things out in the view of some.

Nugent: well the first part um when I was asked in an event about um academic planning when I was asked about this in the course of that event uh initially I responded with what is my usual practice and I did accurately describe that practice at that time which is that as a university president I typically do not make public statements about public issues um for example I have very strong feelings about the injustice of the death penalty, I have very strong feelings against the killing in war I do not articulate those feelings I don't feel or those beliefs I don't feel that's my role um as the head of a university even though I feel those are deeply moral and ethical issues for our society and so that's what caused me to initially respond in that way. What changed my perception about it is actually exactly what you just said

Eric these are this is uh pretty much an unprecedented time and it became much clearer to me that we were really called upon to speak.

Stock: What are your main take aways from this uh this entire experience in interaction with the students on this kind of a level and I guess just not students but you know the university community.

Nugent: Yeah with the university community well then I'll also go I was thinking you were asking another thing which is take aways from this whole period in our national life. Um to the first about um, the my understanding on this university I will say one thing which I think probably escapes most peoples attention I was actually named, the real president of this university in November and by the middle of jan- march rather there was no one on this campus that is about fourth months I guess December January February that's about four months so one of those months of course it was the holiday season and the campus was not in session. So that does mean that effectively I've been a member of this campus as its long term president for about 3 months. The reason I bring that up is that I think typically in my earlier presidency's I would have had many more opportunities to in time to uh build more personal relationships and understandings. Now the Illinois Wesleyan Community has been wonderful to me and certainly a number of those relationships have come in to being but I would say that that is less true of the students um in my initial time here I chained as a one year interim president and it was very clear that my one year assignment was primarily to address financial stability at the university um that is I would say that is somewhat of a different job description from the long term president so I think the fact that the students havn't really had an opportunity to get to know me as well as I would like nor I them um has probably contributed to this desire to understand clearly who I am and where I stand um as a comparison when I was the president of the college of Lister in Ohio, I met every month with the student leaders of the various diverse groups on campus we had a lunch in my office every month and we could sit together and really learn from one another and they helped you a great deal to understand what was going on on campus and what their experience was. Unfortunately there havn't been that many opportunities for that personal relationship building here. So I think in some ways this is an opportunity that I hadn't really had before here much more directly um about the concerns of certainly our current students but also our alumni. I was I would have normally been in the course of about a two year tour around the country coming to speak with and learn how alumni um we held two of those events and then everything had to be cancelled. So I think there's a little bit of that just pure logistic um in affect here but which I take away from the uh experience I think uh it remains very clear despite the fact there hasn't been that as much an opportunity to build relationships that the expectation here is community and Illinois Wesleyan family is there will be very close communication um you know students and alumni and faculty do not hesitate to reach out to me and tell me what they think and ask for my help and that's really good thing you know so that's what we'll be engaged in more and more uh as we go through this very dark period together. Um what I take away from the country is uh is frankly a hope Eric um we all know those of us have who have lived longer know even more that these kinds of despicable incidents and killings and inhumane events have occurred over and over in our history and it seems to be cyclical. We are appalled and we regret and we move on and then it happens again and again and again the outpouring of outrage and protest that were seeing in at least 350 cities across this

nation gives me some measure of hope that maybe we will finally um not forget that we will not just move on that this could really mark a turning point and I find that a very positive possibility.

Stock: If we could uh shift gears to the fall what is the game plan at this point or what kind of plans are under consideration to possibly return to in classroom instruction.

Nugent: Well we have a lot of planning going on Eric (laughs) we were just in meetings on this today. But I suppose unfortunately the first thing that has to be said by any college or university president is that my crystal ball is very murky I believe none of us knows exactly how this pandemic will play out obviously we try to understand what the epidemiologists are telling us about the potential wave after wave that we may experience and when those wave's might occur. In the absence of any better knowledge or clearer knowledge we have to try to plan for a return of our students and our faculty um that is as close to normalcy as possible, that is a very tall order and I'll tell you some of the specifics that we are looking at now. Um we have I guess it's 4 I may end up with 5 I think we have 4 different planning groups currently there's a group working on institutional planning and that's taking into consideration things like how will we handle dining how will we handle uh or what will happen with athletics and so forth institutional planning. There's a group of particularly faculty who are working on instructional planning how are we going to actually deliver courses. There's a group that's specifically concerned with health planning naturally what are the precautions and the protocols that we need to have in place and there's a group working very hard on facility planning because facilities are a part of every aspect of the solution how many students um how are we going to house students will they all be in single rooms how will we deal with bathroom arrangements how will we deal with classroom arrangements. We heard the very discouraging news today that as our facilities group analyses our classroom space together with the prescriptive in place at least for now uh 6 feet of distance. Many of our classrooms will only be able to handle about 15% of their capacity. So this is going to be an enormous challenge on every front. And then fifth it is not a separate planning group but it infuses every one of those aspects it is um technology and electronics so if we are going to deliver courses both in person and online what platform are we going to use or platforms uh is instruction going to be synchronous or asynchronous um how are we going to do uh examinations will those be virtual or in person the questions are endless. Happily I work with a wonderful group of colleagues and faculty members and they're working very hard on these questions. But the planning is um it's a gargantuan task.

Stock: How has this impacted enrollment uh I imagine a lot of people are a lot of uh prospective students are sitting on the fence waiting to see what's actually going to happen and may decide of it's online only maybe it's not worth it uh how has that impacted it so far

Nugent: well that is a very good question Eric and again we meet every day like my team meets every day (laughs) and we have since March to look at this whole array of issues um in this morning's meeting we heard uh news which has been very consistent news throughout this from the beginning of the pandemic in mid-March and that is that our deposits continue to increase um currently our incoming class would you know this would change if you don't know how it would change but our current incoming class if it held steady at the current number would be oh I would say would be about 40

students larger than it was a couple of years ago. So we don't understand it frankly (laughs) I know from my conversations with other presidents that this is not happening at other colleges um I do know that everyone on our team admissions officers our student ambassadors our faculty have been working very very hard to be um high touch with our students so that they're really communicating and again building relationships even though it's online so um I have to think that that's part of the success that we are really reaching out to our students but I am astounded that that's where we are so even last night more deposits came in.

Stock: alright uh anything further that you would like to add?

Nugent: Uh let me see is there any other interesting aspect of our planning. No I think.. I think overall when everyone had to make that sudden turn to being 100% virtual, in the case of our type of college, being zero percent virtual, you know with that turn in the spring I think we actually uh carried that out remarkably well um for the circumstances and now what our faculty is really focusing on is learning from the experience they had and really try and move ahead so we can um have our instruction in that medium be at the same level as we have in our classroom.

Stock: So to make sure I'm clear so there is a possibility for-

Nugent: I think this would be one of the many things that is a positive coming out of covid frankly it will have changed all of our lives in many ways and some of those will be positive new ways of doing things.

Stock: and some of those classes could be blended right some of them virtual and in person at the same time

Nugent: yes in fact yeah we were talking about that again just this morning about uh the systems were looking at that you know were testing several systems that would enable us to say live stream an on campus course

Stock: I know this is changing every day but is there a date where you need to move you need to have the plans executed

Nugent: Well one of the things that will be very complex is that as we rearrange these class schedules and so forth and perhaps rearrange our academic calendar it's likely im sorry I forgot to mention that it's likely that we will begin a little bit sooner and try to complete the instructional semester by Thanksgiving you've probably seen a lot of colleges are trying to do this. Um as we try to do that and do all of this rearrangement of courses that's a tremendous burden on just the logistics of registering and reregistering students so I believe our registrar has indicated that we really must have that done by say mid July

Stock: Hm interesting

Nugent: So I would say that were aiming to be able to let our students and families and faculty have more certainty as early as we can in July