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Eric Jensen is Taking the Temperature of the Community and Campus at IWU

Charlie Schlenker
WGLT, Illinois State University

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WGLT Sound Ideas interview with Eric Jensen, November 30, 2015

Mike McCurdy announces interview: New president of Illinois Wesleyan University has been on the job for about a month. Eric Jensen is taking the temperature of the community and the campus, he tells Charlie Schlenker he's asking everyone he meets about the particular strengths and opportunities they see in the institution he's now leading. Jensen says his fundamental impression of IWU as a gem is unchanged.

President Eric Jensen: Institutions are about to some small extent about the physical facility which are phenomenal on the Illinois Wesleyan campus. The new state farm hall, the shirk center with the new addition with the fitness center and uh of course the existing stock of buildings here on campus well they're never perfect at a university, there always a building that could use a little more attention but it's beautiful. The library is one of those places that as an academic it actually makes your pulse beat a little faster to see it that's what a library ought to look like. Um and I think what the conversation is really about though in an institution is about the people. That's what really makes a place special, the faculty are very high quality, the students are exceptional and the staff and administration are all really top notch, I've been impressed with everybody I've met.

Charlie Schlenker: And what are the early takeaways from people telling you what will not need attention and sustained effort?

Jensen: Well I think what everybody realizes is that higher ed is a tough market, it's been increasingly tough since 2008 and that the uh resting for long term success is very clearly defining what the niche of the institution is. Liberal arts institutions in general have a special ability to provide an intensive one on one level experience for every single person who enters the door. There's a roll for faculty, there's a role for interaction between students uh that is um possible to fulfil at larger institutions but because of way larger institutions are built it's impossible to do that for everybody. Liberal arts institutions on the other hand historically have been and continue to be designed to make this an inclusive experience so if you walk through the door you should expect to have the kind of defining experience that will, we hope, be transformative over the individual's life time. So the question becomes what does that mean, how do you put meat on those bones, how do you define that, and again that gets us back to this conversation that I've been having around campus. How do we take what is uniquely Illinois Wesleyan for example the mix of performing arts, applied schools like nursing, and the traditional liberal arts focus and stitch that into a story that will tell where every student that comes in has that immersive experience that may be very different according to what path they choose? It may be performance of music or drama or musical theater, it may be accounting where one is out working out with firms on projects as a well thought out uh accessible part of one's education or it may be something uh completely different in other fields.

Schlenker: In the wake of Ferguson Missouri and the Black Lives Matter movement conversations about racial climates are becoming common on many campuses sometimes in an orderly fashion some in an abrupt and accelerated and urgent fashion such as the University of Missouri uh recently. How is this happening on the Illinois Wesleyan University campus?

Jensen: Well diversity is something that I take very seriously and value very highly in everything we do at Illinois Wesleyan. My previous roll at Hamline University as Provost, I had uh the fundamental responsibility for diversity there and what we're doing in a liberal arts institution is training leaders. Um were training people who in their working lives will be running organizations or playing significant roles. It's impossible in that setting not to understand how to survive and in fact thrive in a diverse world. So from the time I've arrived on campus I've had conversations with students and faculty about diversity. An important part of the element or an important element in that is to uh insure that uh we are to the best extent we can taking care of those with financial need as well as we can. Racial diversity and economic diversity are far from being exact mirrors but making sure that we take care of our most financially needy students is an important part of a uh unified diversity effort. So

conversations continue and it's an important part of what I see my work over the next certainly initial months but over my career at Illinois Wesleyan.

Schlenker: How should the conversation happen, the chronical of higher education has a piece. Talking about how really difficult and exhausting such conversations can be because of the danger that each side comes to the conversation with stereotypes. Whites worry about being perceived as racist and blacks worry about being perceived as academic light weights that were let in because of diversity values and rather than pure academic standards and that can get in the way of the conversation. How do you make the conversation safe for people to have?

Jensen: Well I think two things about that, one is that those kinds of conversations necessarily do come with baggage there's a long history on all sides, there's more than two sides, on all sides with these issues. I think also that let's be clear that diversity takes many forms that the press recently has been focusing on black white issues in particular. But, I think that a meaningful conversation on diversity is got to be broader than that. One of the things I talked about a minute ago was that the notion of liberal arts institutions can provide that kind of transformative experience because students learn to in very personal ways think, write, talk and otherwise analyze issue and it's my feeling that an institution like Illinois Wesleyan is very positioned to have a meaningful dialog at an intellectual level um in classes and in more structured settings about these issues. So I think that it's not necessarily a top down sort of discussion as it's often been the case in the problematic areas that you name and I think it's really much more a situation where we can as part of a unified effort to make this that transformative place where we can stress that there are issues that need to be talked about in part to diminish their power and if we can do that if we in class, in seminars, in unstructured settings where we bring people together, have those kinds of conversations at an intellectual level. I think we're a long way in the direction in which we need to move.

Schlenker: Again turning to the chronical of higher education piece, um there's some implication that framing it as dialog is not giving it the best possible service uh to the way in which this attention to the issue ought to happen there needs to be training in habits of mind that encourage empathy and training in ways to have constructive conflict and an acceptance rather than avoidance of conflict. How do you do that?

Jensen: I think we Charlie we may have said the same thing in two different ways. I think that what I'm talking about is that kind of dialog that gets away from some of the issues about which you speaking of. That what we really want to do is by um disempowering the scariness of the notions, make them things that are ok to talk about. So it's not dialog that is for dialogs sake. It is a conversation that leads to great understanding in the same way that an English class talking about Moby Dick comes to understand what that book might be about. Uh I think we have some of the tools, we may not have traditionally used them in this way because these are scary issues and I think that one of the ways that again we as an institution and for that matter a liberal arts institution in general could move forward would be for us to embrace our strengths that we really do have that kind of a venue.

Schlenker: This is Sound Ideas, I'm Charlie Schlenker talking with new Illinois Wesleyan University president Eric Jensen.