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IWU President Eric Jensen on the Fall Enrollment Drop

Charlie Schlenker
WGLT, Illinois State University

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WGLT Sound Ideas interview with Eric Jensen, November 15, 2017

Charlie Schlenker: This is sound ideas. I'm Charlie Schlenker. Eric Jensen is the President of Illinois Wesleyan University. He's in studio with us. Let's pivot to enrollment- it's been a tough year for Illinois's public colleges and universities. With a few exceptions, enrollment is down around the state, which is an exporter of college students. How does Illinois Wesleyan's enrollment look this fall?

Eric Jensen: We're also down a little bit. Yeah- it's a cyclical business. Some years you're up, some years you're down and this is one where- as you said, Illinois is a hard state. I think that there's a tendency to think of, and as I've said before, how education as sort of a homogenous mass and it's- it's not. The truth is that most students who go to colleges go to public colleges and universities and the public colleges and universities in our life had a tough road to hoe for the last couple of years. We've been affected by things like map grants and the uncertainty surrounding them. About a quarter of our students receive map grants and so we- early on as this uncertainty as this dysfunction between the governor and the legislature was coming to – to full fruition made the decision that we were going to help our students cover whatever missing map funds, may eventually...may have eventuated and that's nice because the financially right thing to do and a morally right thing to do coincided exactly. So we stepped up and helped our students. But the students that we didn't have yet- the ones who were thinking of coming to Illinois and were debating as to whether or not there was going to be the Illinois State System that they knew of or whether there was going to be the map grant at a private school – or generally what the climate of higher ed and education was like in Illinois – I think that that hurt, you know, that hurt a number of institutions.

Schlenker: How long will it continue to hurt?

Jensen: I think Illinois is actually rebounding. I think we have a budget in place- miracle of miracles- and... and there can be some long-term planning that's done. I think another thing that actually hurt us was the international climate. There was a lot of harsh rhetoric and I think many places had fairly significant decline in their international recruiting – and we – that – whether that's going to bounce back or not, I'm not sure. I can't say for certainty. I'm – I'm thrilled since the last time we spoke. We have a new Vice President in a new position – Vice President of Enrollment and Marketing and a new person – Leann Hughes- in that job with a number of new staff people, and so we're actively- both being more aggressive within a – in Illinois, getting across that message that 'Hey, we're not... we're not afflicted in the same way that – that many of these institutions are', and we're also looking outside Illinois in aggressive ways. We have somebody who's in St. Louis, we have somebody who's in Denver – and – and so we're looking at somebody in Atlanta as a way of – of looking at other markets.

Schlenker: How much is the international cohort down and how much is total enrollment down?

Jensen: We're at little under 1700 this year so we're down – something... we're down a little bit more than we'd like to be in the sense since our ... our international enrollment fluctuates more than most enrollments year-to-year. We've had years where we've had 60 or 70 international students coming in, we've had years when we had 30, and this year was more like... like 30 coming in.

Schlenker: Okay – so is that the smallest headcount since 1988 or ...

Jenson: We're – yeah – we're a relatively low level for us, I think that we could comfortably handle more students than are there right now. We have a .. a choice, you know, what we're trying to do is create an environment that is special in a lot of ways. We want the ... really meaningful interaction between faculty and students and between the students themselves. And so we want to make sure that we're picking the kind of students who are going to benefit most from that environment and if we're going to benefit that environment the most is – is sort of a synergistic process. We're very happy with the incoming class- they are ... the test scores are just like they've always been – impressive. The high school grade point average is impressive. We're also very diverse. We have significantly more students who self-identify as African-American or Latinos than in the past years, and that's important, 'cause what we do is train leaders and the leaders in the world to come and going to be leading in a multinational, multiethnic, multiracial setting, and it's – it's important that our world on-campus looked like that world that they're going to be the leaders of.

Schlenker: So if you're at 1700 and you'd like to be at 2000 or 2200, what do you do? Do you have too many faculty for that number of students... what...and how do you adjust?

Jenson: Well, I think we want to keep our eye on a long run strategic goal and as I said, it's a cyclical business- there are years that are up, there are years that are down and the key thing is not to be hasty in any sort of response. I think that we want to grow. I think 2200 is probably bigger than we'd like to be but 1900, 2000 – somewhere in there – that's a nice size. And so that means ... that means a reasoned, careful approach at growing enrollment to make sure that we continue to get the students that we want. One of the most interesting conversations I've had was at Heartland Community College. We're talking – our Provost and Vice President for enrollment and marketing and our registrar- we're talking to their counterparts that Heartland with Rob Widmer and I being sort of either spectators or brokers – I'm not sure what at this meeting – we're talking about how we might ease the path into Illinois Wesleyan in ways that are appropriate for us and for the heartland students-for heartland students who either one year in or have gotten their A-A... We are really a part of this fabric of this town, of Bloomington-Normal... you know, Illinois Wesleyan- a number of people I meet as I come around to various functions, who are alums, who have this deep sort of affection for the place- it's palpable. And Heartland is such an amazing place. There's something like 5,000 degree-seeking students at any one time. We'd really love to work out a way where we can stitch some of those students into the fabric of our place in a way that – that is consistent with what we wanna do, that also benefits some local students in that way. So there are lots of- there are lots of ways to increase our enrollment. I was just at a ... I was just at a function in Kenwood, at - at a alumni- two actually alumni couple's house. They have a friend who is the director of the Obama library project on the south side and so we had an event for the prospective students and their parents and for alums to come and listen to him give a brief presentation and – and sort of talk and we're gonna- we're gonna get 3, 4 students from that that we probably exposed to something that wouldn't seem otherwise and I think – it's a baseball cliché – small ball, you know, you get somebody on first and you ... you get them around. It's three students here and four students there and six students there and we're small, and we have an incoming class that's, you know, in the neighborhood of 500 and so influencing the class up and down a little bit in that way is what we need to do. So I think the key is a

careful, reasoned approach and we don't need to resort to anything drastic in response to showing fluctuations. We have a supportive board of trustees, we have a substantial endowment, and we're in the place that we need to be. We just have to have a little bit of focus on what the next 2 or 3 or 4 years of recruiting looks like.

Schlenker: So you're gonna stay the course regarding staff and infrastructure and eat the loss that those 2-300 kids who aren't coming temporarily produce?

Jenson: Yeah, short-run, short run staffing changes, ups and downs as a result of changes in enrollment in particular... classes or something – that's normal so, you know, there'll be some – there will be some change in terms of, you know, they all exist in any given year. I think we shouldn't construe sort of short-run responses to – in terms of visiting positions hired or something like that to strategic responses.

Schlenker: So if you do have staff adjustments, it would be attrition and not through ridding?

Jenson: That's the plan. Yeah – yeah, and I think that we're in a – we're in a situation where, you know, we- every year we eagerly await you know, sort of the next crop of students coming in. We do a set of intersessions for prospective students and their parents where we start out with the crowd in Hansen Student center and then gradually take them on tours and get them meeting faculty members and so forth. And we have one coming up this Saturday that they just had to close registration on 'cause it's too popular. That's the position which we want to find ourselves at- where we have to stand in front of the door and say, "No, no, no, no, you can't come in right now."

Schlenker: So there are a few international first-years this year, but what do the rest of them look like in terms of academic qualifications, in terms of background. You already mentioned increased diversity. But what are some other metrics that reflect the- this year's first-years?

Jenson: Well, I – I think that it- like every year, they are this heterogeneous mix of kids who when you stir them together, always look a little different than the class that came before them or the classes that came after them, and yet always work some way. So the metrics of the, you know, exactly comparable in terms of test scores, in terms of – in terms of grade point averages. We have a new group this year called the Posse- the Posse foundation, the international foundation that helps recruit students in non-traditional ways- in – it's a leadership scholarship. The award- we're actually bringing in people who we think are going to be leaders while they are with us on-campus and then go on and do the same. They're typically, but not always students of color, but typically, not always, from economically disadvantage situation and our group comes from New Orleans. So I think we- we have 10 of them and we had a friend of one of them – a company, so we have 11 Louisianans which I think is about 1000% increase in our lifetime batting average for Louisiana.

Schlenker: -No to cafeteria, add gumbo.

Jenson: -well, one of the guys likes to cook, so- we're actually hoping to get him to cook a meal for us, but it's – it's a, you know, it's an interesting group.

Schlenker: Yeah-

Jenson: -Yeah.

Schlenker: Eric Jensen is the President of Illinois Wesleyan University. Thank you so much for joining us.

Jenson: Thanks for having me, Charlie.

Schlenker: I'm Charlie Schlenker.