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President Georgia Nugent Shared Campus Plans and Updates

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WGLT Interview on President Georgia Nugent on April 25, 2023

Announcer: Illinois Wesleyan University is continuing its campus conversation about structure and priorities. Over the past twenty years, students nationwide have shown more interest in pre-professional programs and less in traditional liberal arts majors. University President Georgia Nugent says IWU hopes to offer a blend of the two. There has been faculty push back in previous moves in some departments, including foreign languages, philosophy and music. In this interview with WGLT's Charlie Schlenker, Nugent talks about the ongoing shape of the re-visioning of the institution and how enrollment in those majors is going.

Georgia Nugent: Well you know we're doing alright but again those are national trends. Enrollment in foreign languages in American has been declining steadily for forty years. We tend to see very high enrollments in Spanish, which again people view as more pragmatic these days, I think. Some of our programs that you mention; philosophy, art, are actually seeing increasing enrollments, but there to I would say we actually evolved our School of Art into a School of Art and Design and it has very healthy enrollments now but it has also added some new types of programming like graphic design. I think we're teaching anime, I'm not sure but there's a lot of interest in those fields. Music is, it's in a bad situation nationally so we have very healthy enrollment in Music Education but the training for really professional musicianship is, it's not as popular as it once was here so we're working very closely with the music faculty. They're looking at ways that they can trim expenses and ways that they can introduce courses that might be of a broader college-wide interest.

Schlenker: Over the last 4 to 5 years you've had deposits in music from music majors between 10 and 21, does that level really merit a continuation of the School of Music?

Nugent: Well I'm hoping that we can continue the School of Music. Certainly what I can say is we will always have music at Wesleyan. Um whether it makes most sense for it to be organized as a School or as a department is something that we are looking at now. Our faculty are getting out more into the schools and trying to recruit and reach new students and so we're seeing what the possibilities are for the future.

Schlenker: With that level of enrollment, how should we frame the departure of the Director of the School of Music for a position at Ball State?

Nugent: I don't know if that was directly related. Um, Franklin is just...he's been a wonderful person to have here and I haven't, I haven't questioned him about that decision but I think he just saw an interesting new career opportunity so he's been wonderful to work with as we've thought about what are the ways that we can increase enrollment there. He will now be succeeded by Bill Hudson in the department and he's been great to work with as well as we look at what the options are.

Schlenker: When are you going to make a choice about School of Music, no school, other programs to consolidate faculty or not?

Nugent: We are looking at some options for reorganizing in some ways. If you look to our national accreditor which is the Higher Learning Commission, they actually conceive of us as a School of Nursing, a School of Music, a School of Art and a School of the Liberal Arts so there's a little bit of a discrepancy

between the way that we're viewed nationally and the way we view ourselves on campus. So we're looking at whether it might make sense to organize some of our smaller departments into a more overarching entity. We have had several possible plans and many different permutations of how you could do that. Uh, School of the Liberal Arts, a School of the Fine and Performing Arts whatever it might be. So the faculty has had an opportunity to think about those, to offer us feedback and we'll be working through that more through the course of the rest of this year and probably through the summer.

Schlenker: And then decision next—

Nugent: Probably in the fall. I would think.

Schlenker: That cuts administration in some fashion if you lump together a number of different departments that previously were not connected. What does it do to faculty numbers?

Nugent: I don't see it affecting faculty numbers but one thing that I like about such a plan is that it would actually put faculty more in the classroom. So currently if you were a faculty member who's the chair of a department, they get some release from their teaching load so I would rather see more of our full-time faculty, in the classroom with our students and decrease the kind of administrative work that's going on.

Schlenker: What departments are in conversation about this potential move?

Nugent: We're looking at every area of our work so humanities, social sciences, sciences, business, nursing. It's thinking about the structure of the whole campus and a reason for doing that is not just administrative or financial or something like that. What's been happening, um, for the last fifteen or twenty years is we're seeing the real intellectual energy being in the interdisciplinary areas. The way I like to think about it is the world has many difficult issues and they don't come in disciplinary boxes so I think the more that we can foster those kinds of interconnections, the stronger education will be offering our students.

Schlenker: This is Sound Ideas and I'm Charlie Schlenker. We're talking with Illinois Wesleyan University President Georgia Nugent. The Nursing program has had some difficulties. It's got a low passage rate on the licensing exam for new nurses, for RNs and it's on probation. That's not a good step and reputationally that's going to scare away some new enrollees. Are you seeing that in this year's deposits?

Nugent: No we have not seen that but I understand obviously we are very unhappy to be in that situation but as soon as it became clear that we had experience lower pass rates, we took action immediately in the School of Nursing. So there are several things that have happened. Our students now, how can I say, you know how you do a review course for the CPA exam or for law school. Our nurses are now engaging in a review course as in each year they have a kind of a program to prepare them for the NCLEX so that they're fully prepared when it comes time for them to take it. This is especially a blow to us because our pass rate has been very high over the last decade. So I think it was there are other schools in Illinois that are experiencing this. Nationally the pass rates have declined but we don't want to be in that company so...so we are really working on that and in addition to the review courses. Our faculty is also doing some curricular revision which began this spring and will continue into the future. I think, um, I actually do not think that we will see enrollment drop. A part of the reason for that is our School of Nursing independent of this issue with the licensure exam, our School of Nursing is

actually also evolving into a School of Nursing and Health Sciences because we know that there are many healthcare fields that students have interest in, in addition to those which have been particularly strong.

Schlenker: The pass rate has been trending downward for five years and some of that is Covid but not all of it. Why wasn't this caught earlier before you got to a formal probation letter?

Nugent: Um, I don't have the data in front of me but my recollection Charlie is it went up and down a bit that it did trend down one year and then it went up and then it trend...so I don't think there's been a continuous pattern. I think what happened is certainly related to Covid and nationally experts are saying that it disrupts that very important part of nurses' training, their clinicals and so we experience that and I think we had a leadership situation where our then director of the Nursing school was also serving as an interim room director of our health services and I think frankly that we um, we asked too much of her so she was terrific in guiding us through Covid and really had to devote a great deal of time to that and think that that probably resulted in taking her eye off the ball a little bit in the School of Nursing. It was just a tremendous amount for one person to carry.

Schlenker: That's Illinois Wesleyan University President Georgia Nugent. She says that the campus has had great success with its tenth annual Day of Giving fundraiser called All in for Wesleyan. That event set a record of 2.6 million dollars in 5000 donors. She says fundraising still continues for the Petrick Idea Center and they hope to schedule a groundbreaking soon. She says the hope for completion date is the spring of 2025. Renovation of the first year student dorm Munsell Hall will happen this summer and Ferguson Hall next year. The two will cost 16 million dollars. Nugent spoke with WGLT's Charlie Schlenker.