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Rising to the Challenge

To lead Illinois Wesleyan's academic program, Provost Beth Cunningham brings her skills and passion as a teacher, scholar, and administrator.

Story by Nancy Steele Brokaw '71

Taking on a challenging job can be as exhilarating as a long hike through the mountains. Just ask Illinois Wesleyan's new provost, Beth Cunningham.

During one of her recent hiking experiences, Cunningham completed a 24.9-mile trek over the Bald Eagle Mountain Megatransect in central Pennsylvania in just nine-and-a-half hours.

"I figure if I can do that," she says with a smile, "I can do just about anything."

Cunningham took on an even bigger challenge when she assumed the position of Illinois Wesleyan's chief academic officer on Aug. 1, 2006, succeeding Janet McNew, who left the University to accept a position as provost and vice president for academic affairs at the University of Tampa.



Cunningham enjoys a trek through Zion National Park.

As provost, Cunningham is "a key officer of the University, someone who has responsibility for the continued growth and development of our academic program," explains Illinois Wesleyan President Richard F. Wilson. "The work of the provost also impinges on all areas of the University, from student affairs and public affairs to business affairs and development."

Cunningham was a natural for the position, according to Mike Seeborg, the Robert S. Eckley Distinguished Professor of Economics. Seeborg chaired the search committee that brought Cunningham to IWU. "She's one of us," he says. "First and foremost, Beth is an academic. She earned the rank of full professor at a top school, as a woman in a male-dominated field."



Illinois Wesleyan's new provost is seated next to Wilson at a weekly meeting for administrators and faculty who are part of the President's Cabinet. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Cunningham was that rare student who went off to college at Kent State University in Ohio, picked a college major, and stuck with it. She also stuck with her school, earning bachelor's, master's and Ph.D. degrees in physics at Kent State. It was there that she met her husband, David Wolfe, who earned a Ph.D. at Kent State, concentrating in theoretical nuclear physics. (Wolfe was recently named IWU's assistant director of corporate and foundation relations.)

Cunningham recalls that her interest in science started early. "Biophysics was a new term when I was in high school," she explains. "Physics challenged me so much." And like anything that challenges Cunningham, she develops a passion for it.

Throughout her career Cunningham has held a particular interest in cross-disciplinary studies, reveling in opportunities to work with cohorts in biology and chemistry.

"My research is in soft condensed matter physics and biophysics," she says. "As a consequence, my scholarly projects have attracted undergraduate students who have majored in biology, chemistry, engineering and, of course, physics. I truly enjoy interacting with a variety of scientists, from undergraduate students to senior faculty.

"It's great fun to work with people from different backgrounds," Cunningham adds. "We all have our strengths. We take a problem and all add something to how it's solved."

In the course of her Ph.D. studies, Cunningham was a teaching fellow and research assistant at Kent State's Liquid Crystal Institute, home to an interdisciplinary program that studies applied liquid crystal research, vital to the development of the liquid crystal displays found in many appliances, including laptops and flat screens.

As a postdoctoral fellow at the Hormel Institute at the University of Minnesota, Cunningham once again wedded physics with another field, this time studying with a biochemist who worked on lipids and heart disease.

Following her postdoctoral fellowship, Cunningham taught at Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, Penn. In 1989 she joined the physics department at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Penn., as an assistant professor. “Her colleagues at Bucknell held her in high regard,” notes Wilson. Cunningham was named associate dean of the faculty in Bucknell’s College of Arts and Sciences in 2000 and promoted to full professor in 2002.

The provost search committee was appreciative of Cunningham’s broad experience in academic and administrative matters. At Bucknell, Cunningham oversaw the hiring of new faculty, worked on the faculty promotion and tenure committee, and enhanced internal and external support for the faculty and the curriculum. Such duties were “routine for a provost at a small university,” according to Seeborg. The committee noted her achievements in such arenas but wanted — and needed — more.

“Beth’s appointment came at an important time in the history of the University,” Wilson says. “We had just completed a strategic plan and many of our goals for the future required strong and thoughtful leadership on the part of the provost.”

“We thought about the strategic goals of the University. Some of those goals were unique to IWU,” Seeborg says. “For example, we needed to institute a curricular review. We needed to set up a structure whereby we can evaluate where we are and where we can improve.”

Cunningham fit the bill. At Bucknell, she concentrated on faculty development and providing mentoring of new and mid-career faculty. “It was important to continue the development of undergraduate research at Bucknell,” says Cunningham, who noted that Illinois Wesleyan held the same ideals. “I wanted to be at an institution that values teaching and scholarship, but also the interaction with students,” she says. “That was a reason I came to Illinois Wesleyan and I have discovered that I was, in fact, right.”

Cunningham anticipated that IWU’s professors would be “incredible” and they have proven to be so. “The faculty are excellent scholars and teachers,” she says, “and they also provide so much outside the classroom. Across the board, in the arts as well as in science, our faculty is doing amazing work with undergraduates.”



Cunningham has been impressed by the friendliness of the campus and surrounding community. At McLean County Appreciation Day, she enjoyed a chat with Associate Professor Emeritus Forrest Frank (center), Associate Professor William Walsh, and Walsh’s wife, Paula. (Photo by Marc Featherly)



One of the provost's perks is to meet fascinating campus guests such as humanitarian Stephen Lewis (above right), who spoke about the global AIDS crisis at this year's Founders' Day Convocation. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Her belief in the development of undergraduate work connects her closely to Illinois Wesleyan. Cunningham's passion for undergraduate research stems from her experiences mentoring undergraduate students and administering the Bucknell physics department's summer research program sponsored by the National Science Foundation.

Her eyes light up when she talks about her many years of working one-on-one with students in her physics lab. It's something she hopes she can get back to if time allows. In addition to her physics classes, she taught general education courses at Bucknell. It follows her belief that a well-rounded education creates a well-rounded person.

"I believe that a liberal arts education is the best way our nation can prepare our citizens for leading productive lives in the 21st century," Cunningham says. Even with her short time at Illinois Wesleyan, she believes the University is following the right path. "IWU students are just what we say," she states. "They are multitalented with incredible academic credentials."

She wants to continue to provide for students, and that means giving them more of the best. Each department at Illinois Wesleyan develops its own curriculum, Cunningham points out, which is overseen by a curriculum counsel. Her job is to facilitate those efforts.

"We need the best faculty to carry out the curriculum," she says. "They need support both to stay on top of their field and in the area of pedagogy and teaching. They need equipment and supplies, whether that's pianos or lab equipment. They need conference travel and the chance to be with colleagues, plus money to develop curriculum."

Illinois Wesleyan's ongoing curricular review is vital to what Cunningham calls "the way we approach this new century's student. In the 25 years or so since I graduated the world has gone global. What our students need now are technical and communication skills — oral, written, and even other languages — and an understanding of the world through civic engagement.

“There’s a new emphasis on civic involvement,” she continues. “It’s college learning for the new global century and study abroad fits into that. May Term travel is a great opportunity because all schools talk about the ‘campus bubble’ and how important it is to get out of it and explore.”

Teamwork and collaborative problem solving are important in every field of study, notes Cunningham. So are creative thinking and integrative learning — both passions of Cunningham’s.

“The reality is that few of our graduates will stick with the same job for 35 years,” she says. “Students need to take what they learn and synthesize it across disciplines. It’s not enough to have just one skill set in any area.

“This goes to the fact of understanding our students as individuals so we can help guide them to make connections,” she continues. “We can create a curriculum that helps them understand those connections.”

Making connections has been key to Cunningham’s life in academe. As a physicist and as a provost, she watches not just the overall result, but also the process by which change occurs. She observes the details, and is enthralled when she sees students and faculty fulfill their potential. The knowledge that she played a part in facilitating such transformations is just as exhilarating as a hike through the mountains — and even more satisfying.

“I desired a role in which I could make a difference,” says Cunningham, summing up her life’s passion with admirable precision. “The provost position at Illinois Wesleyan University is such a role.”



Cunningham shared a quiet moment with her husband, David Wolfe, at Bourgeau Lake in Canada’s Banff National Park last July.