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In bold strokes and careful detail, Illinois Wesleyan maps its future

IWU President Richard F. Wilson talks about the new Strategic Plan and what it will mean for every member of the University community.



Amid the applause and fanfare that accompanied the announcement of Richard F. Wilson's appointment as IWU's 18th president in April 2004 at the Hansen Student Center, there was one moment of pure silence. It happened when the president-elect stepped to the podium to give a brief statement. Everyone — trustees, professors, students, and staff — listened intently for insights about the man who had been chosen to lead the next era of Illinois Wesleyan's history.

When Richard Wilson (above) became IWU's chief executive, he vowed to listen closely to what the campus community had to say about its future hopes. That input has been built into a plan of action that will define his presidency. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

After listing the qualities that made the University "a place secure in its image and positioned to continue to move forward as a national leader in higher education," Wilson gave a revealing clue about his leadership

style. "I found myself dreaming with you even before the search was completed and now welcome the opportunity to work with you to define the dream" for Illinois Wesleyan.

In fact, work had already begun to define the University's dreams and aspirations under the tenures of the late President Minor Myers jr. and Acting President Janet McNew. In Myers' final years as president, he appointed the Strategic Planning Steering Committee whose charge was to develop a vision that could guide planning for the next decade. Work on this Vision Statement continued after Myers' death in 2003 and was completed under the leadership of McNew in the fall of 2004, after Wilson assumed office.

As Wilson convened his first meeting as chair of the steering committee in October 2004 he made it clear that he would consider the new Vision Statement —and also the revised Mission Statement, adopted by the Board of Trustees in 2003 — as guiding principles throughout the planning process. (Both statements and full text of the Strategic Plan can be viewed at www2.iwu.edu/president/Strategic.)

The committee first set goals for enhancing areas key to the University's future success: teaching and learning, student development, human resources, identity, and financial resources. Work

groups were then appointed last fall to develop specific strategies to meet those goals. Prior to this, in February 2004, the Board of Trustees had resolved that the University should begin immediate work on a strategic goal that was deemed a high priority: creating a more diverse community. A diversity goal statement and strategies were approved by the board in May 2004.

In completing strategies for all of the goals, Wilson stressed the importance of both inclusiveness and timeliness. To make the process as inclusive as possible, frequent forums were held to exchange information and feedback between work groups and the larger campus community. For timeliness, Wilson set a strict deadline: a finished Strategic Plan would be presented to the Board of Trustees for approval at its Feb. 7, 2006, meeting.

As he presented the plan to trustees, Wilson stressed that it would be a “dynamic, living document, one that will guide University development over the next five to seven years.” He added that he was especially pleased by the make-up of the work groups whose participants had often labored long into the night to map out detailed strategy statements. “Each group consisted of faculty, staff, alumni, trustees, and students. All voices had opportunities to be heard. This plan truly is the work of people who care deeply about this University,” Wilson said. After the board formally adopted the dream-defining plan by unanimous vote, the next phase of strategy implementation began.

Two weeks later, Wilson sat down with *IWU Magazine* Editor Tim Obermiller to discuss the Strategic Plan and what it will mean for his presidency and Illinois Wesleyan’s future.

Why was it necessary to launch a strategic plan at this time?

As with most institutions, Illinois Wesleyan has certain enduring qualities and values that we hold very dear. On the other hand, we must place ourselves in the context of what’s happening around us — the changes that are occurring in our society and in the world — and measure that context against the kind of educational experiences we should be providing our students. What I see as the driving force for this strategic planning process has been a desire to reaffirm our traditional values and to begin to wrestle in a serious way with emerging values such as social justice, environmental sustainability, global citizenship, and democratic leadership. Finding the right balance among these values is the challenge faced by Illinois Wesleyan and all other liberal arts institutions.

You’ve said that this plan represents a shift in focus for the University. Why is it important to make that shift now?

Over the past 15 years, the University has changed in dramatic ways. We’ve moved among the top liberal arts universities in the country, and we want to continue that forward momentum. However, my sense is that the specifics of how to do that are very different today than they were 15 years ago.

Probably the clearest manifestation of that difference is the fact that the campus, from a physical standpoint, has taken a dramatic step forward. As president, I’m in the enviable position to be able to say that we have only a few major capital projects remaining on the agenda because of

the building projects that have been done in the last 10 years. And that fact allows me the opportunity to focus my attention and energy on what I consider the core of the University: the people who are here — students, faculty, and staff — as well as the programs that we offer. And so I think the next 10 years will be spent directing our energies and efforts toward enhancing the qualitative and human resource sides of the institution, in order to allow us to continue this positive momentum. How to do that is a Can you give examples of the kinds of human resource issues addressed in the plan?

One example is the changing demands being placed on our faculty. We have the advantage of attracting very talented students, students with multiple interests, students who want to combine programs and who are fascinated not only with what is occurring on campus but also around the world. They create a very exciting learning environment. Their multiple interests and talents also increase demands on the faculty in a variety of ways.

I'm reminded of a faculty member whose office I walked into last year and noticed 30 names on his whiteboard. He explained that the list represented students who had asked him to write recommendations on their behalf for a variety of opportunities: internships, scholarships, graduate schools, and employment. And, of course, we want our students to be pursuing those opportunities. But that one small example symbolizes the demands being placed on our faculty every day. So, as part of the human resource goal, we want to look at ways we might provide more time to faculty for work on all of the important things they need to do as instructors, scholars, mentors, and advisors.

How do you see the implementation of this plan unfolding?

We'll have to establish priorities as we move forward. That's acknowledged in the way the plan was written: some of the goals and strategies will be implemented over a relatively short period of time, within the next one to three years. Some are much longer term. We will also conduct frequent reviews to evaluate our progress and perhaps to realign some of our priorities, or set new ones. I expect to make periodic reports to the faculty, to students, to alumni, and to the Board of Trustees on how we're doing. Just as the process of developing the plan was inclusive, how we implement it will also be inclusive.

This document is, for me, very important. It helps define the agenda I intend to pursue over the next five to seven years. At the same time, there are aspects of this plan that I expect will never truly be finished. When we talk about improving teaching and learning, I can't imagine us ever not being concerned about that. But this plan allows us all to think about, discuss, and prioritize how we will meet such goals at this specific point in time.

How does this plan relate to recent financial challenges the University has faced?

There are, of course, financial constraints. That's why we'll have to establish priorities as we move forward. But it's worth noting that our financial situation looks brighter as we recover from the decline in the endowment that paralleled the decline that many of us experienced in our personal investments in the early part of this decade. So, in the roughly 18 months I've been here, we've instituted several new processes or procedures aimed at either reallocation of

resources or, in some instances, finding ways to address our needs with fewer resources. We've seen success in both of those areas, but we need to carry that momentum forward to effectively address several of the strategic planning goals. That's precisely why the financial goals listed in the plan are so key to its overall success.

What role do you see alumni having in making this plan a success?

There are several ways. First, as part of the student development goal, there is a specific strategy tied to the relationship between current students and our alumni. Our students look to alumni for career advice and mentoring and for assistance with internships and job interviews. At the institutional level we will turn to alumni for assistance with projects that relate to their expertise, to serve on advisory boards and committees, and, of course, to help us financially. Our alumni believe they received a quality education here and want to do what they can to make it possible for other students to have the same kind of experience.

Feedback from our alumni will be an important part of our implementation efforts. When I first arrived here as president, I spent a lot of time talking to members of our community, including alumni, about where the University needed to go, and I developed some early impressions. What the planning process has done is either confirm those impressions or adjust the lens slightly so I now have a better understanding of our future direction. As we move forward we will continue to rely on alumni and their unique insights to help us carry out a plan that I believe reflects our highest aspirations.

Comments about the Strategic Plan are welcomed and can be submitted at the following Web site: <http://www2.iwu.edu/president/mailbox>