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## Promises and Possibilities

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## Promises and Possibilities

In his inaugural address, Richard F. Wilson calls upon Illinois Wesleyan’s “special promises” to be true to the core of its mission and open to active engagement with the world outside campus.



During his April 9 inauguration, Richard F. Wilson was presented with “a symbol of the presidency,” a medallion reproducing the University’s seal. Each of the chain’s lower links bears the name of a previous IWU president. (Photo by Marie-Susanne Langille.)

### **Inaugural remarks by Richard F. Wilson**

### **Introduction by Tim Obermiller**

In her welcome to the Shirk Center audience attending the inauguration of Illinois Wesleyan’s 18th president, provost and former acting president Janet McNew observed that “to ‘inaugurate’ means to ‘introduce into public use by some formal ceremony.’ We don’t inaugurate CEOs, and, really, besides the President of the U.S., it seems that presidents of universities are the only sorts of leaders for whom we feel the need for such ceremonial beginnings.”

So why commit to all the fuss of a formal inauguration? After all, Richard F. Wilson, IWU’s new president, had actually taken office six months prior to the April 9 ceremony. McNew had a simple answer. Academic institutions like Illinois Wesleyan “think of ourselves as communities, planted in particular places, and sharing a common set of academic values. For us, a new president symbolizes a new era in the life of our community, and as such, requires a ceremony to honor our new leader who represents the hope we share for a bright future for this venerable university.”

And so it was that — with pomp and circumstance, robes and hoods, banners and music, distinguished visitors and old friends — Illinois Wesleyan formally installed Dick Wilson as the person who will lead the campus into its future.

Thinking of the last time that the campus community had assembled in this way — on Aug. 25, 2003, to mourn the death of its last president, Minor Myers jr. — there was indeed something inspiring, healing, and altogether necessary about the new beginning Wilson’s inaugural ceremony marked.

In his inaugural address, Wilson himself alluded to this transition, but widened the focus of its significance even further back, to the University’s beginnings and to his own genesis as a scholar and academic leader. As he began, Wilson recalled a sculpture on the campus of his undergraduate alma mater, Alderson-Broaddus College, “of two interconnected human forms, one standing on the shoulders of the other reaching an arm toward the heavens.”

“I have always found the statue meaningful for an educational institution,” he continued, “because we clearly do stand on the shoulders of all those who have come before us. No one is more aware of that fact today than I.”

Among the shoulders Wilson said that he had stood upon in his own life were those of his father-in-law, Dr. Richard Shearer, the former president of Alderson-Broaddus, who was present on stage as Wilson spoke and who gave the ceremony’s benediction. The other “shining lights” who Wilson lauded in his speech as having played key roles in his life included colleagues, friends, and family — paramount among them his wife, Pat, who he asked to stand as he warmly described the closeness of their relationship. “I have come to expect that she will know when it is time to express support and concern and when she needs to stir my resolve. There are many blessings associated with the presidency at Illinois Wesleyan,” Wilson said, as he beamed down at her from the weathered podium, “but the most important one is that we get to do this together.”

And then, Wilson turned the attention of his speech to the institution that had, just minutes before, been formally given over to his charge by Board of Trustees President Craig Hart. That portion of the speech, contained in the following text, clearly staked out the areas that Wilson felt most strongly deserved the institution’s careful deliberation. Within the framework of those remarks, Illinois Wesleyan’s 18th president was clearly volunteering a new set of shoulders on which the University could rely and build upon: his own.

(Editor’s note: The portion of Wilson’s speech that begins on the opposite page is taken from the written text, which was slightly abbreviated in the spoken version. To read the speech in its entirety, go to [www.iwu.edu/Inauguration/](http://www.iwu.edu/Inauguration/), or [click here](#).)

This inaugural celebration occurs almost exactly one year from the date of my appointment as President of Illinois Wesleyan University. These last 12 months have been the most exciting and challenging time of my life. I was attracted to Illinois Wesleyan because of its mission, its standing as a national liberal arts university, its pursuit of excellence, its commitment to social justice and cultural diversity, and its relationship to Bloomington/Normal and the surrounding region. These early impressions have been reinforced with regularity over the past year in formal meetings and through informal conversations with students, parents, alumni, faculty, staff, and friends.

My education as President is far from complete, but today I would like to share my thoughts about Illinois Wesleyan’s role in “Inspiring Knowledge and Wisdom,” a phrase chosen as the theme for this inauguration and that drives the work of the institution.

For the past six months, I have had the privilege of working with a small committee of faculty, staff, students, and alumni on a strategic plan for the University’s future. In one of our meetings, a student reminded us that the key to our success as an institution was to “deliver on the promise.” I find myself thinking about that phrase every day and have come to believe that the promises we make are derived from debate, discussion, and experience over time and form the basis for how we go about “Inspiring Knowledge and Wisdom.” I plan to focus the balance of my remarks on three elements of our promise, each of which can be seen as a promise in itself: (1) our distinctive mission, (2) our commitment to global citizenship, and (3) our concern for civic leadership and community engagement.

## Defining our mission

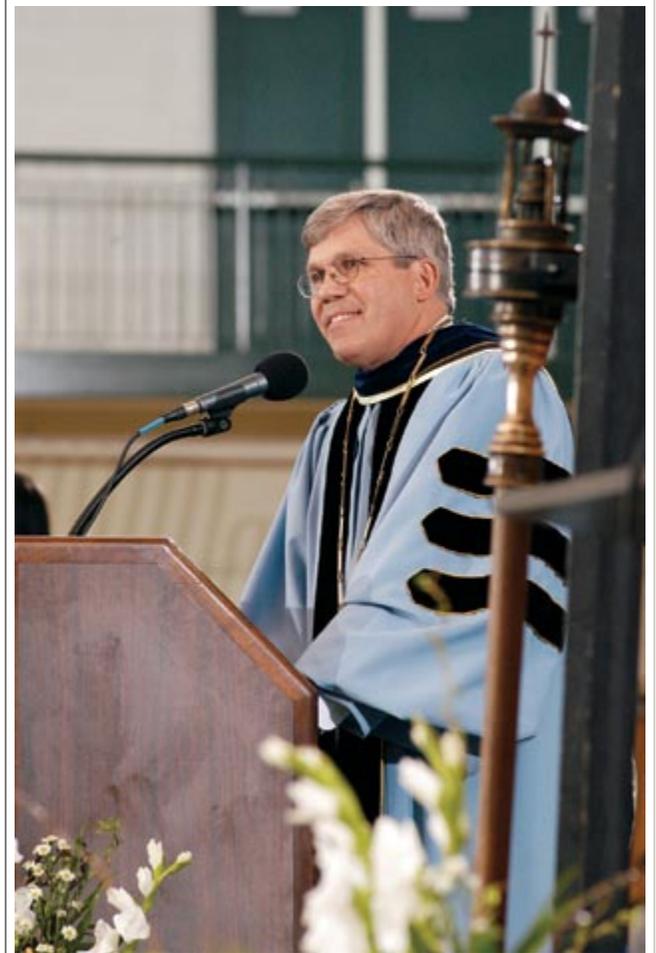
A key promise that we make to students flows directly from the nature of the institution as described in our mission. Colleges and universities in the United States are frequently divided into four or five broad categories: community colleges, liberal arts colleges, comprehensive universities, and research universities. Illinois Wesleyan University does not fit neatly into any of these categories. The University is a liberal arts institution with professional schools and colleges in selected areas. For all programs, the liberal arts and sciences are the core of the educational experience. That fact is embraced widely on this campus and creates both challenges and opportunities. I would like to single out three characteristics of the University mission that contribute to our distinctiveness.

Our curricular breadth is a defining element of the University and enriches the educational experience for everyone. We embrace students who come to us dedicated to receiving a broad liberal arts education as well as those who come with specific career or artistic expectations. Many initial interests become modified over time as a result of experiences here. And the modifications occur in all directions: some students move from professional or artistic programs into the liberal arts; some who start in the liberal arts move in the other direction. The cross-program activity gets even more complex when co-curricular activities are considered.

The curricular breadth is clearly a benefit to students who come to us at various stages of personal and professional development. We create an environment that permits experimentation and growth and, most importantly, pathways of change. Regardless of their ultimate major, we are able to infuse all students with an educational experience that prepares them for life, not simply for a job.

The nature of the University also provides distinctive opportunities related to diversity. We place a premium on this value for reasons related to social justice but also for intellectual and pedagogical reasons. We believe that it enriches the lives of everyone on campus if we engage in discussion and debate with those who have experiences and perspectives different from our own. Those differences are frequently tied to such characteristics as race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status but also emerge out of academic, artistic, and career interests. Our efforts to provide students with a diverse intellectual experience are strengthened as a result of a diverse curriculum, one that mirrors to the extent possible the society in which we live.

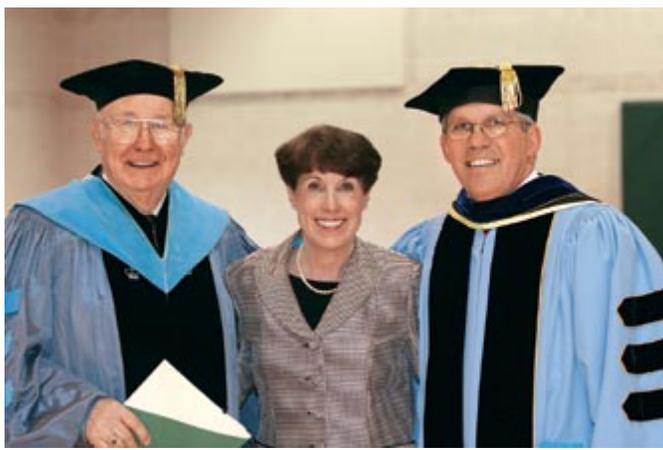
Finally, the lens through which we view teaching and scholarly or artistic activities is distinctive. I believe we have an opportunity to define this relationship in a special way. Much of the scholarly and artistic activity of the faculty is tied to our instructional program. I have heard more than one faculty member indicate that decisions about lines of scholarly inquiry or forms of artistic expression are chosen with student participation in mind. In addition, we look for genuine balance between teaching and research. We have work ahead of us to define this relationship more explicitly, but I am convinced that we have a model that is distinctive and consistent with the core mission of the institution.



President Wilson (above) acknowledges applause before beginning his address. *(Photo by Marc Featherly)*

## Global Citizenship

The second promise that we make is relatively recent and relates to the fact that we live in a global society. We see the evidence every day in the creation of multi-national corporations, in the movement of products from one country to another as part of the assembly process, and in the speed with which communication occurs. We see it as well in the mutually dependent nature of financial markets, in joint efforts among countries to assess environmental impacts and remedies, and in the importance attached to monitoring political, social, and medical issues around the globe.



Wilson and his wife, Pat, pose for a photo with Pat's father, Richard Shearer, who was himself a college president at Alderson-Broadbuddus. (Photo by Marie-Susanne Langille.)

The promise that we make is that we will prepare students to live in a global society. Some elements of that promise are not new to us, such as ensuring that students are culturally and scientifically literate, have well-developed writing and critical-thinking skills, and know when to talk and when to listen.

Wilson and his wife, Pat, pose for a photo with Pat's father, Richard Shearer, who was himself a college president at Alderson-Broadbuddus. (Photo by Marie-Susanne Langille.)

But there are special challenges today that are different and provide uncommon opportunities for a place like Illinois Wesleyan. Every graduate can expect to live and work in a society that is diverse in every way imaginable: politically, economically, socially, and racially. We also

live in a world in which environmental conditions must be assessed and remedied across national borders.

Earlier this semester, Edward Walker, former U.S. ambassador to Israel and Egypt, was on campus to address the future of Iraq. One of the key points in his talk was that our progress in Iraq is impeded by what he called geographic and theological ignorance. We cannot expect every student to understand the nuances of every culture, but we can work to instill an awareness of differences and a willingness to explore such differences as part of everyday interactions.

We can read about these changes and welcome discussion of them in the classroom, but I am convinced that our most genuine life changes occur as a result of an intense experience of some type. We see this all the time with students who study abroad for a semester or year. Invariably the early weeks of those experiences are challenging — life is simply not the same for these students. However, when the experience is over, those students are forever changed. They view people differently, they view life differently, and they frequently view their futures differently.

Not every student can study abroad, but I believe that the size of our student population works to our advantage in this regard. We can contemplate ensuring that every student has a meaningful experience that can be tied to global citizenship. The possibilities include study abroad (and I hope we can expand our formal programs beyond the two in London and Madrid); May Term travel courses in which students are immersed in countries where political and social justice issues are being debated; internships that focus on the global consequences of environmental inaction; residential facilities themed around global citizenship; and carefully constructed modules on global citizenship in course offerings. We cannot leave this important matter to chance. We must incorporate into the undergraduate experience those opportunities that allow students to enhance their sensitivities and develop their roles as global citizens.

## Civic Leadership and Community Engagement

One of the historic strengths of Illinois Wesleyan is our connection to the community and the surrounding region. There is a tradition of positive interaction and mutual support in this community that is important to me and frankly is essential to the heritage and promise of the University.

Not everyone here today may be aware that the first president of Illinois Wesleyan, Reverend Clinton W. Sears, would only agree to become president on the condition that a “substantial sidewalk” be constructed to link the college and the downtown. He even agreed to spend \$500 of his own money to build that sidewalk, so important was it to construct that connection between the town and the University. The commitment of this community and region to Illinois Wesleyan has been demonstrated over and over again since its founding in 1850. We must deliver on the promise that flows out of that commitment.

IWU students at work on a house for Habitat for Humanity — one of many examples cited by Wilson of meaningful exchanges between the campus and community. (Photo provided by IWU Habitat for Humanity)



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Part of this promise is tied to the quality of the educational experience that we provide to students from the region who enroll here. I have learned quickly that the community has high regard for that part of our mission. The more challenging element is tied to the University’s other contributions to the public good.

Historically, universities were fairly isolated from the communities in which they were situated, hence the label “ivory tower.” Based on President Sears’ insistence on a sidewalk, I am not certain that this was ever true at Illinois Wesleyan, and it certainly is not true today.

A few years ago, Harvard Professor Robert Putnam wrote a book entitled *Bowling Alone*. One of the themes in the book is that interest in volunteerism, civic leadership, and community engagement has declined dramatically, presenting serious problems for the quality of life in communities and for our democratic form of governance. Well, I don’t know if our students are “bowling alone” or not, but I do know that they are engaged in the community and that our faculty and staff actively look for ways to enhance these interactions. Here are a few illustrations:

- Faculty and students from Illinois Wesleyan and Illinois State are involved in building their tenth Habitat for Humanity House.
- Students serve as interns for the McLean County Historical Society and the local United Way office.
- Students from the Action Research Center are serving as resource staff for the leadership of Heartland HeadStart.

My sense is that many students who enroll at Illinois Wesleyan come with community service interests and experience and quickly find meaningful ways to contribute to the quality of life in this region. In so doing, they reaffirm the covenant between the University and community — one that I embrace and hope to facilitate.

### Tipping Points

I have chosen to emphasize three of the special promises of the University, ones tied to our mission, to global citizenship, and to community engagement. Each one is important in its own right and, along with others not discussed today, contributes collectively to our efforts to “Inspire Knowledge and Wisdom.”

In assessing the significance of the promises made at a particular point in time, I was drawn to an idea made popular by Malcolm Gladwell in his 2002 book called *The Tipping Point*. He describes a tipping point as an idea that spreads very quickly as a result of little changes that have big effects in a relatively short period of time. One of his examples is how a handful of kids reestablished the Hush Puppy as a shoe of choice for 1.6 million people in the space of one year as a result of buying the shoes in resale shops in the East Village in 1995.

I like the image evoked by tipping points, although I need to modify Gladwell's definition slightly. The modification relates to the staying power of the change; that is, how long does the change persist? I think all of us find our interest increasing substantially if we believe that our actions make a long-term difference for an institution.

As I look at the history of Illinois Wesleyan, I find many examples of tipping points.

- Elmo Watson's history of Illinois Wesleyan would suggest that a financial tipping point preceded the 1856 appointment of Oliver Spenser Munsell as the second President of Illinois Wesleyan and his brother, Charles W. C. Munsell, as financial agent. Watson reported that the assets of the University at the time included "ten acres of ground ... the walls of a plain but substantial three-story brick building, and an encumbrance of nearly five thousand dollars. ..." President Munsell and his brother launched a successful \$25,000 endowment campaign to get the fledgling institution on its feet, saving it from extinction.
- A proposal to move the University to Springfield in 1919 might be considered a geographic tipping point. This move was forestalled by an early cooperative effort between the University and the community leaders comprising the Bloomington Association of Commerce.
- The sevenfold rise in the endowment during Robert S. Eckley's presidency might be characterized as an endowment tipping point, while the dramatic improvement in buildings on campus during the presidency of Minor Myers could easily qualify that era as a facilities tipping point.

I stand on many Illinois Wesleyan shoulders this afternoon and I am grateful for the work that has been done in the past and for the dedication of those who serve and support the University today. I look forward to working with all of you in reaffirming our commitment to the distinctive mission of this institution, to enhancing our role as global citizens, and to strengthening this University's contributions to the public good. We will accomplish these goals and others established for the University through careful planning, through an investment in the people and programs that define the institution, and through continuous attention to the quality of our work. I view these as core responsibilities. If historians look back on my tenure as president and describe it as a tipping point for the core, nothing would please me more.