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Leading by example



For Illinois Wesleyan's new president, Richard F. Wilson, the first step in moving the University forward is to listen to what others have to say.

By Nancy Steele Brokaw '71

Photo portrait (above) by Mark Romine

Calm. Measured. Engaged. All of those traits could be heard in Richard F. Wilson's voice as he spoke fondly of his childhood in rural West Virginia, reviewed highlights of his long career as a leader in higher education, and discussed the challenges ahead for the University that he is poised to lead into a new era as its 18th president.

Outside Wilson's second-floor office in Holmes Hall, overlooking the Eckley Quadrangle, it was a typical July day, with soaking humidity and temperatures throbbing in the 90s. As the interview neared its conclusion, a low rumble of thunder was audible and the darkening sky had turned ominous shades of green and yellow.

Susan Bassi, assistant to the president, entered the office doorway to announce that severe weather warnings had been posted for the area. A few minutes later, a storm swept across the quad. As trees began to twist and bend with its force, Bassi returned to announce that "at this time, we need to go to the basement." Wilson nodded, picked up his suit coat, and joined the large group of administrators and staff that had crowded into the subterranean shelter of Holmes Hall's basement. Extending his hand to the first person he saw, he offered a warm smile. "Hi," he said. "I'm Dick Wilson."

Startled at first to meet IWU's new chief executive under such odd circumstances, the recipient of Wilson's firm handshake quickly relaxed as the two engaged in lively conversation. Before the storm had passed, Wilson met, greeted, and chatted with as many people as he could, enjoying the spirit of camaraderie that made the event seem almost lighthearted, despite the inclement weather outside.

Many in the group had already had a chance to meet Wilson — who had started his new job just two weeks earlier, on July 1 — but for some it was their first encounter. Throughout each exchange, the president tipped his head forward slightly, intent on catching every word. For Wilson, listening is obviously an active — not a passive — activity.



At right, during the First-Year Convocation, President Wilson was presented with a Class of '08 T-shirt — the same shirt that students wore on their first day at IWU. Wilson said he would always have a special affinity for the new class because they were starting their journey at Illinois Wesleyan together. (*Photo by Marc Featherly*)

It is a quality that impressed Trevor Sierra, who is Illinois Wesleyan's Student Senate president and a member of the search committee that unanimously recommended Wilson's appointment this past April. "I had lunch with Dick Wilson on his first day of work," says Sierra. "He was extremely eager to learn all about the students and their activities."

Another member of the search committee, Brian Hatcher — who is a professor of religion and humanities and chair of IWU's religion department — was also struck by Wilson's open style. Hatcher anticipates that Wilson will promote a collaborative approach in leading the University. "He'll include faculty and staff whenever possible," he says. "Dick has a great willingness to talk to people and work with them to bring them into the process."

Wilson agrees with that assessment. “I tend to consult widely on important issues and get the best advice I can from everyone affected,” he says. “I’m not afraid of debate on issues, concerns, and problems before coming to a decision.”

That leadership style is partly a result of Wilson’s extensive and varied academic experience. His resume includes a 26-year administrative career at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he most recently served as vice president of the University of Illinois Foundation, leading campus efforts to achieve a \$1-billion fund-raising goal.

Prior to moving into the development area, Wilson worked as assistant director in the Office of Planning and Evaluation and, later, as the assistant vice chancellor for Academic Affairs, where he directed the Council on Program Evaluation, which was responsible for evaluating all of the Urbana campus’s academic units.

As Wilson told reporters in a press conference in the Hansen Student Center after his appointment was announced last April, “for several years of my career I was responsible for evaluation and planning activities, and part and parcel of that effort was not only setting the direction but tracking progress.

“My own style is one of building a collaborative agenda,” he continued. “I don’t come with a plan that I somehow want to unfold at Illinois Wesleyan. I’ve listened to people and I hear what they are telling me. And what I’ve heard is that there is a strategic plan for this institution, some of which has been initiated but many parts of which have yet to unfold. So I think part of my work over the first year — working with the other senior staff, faculty, and students — is to begin to put some shape around that strategic plan and to define it in a more detailed way.”

During his press conference, Wilson also addressed what has become the most commonly asked question about his move to Illinois Wesleyan: is it hard to switch from a very large university to leading a much smaller institution?

“Well, absolutely there are differences, particularly in terms of scale,” he responded when a television reporter asked this very question.

“On the other hand,” Wilson continued, “I kept scratching my head as I moved through the interview process because many of the issues that this institution is grappling with are identical to those we struggled with at the University of Illinois. And the solutions, I think, are very similar.”

* * *

In fact, Wilson’s journey to Illinois Wesleyan university is not all that surprising when you learn more about his background, which includes attending a small liberal-arts college. He and his two brothers grew up in the West Virginia town of Point Pleasant, situated on the banks of the Ohio River. Wilson’s father was an agricultural extension agent whose career was interrupted by World War II when he fought in the South Pacific and achieved the rank of captain before returning to Point Pleasant to run a milk and ice cream business. During high school summers,

Dick Wilson drove a route truck for his father, delivering ice cream to rural stores. He also operated a mobile ice cream stand that sold treats to West Virginia fairgoers.

While schoolwork and his delivery job kept him busy, Wilson found time for Boy Scouts, eventually attaining the rank of Eagle Scout. In high school, he was elected state treasurer of the Key Club service organization, played baseball and basketball, and was a class officer.

Attending Alderson-Broaddus College in Philippi, W. Va., Wilson continued to play baseball and also discovered soccer. “This was around 1966, and soccer was new in that state,” he recalls; however, he quickly mastered the sport and was named West Virginia Intercollegiate Athletic Conference Athlete of the Year as a senior. He was also a standout in the classroom, graduating cum laude in 1968.

During his college years, Wilson met Pat Shearer, who was the daughter of Alderson-Broaddus’s president. The two got to know each other while Pat was home on break from Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Penn. Dick likes to joke that he “got to know the Pennsylvania Turnpike well” over the two years of courtship that followed.

Dick and Pat were married three months after their respective graduations. The young couple took jobs at a Spencerville, Ohio, high school where Dick became a math teacher and Pat taught English.

A year later, the Wilsons moved to Ann Arbor, Mich., so that Dick could attend graduate school, earning a master’s degree in higher education at the University of Michigan in 1970. They returned to Alderson-Broaddus for four years, during which time Dick served as director of admissions. Following that experience, he returned to the University of Michigan, earning a Ph.D. in higher education administration in 1978. That same year, Wilson joined the University of Illinois, where he quickly established a reputation among colleagues as an effective problem solver.

Larry Faulkner, president of the University of Texas at Austin, worked closely with Wilson during Faulkner’s tenure as provost, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and chemistry chair at the University of Illinois. He was particularly impressed with Wilson’s “great people skills and broad experience with issues relating to higher education, both on the academic side and the operational side.



Wearing Titan garb, Pat and Dick Wilson (above) unload moving boxes in the kitchen of the President’s House. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

“In addition,” Faulkner says, “Illinois Wesleyan is getting a president with excellent integrity and very fine values.”

Wilson is well aware that integrity and values are things Illinois Wesleyan’s community has come to expect of its presidents. During his time at the U of I, Wilson watched IWU from a distance and followed the 14-year presidential tenure of the late Minor Myers jr. with interest and admiration. “Minor Myers was a beloved president, and if you want concrete evidence of what he accomplished, just look around this campus,” Wilson says.

“Minor Myers put a high mark on the wall,” he continues. “He had a wonderful tenure as president of this institution. And he really moved the institution forward. My view is that Minor Myers established a solid foundation for the person who would follow him.”

By building on that base and taking the University forward, Wilson says he aspires to “do honor to all those who came before me.” One thing that attracted him to IWU, he adds, was “the widespread loyalty to the institution and the strong commitment to enhancing its excellence.”

As Brian Hatcher puts it, “From the beginning, Dick didn’t see us as a place that needed to be fixed. He can build on what we already have. He has the abilities and strengths to take us to the next level.”

* * *

Wilson has written, lectured, and taught classes on a variety of educational issues, including the history of American colleges and current issues in higher education. Throughout his administrative and scholarly career, he has been a passionate believer in education’s power to improve the lives of individuals.

As America enters a critical crossroads in its history — becoming a more fast-paced, technology-enhanced, and globally based society — Wilson sees education in general, and the liberal arts specifically, as the best means to help people successfully make that transition.

“We prepare students to adapt to change,” he explains. “What we know now is that most adults will change careers at least three times. The value of the distinctive education we offer at Illinois Wesleyan is that we are preparing people for life and the transitions that will occur. We teach students how to deal with complex issues in creative ways — and that’s perhaps the most useful job skill of all.”

As defined by Wilson, a student with a good background in the liberal arts should possess an inquiring mind, a sense of discipline, and a willingness to embrace opportunities and to explore new ideas and cultures different from the ones to which he or she is accustomed.

“The global society in which we live not only requires a sensitivity to racial, ethnic, and cultural differences, but also an appreciation for the fact that such sensitivity will enhance the work experience, and enrich life in general.”



On his first day as president, Wilson got better acquainted with administrators and staff, including Director of Multicultural Affairs Monica Taylor '88. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Wilson shares IWU's commitment to diversity, and says he intends to work with others on campus to meet that challenge in relation to race and ethnicity, and also in terms of culture, economic status, and geography. Wilson sees diversity as fundamental to any student's education. He believes that the more students engage with other students, professors, and staff whose backgrounds are different from their own, the richer their educational experience will be. Such students will also be better prepared to enter a workforce that's increasingly diverse and global, he says.

Among the many challenges facing Illinois Wesleyan, Wilson notes that student and faculty recruitment and retention will continue to be vitally important. "The long-term solution is to build endowments for people and programs — scholarships for students, chairs and professorships for faculty members, and special funds for

programs," he says.

Wilson is particularly interested in exploring ways in which different areas of University teaching and scholarship might address questions about ethical leadership and civic responsibility. After a recent wave of corporate scandals, he notes, many universities are wrestling with how these issues can be included in the curriculum. He also plans to look at ways in which the University can enhance its relationship with the Bloomington/Normal community. Specifically, he wants to find out where IWU is uniquely qualified to improve the quality of life in the area and, reciprocally, how the community can help Illinois Wesleyan.

Although IWU has seen much building activity over the last 10 to 15 years, a few capital projects remain, including the construction of a new theater/performing arts facility, Wilson says.

Capital projects require fund-raising. "Fund-raising," Wilson says, "is something I enjoy and look forward to." He adds, "Fund-raising is not an end; it's a means towards an objective." He's eager to work with alumni who have already expressed a desire to "repay their debt to IWU." He wants to match their interests with important needs, he says.

Wilson sees an expanding role for Illinois Wesleyan alumni. He emphasizes the increasing importance of alumni in student recruitment, professional mentoring of students, and providing expert advice to the University on a variety of substantive issues.

“One of the primary reasons that I was attracted to this position was what I perceived was an abiding interest in how to enhance the excellence of this institution,” Wilson says. “There are many dimensions to that, and as I’ve gotten to know this institution better and became acquainted with its constituencies, and saw the dedication and spirit that exist here, I’ve concluded that this place is positioned to move forward as a national leader. I believe the resources are here, and the will is here.”

Thinking back to the search process that brought him to the University, Wilson says he found himself “dreaming with IWU even before the search was completed.” Now that he has actually begun his tenure, he says, “I’ve never felt as challenged and excited over all that lies ahead.”



Wilson met with assistant chemistry professor Ram Mohan (above, left) for a tour of the Center for Natural Science. *(Photo by Marc Featherly)*