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The Dean of Matchmaking

Over four decades, Jim Ruoti '63 has made a career pairing students with the college of their dreams.

By Nancy Steele Brokaw '71
Photos by Marc Featherly

During an average month, Illinois Wesleyan Dean of Admissions Jim Ruoti '63 puts 2,000 road miles on his Toyota Camry, riding the circuit of college admissions. During that time, Ruoti will give four speeches to crowds of two- to four-hundred high school students and their parents. Afterwards, he'll linger at the high school to personally meet and chat with as many people as he can. He'll answer everyone's questions about financial aid, the college admissions process, and Illinois Wesleyan University. And he'll extend dozens and dozens of invitations to come to IWU and look him up.

Many will take him up on that invitation, which is more than fine with Ruoti. "I enjoy meeting people," he says.

In those few words, Ruoti describes his trump-card skill in a position he has held for 40 years. He is relinquishing that role, effective August 1, to take on new IWU responsibilities as dean emeritus.

Ruoti adds (unnecessarily for anyone who has had contact with him), "I'm not shy; I can always meet people."

"Meeting people" is an important part of being a dean of admissions. It's a position that has become dramatically more complex over the last 10 years. The business of college admissions now encompasses marketing, rankings, summer programs, web presence, direct mail, and the emergence of independent companies that massage data to predict applicant probabilities and enrollment projections.

Despite changes in his field, Ruoti says one thing will never change. "People still relate to people. It's still about a relationship."

Jim Ruoti should know. In a colorful career at the helm of Illinois Wesleyan admissions, he has watched his alma mater grow from a regional school to a nationally ranked liberal arts college.



At the Hansen Student Center, Ruoti explains the advantages of an IWU education to the Bill family from Wisconsin. Son Jacob is a prospective student.

Ruoti and his staff have admitted students whose academic mettle has inched ever upward. For example, the average ACT of the 1970 freshman class was 22.4. Last fall, it was 28.1. Other statistics have changed, too. All are part of the nail-biting math that is college admissions.

In 1970-71, Illinois Wesleyan received 998 applications, sent out 797 acceptances, and enrolled a freshman class of 537. In 2002-03, 3,248 students applied to IWU. The admissions staff accepted 1,496 and enrolled a freshman class of 582. (Both the improved selectivity and yield figures are in line with other quality institutions.)

Through it all, Ruoti has been meeting and developing relationships with literally thousands of prospective students. While the “getting to know you” process may include any number of Ruoti’s trademark wisecracking jokes, he is dead serious about the importance of his job.

“Admissions is the quickest way to change a university,” he says. “We have the biggest impact, for better or worse.” He goes on to add that professors often remain at an institution for 20 to 25 years whereas the student body completely turns over every four years. “In admissions, we’re only as good as our last class,” Ruoti observes wryly.

Jeff Hanna, Illinois Wesleyan vice president for public relations, chaired the search committee for Ruoti’s successor. He agrees. “The admissions department is the lifeblood of an institution. The director of admissions job is pivotal in so many ways.”

It’s a career path Ruoti began as an IWU student and business administration major, when Lee Short ’44 headed up an admissions staff of four. Ruoti recalls, “Short would send me out to college nights” in smaller towns “where I couldn’t do any real damage. He paid me five dollars, plus six cents a mile and a meal.”

After graduating in 1963, Ruoti worked the IWU admissions circuit in Chicago for five years, while earning a master’s degree from Loyola University. In 1968, Short moved to the development office and, at age 28, Jim Ruoti became the University’s director of admissions.

“When I started,” Ruoti recalls, “prospective students often shared a bedroom at their home with siblings. They didn’t have a car and hadn’t been many places.”

All that has changed through the years of Ruoti’s tenure and so have student expectations. “You have to supply the amenities that students are used to,” he says. “They have computers at home. Their high school choir has been to Europe.”

Along with increased expectations, Ruoti has seen progressively higher maturity levels in students. “Kids are so much more sophisticated about choosing a college now,” he says. In upscale communities particularly, Ruoti reports more and more high school sophomores showing up for college night programs.

Ruoti has also watched his pool of future University students become more driven and goal-oriented. “It used to be that I did most of the talking in interviews,” Ruoti says. “Now, they ask

lots of questions: Can I double-major? Can I play the trumpet and take German? What percentage of your student body is here on the weekends? What organizations do you have?

“It makes my job more fun,” he adds.

Ruoti and his staff have to do more than simply sift through the credentials of applicants and deal out acceptances from the top of the deck. They have to make a good match, and that doesn’t always mean the student with the highest test scores.

IWU isn’t for everyone; for example, it’s not for a student who just wants to blend in with the crowd, Ruoti says. In the end, it’s about a good fit for both sides — matching what both the student and the institution have to offer. That process really goes to heart of admissions.

It begins in the high schools. Ruoti, who calls working in admissions “a lifestyle,” estimates that he gives more speeches than any other private school admissions counselor in the Midwest. He’s averaged 35 to 40 speeches per year, most of them at Chicago feeder schools where Illinois Wesleyan has traditionally drawn large numbers of students. Ruoti says such schools traditionally set up their college nights to include one representative of a large state university and one from a small school. He wants to make certain that the small school representative is always from Illinois Wesleyan.



The University community held a special celebration of Jim Ruoti’s career at the Hansen Student Center on April 24. Above, Ruoti accepts a bouquet of flowers from Risa Kumazawa ’94, who teaches in the economics department.

Gloria Mueller, college counselor at Glenbrook, Ill., South High School, has worked with Ruoti for 22 years. For her college night programs, Mueller reports, “I always save Jim for last.” Why? “It’s like putting Johnny Carson up there. With Jim, the kids are in hysterics, but they get it. He’s not a blah-blah-blah kind of speaker. He gives wonderful information in such an entertaining way.”

It’s not just the students who learn from Ruoti’s speech, Mueller maintains. Parents pick up plenty of tips, too. “He has this great line about parents’ behavior during student interviews,” Mueller says. “He’ll tell the parents to please let their kids do the interviews and then he’ll add, ‘I’ve interviewed some great moms and dads.’” Without being overly critical, Mueller concludes, Ruoti gets his point across.

Scott Huch ’86 first met Ruoti at a 1979 college fair. “I was from a very small town [Chester, Ill.],” Huch recalls. “Only nine from my high school class of 108 went to college, so for me to even be exposed to a school of the stature of IWU was really something. Mr. Ruoti was manning the booth and he went out of his way to make me feel welcome.”

Although he received several college offers, Huch was swayed by Ruoti's "aggressive recruiting efforts." Huch not only came to IWU but worked in the admissions office for four years, including two summers. He remembers being invited over to Jim and Judy Ruoti's house for cookouts during those summer months.

Today, Huch is president of Delta Group, a direct-mail advertising agency for non-profit groups headquartered in Washington, D.C. "I got a great education at IWU," says Huch, who credits a lot of that education to his work with Ruoti and his staff. "I learned about dealing with people, especially, and I use those skills every hour in my work."

IWU Provost and Acting President Janet McNew puts it this way: "Jim Ruoti is an authentic genius in the art of relating to people — all kinds of people. He seems never to have met anyone between the ages of 17 and 22 with whom he could not form a bond. The bonds of affection he has formed with generations of students are the best and truest part of Jim's character."

Ruoti has been known to kick-start that bond with a zingy comment that is long remembered. Dan Walls '76 has been the dean of undergraduate admissions at Emory University for 20 years. He clearly recalls the first time he met Ruoti as a high school student. Former Illinois Wesleyan admissions counselor Dave Hughes had brought Walls up from Shelbyville for a campus visit. Ruoti walked out of his office to say hello. He was "an excitable and cocky guy," Walls remembers. When Hughes proudly announced that Walls was graduating seventh in his high school class of 160, Ruoti immediately retorted, "Why didn't you beat out the other six?"

"It was the first thing he said!" Walls recalls, still laughing. Sure enough, the two hit it off and Walls worked in IWU admissions both as a student and then for four years after graduation. "He [Ruoti] was absolutely my mentor," Walls says. "He's been a mentor for a lot of folks. He was simply a great role model."

Through the years, Walls has enjoyed running into Ruoti at national conferences. "There are always people around Jim Ruoti," Walls reports. "He's telling jokes."

Walls calls Ruoti the "consummate people personality."

It's a personality that fuels beyond-the-call-of-duty efforts. "Students come into my office all the time with personal problems," Ruoti says. "They know I'll listen."

He thinks certain students are more frank with him than other administrators because he jokes around with them. They relax and open up.

Nobody brings in a problem I haven't heard before," Ruoti says. "The students are always the same age, 18 to 22, no matter how old I am. They are always dealing with the same issues."

A frequent problem is a sick parent — a mom with breast cancer or a dad who's had a stroke. The student feels like quitting school to go home and be with the family, even though the parents insist that the student remain in school. "I tell them, listen to your parents," Ruoti says.

“As I’ve gotten older, I still joke around with the kids but I’ve become their dad now,” Ruoti says pensively, reflecting on the passage of years. Then he snorts, “But they tell me stuff they wouldn’t tell their dad.”

When alumni return to campus, years later, many head to the admissions office for a visit. If that graduate has gained weight, lost hair, and been gone for 20 years, Ruoti admits he can stumble for a minute coming up with a name. Once he starts to hear a first name, however, the rest usually comes to him.

If not, another member of his admissions staff will probably be able to bail him out. Ruoti is deeply proud of the 11-person IWU admissions staff. “You’d be hard pressed to find a liberal arts college anywhere with the kind of longevity we have here,” Ruoti says. “That has had incredible impact for the school. Some staff members have been here for 21, 23, and 29 years.”

One of those long-time staffers, Jerry Pope ’80, was recently named the new IWU dean of admissions. Pope echoes Ruoti’s sentiment regarding the staff. “The average tenure in our field is 2.3 years,” Pope says. “The average in our office is 14 years.”

He knows he’s replacing a legend. “When people think of Illinois Wesleyan, they think of Jim Ruoti,” Pope acknowledges. He adds that Ruoti has “such incredible insight into the way people think.” Pope says that he plans to “build on the foundation that Jim Ruoti built and expand more on a national and international level.”



Honored at commencement in May, Ruoti received a standing ovation from graduating students, parents, and colleagues.

Pope is stepping into a high profile, pressure-packed job. There are any number of career anxieties that Ruoti is glad to leave behind along with, he hopes, the acid-reflux medication he takes for stress-induced stomach problems.

Ruoti says, “When you’re in admissions, everybody knows what kind of year you had. We’re on the firing line if we don’t bring in the class.”

How tough is it to bring in the next class of students? Ruoti sums it up this way: “April is hell.”

April is the month that most acceptances come back, and with them arises a complex range of questions. How many should you admit? How many will come? If you enroll too few in the class, it’s trouble. If you enroll too many, that’s trouble, too.

As Illinois Wesleyan's student body has grown stronger and more diverse, Ruoti says, the number juggling has become more challenging. Now, it's not just bringing in the students, but micromanaging the projected class with the aim of balancing a variety of demographic categories, from geographic locations to potential majors to racial/ethnic backgrounds.

Jeff Hanna reiterates just how much pressure there is to recruit a class that brings satisfaction to a variety of University constituents. "It's so demanding," he says. "For someone like Jim Ruoti to have done it for as long as he's done it is astounding. As a dean of admissions, your livelihood depends on the decisions of 18-year-olds."

"Those [student] decisions," Hanna goes on, "are based on so many factors, so everything's important. Expertise in admissions is knowing what will swing the difference."

Although Ruoti admits he's ready to leave the pressure behind, he knows it would be extremely difficult to go from six-to-seven day workweeks to sudden retirement. Luckily, for Ruoti and for IWU, he'll be around for two more years in his new role as dean of admissions emeritus. Ruoti says he'll still be making speeches (but not as many), attending conferences, and pinch-hitting as needed. Ruoti will stay involved in the College Inside & Out summer program for alumni and their children (see "Tips from a Pro").

His primary new responsibility, however, will be to develop a formal alumni network to assist in the University's alumni and admissions efforts. Working with alumni will be a natural for Ruoti; he admitted many of them to Illinois Wesleyan in the first place.

As IWU assumes more of a national presence, help with admissions is needed, he explains. Simply put, the admissions staff can't be everywhere all the time. For example, Associate Dean of Admissions Bob Murray '82 spends one week each year recruiting in Colorado. With that limited time commitment, there are many college nights and events in Colorado that he can't possibly attend. A trained alumni representative could step in to fill those gaps.

Ruoti plans to begin by developing a manual. Next, he'll select five cities outside the Midwest for a pilot program. He plans on getting the operation off the ground and running in the next two years.

Expect him to tell a joke or two along the way.

Nancy Steele Brokaw '71 of Bloomington is a freelance writer and award-winning children's novelist. She wrote about the campus food service in our last issue.