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Staying on Track

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Staying on track



In a wide-ranging interview, Illinois Wesleyan President Minor Myers jr. reveals new plans based on revered traditions.

Introduction by Tim Obermiller

Illustration by Richard Thompson

If allowed just one word to describe Minor Myers jr., a strong candidate would be “eclectic.”

A glance at the Illinois Wesleyan president’s curriculum vitae confirms this impression—overwhelmingly. Topics of the many books and articles he has published or that are in progress range from 18th-century furniture to “baroque cuisine,” from American baseball to Roman imperial coinage, from a historical survey of the multitalented to a biography of chemist-entrepreneur (and University friend) Arnold O. Beckman.

Myers’ passion for the eclectic is also evident in the objects he collects: books and musical instruments, especially from the 18th-century; 19th-century cookery; and an astonishing assortment of decorative arts. His diverse hobbies include playing the harpsichord and piano and, less frequently, tennis. He also loves model trains—the layout in the basement of his house

includes many buildings he constructed by hand, including an N-scale office building modeled after the one where both his father and grandfather worked as lawyers in Akron, Ohio.

Myers, who turned 60 last August, was born in Akron. He remained in the Midwest for his undergraduate education at Carleton College in Minnesota before departing for the East Coast—first to Princeton University, where he earned a Ph.D. in political science, and then to Connecticut College, where he achieved the rank of full professor and department chair of government. In 1984, Myers was named provost and dean of faculty at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, N.Y. He returned to the Midwest when he was inaugurated as Illinois Wesleyan's 17th president in 1989.

In the years since, the University has increased its student enrollment, selectivity, and academic profile; raised \$125 million; and has undertaken \$115 million of construction (including the Center for Natural Science and The Ames Library) while expanding and strengthening its academic programs. In its latest annual survey, *U.S. News & World Report* ranked IWU for the first time in the first tier of the nation's best liberal arts colleges.

Regardless of rankings, Myers says the ultimate measure of Illinois Wesleyan's success is the quality of its students and alumni. Nothing pleases him more than to sit down and chat with a current student about how a particular University class or extracurricular activity has sparked his or her curiosity. Becoming passionate about a subject is vital to intellectual development, Myers believes, as one interest leads naturally to another and then another, evolving to enrich a person over the course of an entire lifetime. From Myers' perspective, eclecticism is not just a proclivity, but an engaging way to look at the world and one's relation to it, and provides a cornerstone for what it means to be educated in the liberal arts.

The following interview was conducted in late January by Vice President for Public Relations Jeff Hanna and *IWU Magazine Editor Tim Obermiller*. In it, Myers discusses the challenges ahead for Illinois Wesleyan and its liberal arts brethren in a time of economic and cultural uncertainties. Not content to rest on the laurels of past achievements, Myers continues to encourage the University to look for future inspiration in national models of the best that higher education has to offer.

Such aspirations are only natural, he maintains, for an institution founded on big dreams and bold ambition; a place where "if we believed something needed to be done, we went ahead and did it." As he approaches his 14th year as president, Myers seems as dedicated as ever to leading Illinois Wesleyan through this process of discovering what remains to be done, and then inspiring the determination to do it.

When you first came here in 1989, where did you think this institution would be, or where did you hope it would be, in 2003?

When they first called me to ask if I'd be interested in the position, I asked two things: what are the SATs [averages] and what is the endowment? When I was told the SATs were 1160 and the endowment was \$56 million, I knew immediately that the quality and the strength had already been built into [Illinois Wesleyan's] program.

I also learned that there were very strong people in virtually every sphere—people with ideas, people with a history, people with an ability to plan, lead, and execute.

So I came here with every confidence that this was an extraordinarily strong and accomplished community that deserved to be better known than it in fact was. And that was the remaining challenge, from my perspective. The hard part had already been accomplished, to a large extent. And the difficult part remaining was going to be marketing and sales. In other words, the manufacturing was done; distribution was the question.

Was it partly a question, then, of giving the institution more confidence in and awareness of its own strengths?

I think that process you're describing of growing institutional confidence really began in the Lloyd Bertholf era [Bertholf was IWU president from 1958 until 1968], and has continued over time. It's really a belief that, as an institution, we can do what we set our minds to do. That's a characteristic of planning up to this point, as we undertake a new round of strategic planning for the future. And the criteria we are applying to that planning are: What are the best national standards, and how do we follow them? What is the absolute best and how do we go in that direction? I believe that focus improves the result, inspires the model, and intrigues supporters. It's a combination that's hard to beat.

Those types of standards were certainly applied to projects like the recently completed Ames Library and Hansen Student Center. As a leader, how do you find the impetus to keep that momentum going?

Well, I believe the next things to do put themselves in front of us rather naturally. One building looks very good until you surround it with buildings that are brand-new. And what looked good 10 or 15 years ago may not look good at all right now, if it's surrounded by a new standard of greatness. And that, I think, is the case of our present theatre building.

The theatre is one of those buildings that intrigued me when I came, and I was frankly surprised to hear of its mechanical and organizational deficiencies—that it is simply too small to meet our current needs. I would have thought that was one place where we were pretty well set, but then you find that there are very urgent needs, and so we're looking at a new theatre.

At this stage of planning, it's our task to see what we definitely need to do, what we might like to do if resources allow it, and what the campus would look like if we did those things. So in one sense, the sky is the limit. But then you need to pull back to reality, and you do that by



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identifying those things that are at the central core of our mission. And then asking: which of these elements, if we added them, would make this a stronger place as defined by our mission?

Our current planning is focused on this being an undergraduate, residential, liberal arts college fundamentally for the 18-year-old. I think we've gotten stronger and stronger by focusing on this essence, the center core of what we're doing, which is being a very strong liberal arts institution, and that has been a formula for success.

Of course, periodically throughout the history of higher education, there have been challenges to the liberal arts model, particularly in times of economic stress. How do you see the future of the liberal arts college in the next decade?

I believe that there will continue to be, at the very top of the market, those very selective schools which most touch and inspire young minds, bring new vistas, give a student a new sense of self—a sense, utopian or otherwise, of what a society might be. There will also be a great deal of market for those schools that are offering practical courses that train you in a specific area or skill, like accounting. That's not at all what we're trying to do. We may train accountants, but we train them in a liberal arts tradition, not just to be accountants.

And colleges are going to find themselves asking: are they in one camp or the other? And those who tend toward the liberal arts model may be thinned out, but it's my guess that there will be a good market at the top of that group, though the bottom may have a very tough time indeed.

How do we stay in that top group?

By aiming at the highest standards. That's why I keep talking about a 90 percent graduation rate. That is the one single number that seems to describe to me the essence of what a great place would be. Now there are seven American colleges, on average, each year that graduate 90 percent or better of the first-year students who entered in that particular class. And those colleges are the ones that take the students who come to them and inspire them, keep them amused, challenged, delighted, amazed—helping to develop within them a sense of themselves and a love of curiosity. Once you graduate students at that level, competition to get in, pride of place, usually resources, all fall very naturally.

I wouldn't say that just graduating 90 percent alone is going to accomplish all this, but the things that come with that pattern inevitably build a place that is hard to exclude from the very highest ranks of American colleges in anybody's guide.

Won't a key to achieving that 90 percent graduation rate be maintaining the quality of our faculty?

Yes. Recruitment and retention of excellent professors will be absolutely key to that.

Regarding that first element, recruitment, how do you go about finding people who fit this particular community?

You go into the national market. You look for the people who want to come and you bring them in; you hear how they talk, you look at their eyes and you see how they sparkle in what they say. And there are some types who are eminently suited and some types who are eminently not suited to be here.

Those who strictly want to teach are not suited, nor are those who strictly want to do research. The ideal person is somewhere in the middle—someone who bristles with curiosity and ideas for research, and who figures out entrepreneurial ways to involve undergraduates in this wonderful world of discovery.

The greatest teachers are the ones who are inspired from the inside because they are asking interesting questions to which they are finding answers, and in doing so they pass along a real and authentic enthusiasm for discovery, in their own field and any other field. And that enthusiasm energizes their students and enlivens the entire institution.

And then once we find such people, the other challenge is keeping them?

That is the challenge. Because our faculty, as a whole, tends to be younger than those at other selective institutions, we are not faced with the exodus due to retirement that many other schools are facing. On the other hand, as retirements hit those other places, our faculty may be sitting targets for other people's searches. That's why it's important not only to keep our salaries up but also to keep moving them forward, to protect our faculty assets for our students. We've worked very hard to find the wonderful people we have, both faculty and staff, and we want to keep them.



“When students leave here, they should feel that they became familiar with a range of people whose diversity reflects our society as a whole.”

One topic that we're hearing a lot about now in higher education is diversity. How or why is that an important emphasis for a liberal arts institution like Illinois Wesleyan?

I believe that the goal of diversity is the inevitable task of the liberal arts college. It is central to our mission, because it's very clear that the key to permanent improvement of people's lives is education. The higher the education, the higher the improvement for the people it touches. And that's what we are trying to do; that's why we have these efforts.

The task is—through recruitment and retention—to get a more diverse group of people to become part of our community, so that their faces, their causes, their issues, their joys all become an integral part of the community as a whole. When our students leave here, they should feel that they became familiar with a range of people whose diversity reflects our whole society, as well as other parts of the world: people who they can understand and to whom they can relate.

There is a perception now that the events of Sept. 11, 2001, profoundly changed American society. How do you see that impact playing out at colleges like Illinois Wesleyan?

The way New York came together after September 11 was altogether inspiring; the way the country helped New York was not at all unlike the way the country helped Chicago after the fire in 1871, or Boston in 1872. But beyond that, it has been an atmosphere of doubt and mistrust—many have become afraid to fly overseas, or even to shop at their local mall. There's a great deal more fear, a great deal more uncertainty. Whereas, the essence of civilization is a shared sense of ideals, rather than shared doubts. It is a step backward toward building a fort mentality.

Unfortunately, I don't think there's much that a single college—or even all the colleges in America—can do overnight about international terrorism. As long as the threats persist, so will this atmosphere of fear and mistrust.

The question is: what is the long-term meaning of this on a global scale? What is it to have a satisfied, diverse world? And that is a question that lends itself to the strengths of our institutions of higher learning. For me, the prime task is whether we can build an international understanding for world civilization that isn't based on an "ism"—be it socialism, communism, capitalism, or fundamentalism.

It's interesting that in the 1700s, the intellectuals of Europe began to correspond with one another with the goal of developing what they called the Republic of Letters, that stood apart from the realm of any particular kingdom. It was modeled on the way that science had developed, first in the 1600s, with the idea that results of an experiment could be verified by scientists in Prague as well as London; that the same experiment would work in Peking as well as Alexandria. And that once discoveries were made, they would be communicated, one country to another, through open correspondence and publication.

The Enlightenment movement and the whole concept of natural law grows right out of this, and the questions that were asked then could be fruitfully raised now. Are there certain rules that simply are logical to human behavior in all places, nations, and times? And can we develop a world civilization that is based not on this or that affirmed truth, but rather on mutually understood interests that can somehow be respected, rather than imposed? Establishing those universal principles may be our only hope for the future. The Roman solution of simply imposing one civilization on the rest of the world may bring peace for half a generation, but probably not much longer.

Over the years you have met with thousands of our alumni, both here on campus and around the globe. Is there a common theme that emerges from those interactions?

Our alumni always seem highly impressed and very pleased with the progress that we are making as an institution. Something like The Ames Library is a source of pride for them, and that's something we could have done only with their help. And it was only with their help that we moved to the top of the regional list [of *U.S. News* rankings of best colleges] in the 1990s, and then to the top quartile of the national list this past year.

It's interesting to note that, in the *U.S. News* survey, one segment of the rankings involves what they term "Alumni Satisfaction." And their sole basis for determining this is whether or not the alumni have given a donation to their alma mater's annual fund.

What that implies is that a gift to one's college—however large or small—is really a vote of confidence for that institution. What's exciting to see is that the younger graduating classes are really starting to rally around this new view. When a recent graduate who perhaps hasn't given yet says, "I didn't know it was a vote. I thought it was a donation"—well, it turns out to be both.

In general, I think it's important to convey to our alumni that they can be supporters in many different ways. To use the example of Oxford University, one is considered less a graduate of Oxford than a lifetime member. Through our newly revitalized National Alumni Association, we are trying to achieve that same sense of membership—and all the benefits and obligations that implies. For our alumni to know they have a vote, and a voice, as members of this community is the most important message that we can deliver. It's nothing less than the foundation upon which we will build our future.