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A Place to Call Their Own

by **Tim Obermiller**

In 1999, Illinois Wesleyan's Student Senate issued a 30-page report to the university's Board of Trustees. Its language was powerful, plainly stated, and clearly heartfelt. In detail, it described the dissatisfaction many students felt about campus social life, and what had been done at other colleges to address comparable problems. The report concluded with a simple recommendation: "that Illinois Wesleyan solve these problems through the creation of a new student center."

Three years later, in January of 2002, that recommendation became a reality when the Hansen Student Center officially opened its doors. Several of the Student Senate leaders who helped shepherd the project from conception to completion were on hand to cut the ribbon at the opening ceremony. Standing next to them was Tom Hansen '82, whose \$4-million gift helped transform the old Memorial Gymnasium—hardly used since the 1993 construction of the Shirk Athletic Center—into what Dean of Students Jim Matthews calls "a student-centered student center."

"There is no detail in this building that the students haven't contributed to significantly," says Matthews. "From the shape of the lampposts, to the colors, to the kinds of carpet and furniture that were selected—they've had input on everything, and that's the way it should be."

That feeling of student ownership of the Hansen Center was something that was missing from the Memorial Student Center, according to Mike Balsley '99, who was Student Senate president at the time the report to the trustees was issued.

Says Balsley, "The former 'student center' was, in practice, not really a student center. It was a campus center." Used for faculty, alumni, and trustee meetings, and many other "institutional"



Photos by Marc Featherly

The new Hansen Student Center provides fun, learning, and a sense of community—all under one roof. Pool at Tommy's (above) and the new two-story bookstore (below).



functions, the Memorial Center was serving an important role, says Balsley, but failed to provide a consistent space that was clearly designated "for students."

Balsley and other student leaders felt this lack of a physical center for student life created the common perception that there was nothing to do on campus, especially on weekends. In fact, there were plays, concerts, and other events scheduled throughout the school year. But because those events weren't held in consistent locations or times of the week, students often weren't aware of them.

"There was no single space on campus they could go to find something happening," says Matthews. "And the types of events that were happening were all planned and staged and programmed, and there was no place you could go over to and just shoot a game of pool or play a game of darts, see who was there, and hang out."

"Having space that feels like 'your space' cannot be underestimated," Balsley agrees. "A student center can offer a centralized location where all students can come together to socialize, study, or, more importantly, do absolutely nothing at all."

Balsley stresses the point that the center should, in fact, be for *all* students—Greek and independent, resident and off-campus. The problem with student social life, pre-Hansen Center, was that it was largely dependent on IWU's fraternities. The flaw in this system was made clear after the 1998 suspension of Tau Kappa Epsilon (since lifted) for alcohol and other violations. A Greek Affairs Task Force led by Matthews, who at the time was acting dean of students, examined the problem. Among its conclusions: there was an unfair burden on Greek houses to create an after-hours social life on campus.

"What we determined was that the fraternity basements and party rooms had become, de facto, the center of student life," says Matthews. "And we came to believe that presented unacceptable risks of liability to the fraternities." Primary among those risks was excessive alcohol consumption. Among the task-force findings was that Illinois Wesleyan students were suffering "an intolerable level of emergency-room visits or injuries related to alcohol." Conversely, studies showed that most IWU students drank in moderation, if at all. But even those students had an image, however grossly inaccurate, "that the typical student here binge-drinks. Drinks to excess. Drinks dangerously," says Matthews.

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While the Student Senate was drafting its report recommending that a new student center be built, Matthews was coming up with his own ideas on how to address the problems uncovered by the Greek task force. He attended a conference where representatives of West Virginia University spoke about their response to having been named the nation's "number-one party school." With the help of students, they created "Up All Night," a program that provided an alternative to drinking parties.

"They made sure that every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night there were a series of things—exciting events, give-aways, food—available in the student center." The students responded in

droves. It gave Matthews the idea to try something similar at IWU. Kevin Clark, who was already involved in student life as small-halls director, was selected for the newly created position of Director of Student Activities. Even before the Hansen Center opened, Clark launched two successful entertainment series, held in the Memorial Center: the Funny Bone Comedy Club, featuring topflight comedians, and the Underground, bringing to campus a range of more offbeat performers, including one who has become something of a campus legend—Stevie the Regurgitator.

"He was the epitome of something you've never seen before," says Clark. "He stood in front of a packed crowd in the Main Lounge and swallowed an eight-ball from a pool table and brought it back up." While Clark cheerfully confesses that such performances lack much educational content, he says that most of the talent he signs to appear in the Hansen Center do carry important and positive messages for students.

"A lot of them will talk about mistakes they've made in college. And urge students not to make the same ones," says Clark. "We've had quite a few talk about the dangers of drunk driving. We've had comedians who have spoken about gay, lesbian, and transgender issues. It's really opening students' eyes, and saying you can laugh and still be educated at the same time. Laughing brings people together."

The events *are* bringing students together—Clark estimates that more than 600 people crowded in the Hansen Center last January to see Dean Edwards, the newest cast member of *Saturday Night Live*. "On average," he says, "we get anywhere from 250 to 400 people" for an audience that often includes faculty, alumni, and visitors from the community. Another series that's drawing large crowds premiered this January. Called Tommy's New Music Series, it features IWU students performing in the center's downstairs restaurant.

Clark says he enjoys tapping the university's rich vein of student talent and, whenever possible, he tries to find students to perform as opening acts for the Funny Bone and Underground shows. One such student, Adam Garren '01, honed his comedic talents to the point where he recently signed with a talent agency and is now touring nationally. But Clark says his goal "isn't to make celebrities and stars out of everyone. If that happens because they want it to happen, that's great; I'm willing to help. But more often than not, I just want to give students a chance to get up and express themselves and have a good time."

Clark also makes every effort to have students involved in selecting the talent who will appear at the Hansen Center. "My biggest thing is to rely on student feedback. I don't bring these shows here because I want to, or someone else wants to. I really want to bring them here because the students want to see this type of entertainment." To ensure this feedback, plans are in the works to form a programming board that would allow for student input on a more formal basis.

Keeping students happy and active in events that are fun and safe is Clark's overriding goal, and he's not offended if students choose to attend a concert or play that isn't being hosted by the Hansen Center. "I think it's great that we're at the point where we have so many options, because everyone has a different idea of what entertains them. As long as we're providing options that

touch all kinds of students, we're truly serving what the students need, and going in a right direction."



One item that is being served at the Hansen Center that has drawn the most attention—at least in the local media—is alcohol. Students can purchase beer or wine (no hard liquor) in Tommy's, but only under strictly enforced guidelines. They must provide an I.D. showing they are 21 or older, and consumption is limited to two glasses of alcohol per day. "Moreover, all purchases must be accompanied by substantial food orders," according to a brochure on the center's alcohol policy produced by the Dean of Students Office.

Despite these guidelines, the mere idea that the university was serving alcohol to its students likely raised some eyebrows (a *Pantagraph* editorial was headlined, "Would John Wesley toast a bar at Illinois Wesleyan?"). However, Matthews says his office has received few complaints about the policy, which was approved by the university's Board of Trustees, as well as the City of Bloomington, which issued the license allowing Tommy's to serve beer and wine—in part, because the establishment was clearly a restaurant, and not a bar.

Matthews says the decision to serve alcohol at Tommy's was a direct response to the Greek Task Force's findings on attitudes toward drinking on campus, which showed that while most students who drank did so in moderation, they tended to overestimate the number of binge drinkers among their peers.

"It was felt from the very beginnings of planning for this center that the entire Illinois Wesleyan community could benefit from having a place on campus where moderate consumption would be the norm," says Matthews. "There would be a space that students and faculty and staff could point to and say, 'No, we're not defined by excessive use of alcohol. Look at Tommy's.'"

In this early stage, it's a little hard to tell the success or failure of this "experiment," which will be periodically reviewed by administrators and students to determine if it's worth continuing. Matthews says, "We don't sell a lot of beer and wine" at Tommy's, but adds he never expected that serving alcohol would or should be a primary reason for students to frequent the restaurant. "What will draw people to Tommy's are the quality events that we hold there."

The food served there is also a big hit, and most nights the restaurant is packed with students hungry for an alternative to the standard food-service fare.

Matthews realizes that some people have focused on Tommy's serving alcohol as if it were the entire purpose of the Hansen Center, but says that students know better. The center was carefully designed to improve every aspect of student life. The newly relocated Campus Bookstore provides an educational component, for example, and on the mezzanine level there is space for meeting rooms and offices for Student Senate and other student groups. When it's not being used for events, the atrium is a convenient "hang-out" space for students to socialize, or to bring family and friends who are visiting campus.

For the first few months after it opened, this "hang-out" space was often conspicuously void of students, but by April and May that emptiness was gradually being replaced by activity. Kevin Clark says it's not surprising that it's taken awhile for students to warm up to the center. "Students who've been here awhile have formed patterns as to where they want to eat or hang out. But I think you'll really see a change next year with the incoming freshman class. To them, this will really seem like their building."

For Mike Balsley, that sense of ownership will be the true test as to whether Hansen is a successful student center. "This building's greatest strength will be its ability to change with the times, to reflect the needs of the students," he says. "As long as the philosophy of 'students first' is at the heart of the building's use, the Hansen Student Center will be a success."

And that success will pay off in some very practical ways for the university, Balsley predicts. "Anything that will improve how students feel about their college experience will help sustain their relationship with the school after they have graduated," says Balsley, adding, "When I attended here, IWU seemed to me a small school without a strong central identity for its students, non-Greeks especially. I think the student center has the potential of bringing people together in a big way, and that can last long after graduation."

Matthews agrees that the Hansen Center is a potential cure for that old student lament that there's nothing to do. "Students have a potential to create in this space the student life that they want to have. If students in the future find themselves making those sorts of claims [about a lack of things to do], then they have to look to themselves and what they've made or not made out of this opportunity."

He predicts that students will rise to the occasion. "In my experience at Illinois Wesleyan, students have never failed to step up to the challenge, and I think they will here, too." And when they do, the title Hansen *Student* Center will truly live up to its name.