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The Fun Factor

Illinois Wesleyan's busy students are finding new and healthy ways to relax and let off steam.

Story by RACHEL HATCH

Life as an IWU student can be serious business. There are classes to attend, exams to take and papers to write. Throw in a campus job and participation in a sport or club and it adds up to an active, even taxing, existence.

Take a closer look, however, and on any given day you can find Illinois Wesleyan students caught in the act of having fun. They could be laughing at a comedian's jokes at the Hansen Student Center, moving to the music under strobe lights at an International House dance, tossing a Frisbee on the Quad or enjoying a long brunch in Bertholf Commons.

Having fun is more than simply a way for students to blow off steam, according to Dean of Students Kathy Cavins-Tull. "The social realm is where students find their niche and develop relationships. It's a vital part of the collegiate experience.



An energetic crowd enjoys the music at a Eurotrance dance party at IWU's Kemp Hall. (Photo by B Corbin)

"Students are under more pressure than ever before," continues Cavins-Tull, "so having fun has a real purpose for their well-being."



Sigma Pi and Alpha Gamma Delta swing their way to the top at the annual Lip Sync competition. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

An annual survey by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, shows that emotional health among first-year college students is at its lowest point in 25 years. At the same time, students are placing higher demands on themselves to succeed, and report feeling anxious about their futures in a depressed economy.

The pressure can feel even more intense at a selective school like Illinois Wesleyan. "Just the competitiveness of Wesleyan can be stressful," says first-year student Jill Kawasaki, who is a varsity swimmer and serves as events coordinator for IWU's Student Senate. "I'm personally involved in a lot, and that adds to the stress."

Creating opportunities for students to reduce their stress and have fun is a big part of Sara Schaller's job as interim director of student activities and leadership programs. It is not always an easy task.

"Students here study on a Friday night. I've *never* heard of students studying on a Friday before," says Schaller, who came to work at Illinois Wesleyan in 2007 as a residence hall director. "Sometimes pulling students out of their rooms and the library can be a challenge, but it's important for them to see and connect with other students."

"The face-to-face communication and getting to know people is so vital," she continues. "There needs to be an understanding that friendship is more than being friends because I clicked it on Facebook."

Schaller works with a programming board to plan events for Hansen Student Center. "The board has about 30 to 40 students, and most of the time we just talk about potential entertainment," she says. "For example, I'll ask them, 'I just want to know: Is a magician cool, or is that stupid?'"

Along with ensuring that events meet the cool quotient, the Hansen programmers look for diversity in acts. "You don't want to have all comedians, or all male performers, so it can be tough," says senior Amber Spiewak, a student programmer who has worked in the student activities office for three years. "You want to appeal to people who like to come and passively watch a concert, and those who like to participate and be part of the action. It's important to find a balance," she says.

Sophomore Marlena Szewczyk planned concerts and events for Student Senate last year. Her goal was to get students to try something outside their comfort zone. "Part of college is breaking out and doing new things, meeting new people," she says. "People tend to get stuck in the same routines. If a university event can pull them out of that, then it has done its job."



Students participate in Barrio Fiesta, a celebration of Latin American traditions that features food and dancing.
(Photo by Madison Roberts)



Track team members unwind at Puzzle Night. (Photo by B Corbin)

Having fun while learning something new also supports University goals such as promoting diversity. Cultural happenings — from a hip-hop workshop to salsa-dancing lessons — offer students "something they maybe have never tried and gives them a broader perspective on life or culture," says Cavins-Tull.

In addition to events sponsored by the Dean of Students Office or Student Senate, Wesleyan's weekly calendar includes concerts, plays, exhibits, student-organization-sponsored events and more. "It's really not that you hear there is nothing to do," says Spiewak. "I think it's more choosing what to do — go to a concert or hear a speaker. Watch a movie or go to a dinner. There is so much happening, people have to try and choose what is important to them."

In giving students choices, the University is also rebutting the notion that drinking is essential to having fun. "We have to battle that perception right out of the gate," says Cavins-Tull, who points out that about 35 percent of IWU's students report that, in the average week, they do not consume alcohol. In countering the fun-equals-partying stereotype, the goal is not to be judgmental, Cavins-Tull says, but to offer alternatives.

"If students go to an event where alcohol is not being served and they have a great time, that's a positive alternative. It confirms that they can relax, have fun and relieve some of the stress they might be feeling, and do it in a healthy way," says Cavins-Tull.

When Cavins-Tull talks with IWU alumni, she finds that it's those kinds of positive social experiences they recall most vividly. "They will tell you about those moments and the relationships developed here that have carried them through their lives."

"College isn't just a learning experience," Kawasaki says. "There is also a social aspect that is important. If we want to encourage growth in all aspects of life, then we have to talk about the social element, and not just the academic."

It can be a tricky balance, especially for Illinois Wesleyan's high-achieving, hardworking students. Szewczyk remembers how, during finals last spring, she organized a Relaxation Day at the Hansen Center where students could stop by for massages and free food. It turned out to be a big success, but "the funny part was that it was an event to help people relax and yet I was so stressed out planning it!" she says, laughing.



Students play blackjack at Alpha Gamma Delta sorority's Casino Night. The event raised money for Juvenile Diabetes Research. (Photo by Madison Roberts)