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Alum Headlines ODE Banquet

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LINDSEY HAINES

As public concern grows about the quality of the U.S. education system, the debate about school choice becomes more and more salient. In his presentation at the Omicron Delta Epsilon banquet, Illinois Wesleyan alum and educational policy expert Dr. Ron Zimmer gave students and faculty an interesting overview on the topic.

Zimmer explained that the idea of school choice beyond the traditional local public school was proposed by Dr. Milton Friedman in 1955 and has manifested itself in several ways today including the educational voucher system and charter schools. The voucher system is a certificate issued by the government which families can apply toward tuition at a private school, rather than at the public school to which their child is assigned. However, due to the religious connections of many private schools, critics of the voucher system worry that it violates separation of church and state. Another alternative that Zimmer has studied extensively is charter schools. Charter schools are the political compromise, he explains, they provide low-income students with a way out of poor performing schools and also bring a competitive market aspect to the educational system. He explained that these schools receive public money, but are freed from some of the rules and regulations that apply to traditional public schools. Admission to these schools is often allocated with a lottery system. However, some unions oppose these schools because they do not always hire unionized teachers. Zimmer reports that the success of these alternative education methods is mixed, a fact that has halted the expansion of school choice.

Zimmer says that in his time as an undergraduate at Illinois Wesleyan he truly developed a passion for economics and research. Even beyond the classroom Zimmer has fond

memories of the economics department. He remembers the departmental field trips to the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and the Anheuser-Busch Brewery in Milwaukee. As an economics and business double major and member of the cross-country and track teams, Zimmer also learned the art of multi-tasking at Illinois Wesleyan. However, Zimmer noted he also learned a few unconventional lessons. As a student worker on the grounds crew, Zimmer remembers taking the small maintenance vehicles and racing them across the quad. When asked how fast the vehicle could go, he quickly responded, "about 35 miles per hour, we also timed them going around the track." After graduating from Wesleyan in 1992, he continued on with economics, receiving his MS at the University of Kentucky. He then received his PhD from the University of Kentucky in the related field of public policy. After completing his PhD he stayed on at UK as an adjunct professor for a year before landing a job at the prestigious RAND Corporation. Dr. Zimmer's specialty is educational policy. He has dedicated his career to researching educational finance and school choice, in which he has published numerous articles and reports. Zimmer recently took a position as associate professor of educational administration at the College of Education at Michigan State University. He is also an associate editor for the *Economics of Education Review*.

Many freshman (and even some seniors) wonder, what can I do with my economics major from Illinois Wesleyan? Alum Dr. Ron Zimmer is a perfect example of the many options economics students have. His closing advice to current students is not worry so much about landing that stressful high profile job, but rather to do what you enjoy and see where it takes you.