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Council for IWU Women Inspiring Students, Graduates

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Inspiring students to discover self-confidence is one of the keystones of a liberal arts education. Illinois Wesleyan University is meeting that need in students with groups such as the Council for IWU Women, which was created to instill confidence in female students with the help of a plentiful resource – successful alumnae.

Marsha Guenzler-Stevens, a 1978 Illinois Wesleyan graduate and founding member of the council, recalled her own experiences at Illinois Wesleyan as a female in the male-dominated major of biology in the 1970s. “A sense of self was a gift I received from Illinois Wesleyan,” she said, noting former Professor of Biology Dorteia Franzen as one of her strongest mentors. “I was embedded with a great sense of courage and a magnificent mentorship from Dorteia. She opened doors for me she didn’t even know she opened.”

At Illinois Wesleyan, a task force was created to explore whether female students’ attitudes reflected the national studies. The task force reported its findings to the Alumni Council Executive Board in 2005. “The Board heard data which implied Illinois Wesleyan women come to the University with talent and unending potential, but have less confidence than their male counterparts,” said Guenzler-Stevens.

“It’s a balancing act for women in leadership,” said Pat Wilson, another founding member of the Council for IWU Women and the wife of University President Richard F. Wilson. “If women have a ‘take no prisoners’ attitude and exhibit traits typically thought of as tough, it can be received as abrasive. It can be confusing to women, which is why it is so important for women to have other female role models.”

National studies have shown for decades that young people have a stronger chance of succeeding with a positive role model with whom they can identify. Women tend to build strong mentoring relationships through social networking, said Guenzler-Stevens, who suggested the idea of a mentoring program for women when she heard the task force report as a member of the Alumni Executive Council. “Women probably learn the most by way of sharing stories. “In some

ways, that is one of the roles a mentor has – she finds out the pieces of your story that are beautiful and lets you know how to face the pieces that are challenging.”

In 2005, a working group of alumni, faculty and staff was formed to explore Guenzler-Stevens’ idea of a mentoring program. The group studied successful programs on other campuses, such as Radcliffe/Harvard, Cornell and Northwestern. It was decided by the group to invite women from a range of careers and locations across the country. “We asked ourselves what would work for Illinois Wesleyan,” said Wilson. “We knew a diverse group of women would be able to identify with more students.”

In early 2006, the group approved its mission statement and invited women to join what would be the Council for IWU Women. Thirty-six Illinois Wesleyan alumnae responded to the invitation. The council convened its first meeting at Homecoming of the same year. “We had a really rich beginning with such fantastic conversations between students and the women of the council,” said Guenzler-Stevens. “We discussed more than what brought women to Illinois Wesleyan as students. We talked about their dreams and expectations, and what it means to be a woman in society today.”

According to Guenzler-Stevens, members are asked to support the council monetarily, in order to fund several student scholarships and an annual conference. The main focus, however, is placed on mentoring – offering advice and support to Illinois Wesleyan students and graduates. “The emphasis is on taking the time to pay attention to those things that will encourage success,” said Barb Nathan, a 1980 Illinois Wesleyan graduate and council member.

Nathan, the executive director of the Community Cancer Center in Bloomington, helps plan the annual Council for IWU Women Conference, where alumnae and students have a chance to talk and attend sessions that range from networking to dealing with stress as a working woman. Council members are also encouraged to provide internships for students. Nathan has been offering internships for years to students at Illinois Wesleyan, as well as other universities. “Interns gain confidence and training and organizations gain the help they need. It is a win-win,” she said.

Alumnae are continuing that mentoring role even after students graduate, said Tracy Wych, a 1977 Illinois Wesleyan graduate and member of the council. An executive with Calyon in New York City, a subsidiary of one of the largest banks in the world, Credit Agricole, Wych said she enjoys helping students who are making their way in the city. “There have been times over the years when students come to New York. Whether they are in my field or not, there are always the possibilities of helping them get acclimated to a new area, or connecting with new people,” she said. “That’s the most fun, putting together people who need to know each other.”

Wilson said she has seen the connections of the council grow over the past three years. “Sooner or later the students are going to leave the campus, and our council members are spread out across the country,” she said. “They are providing an expanding support group for graduates coming to a new area. It’s a valuable resource.”

Nathan said the council helps students see that networking can be more than purely social. “It might be hard for students to believe, but they can call alumni and truly get through to us. It’s an opportunity to create a relationship,” she said. Nathan added that the council is a chance to return a favor. “Each of us has had a time when an alum has reached out to us. This gives us a chance to give back.”

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