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## A Question of Giving

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## A Question of Giving

**A task force examines the conundrum: If alumni satisfaction is so high, why is annual giving participation so low?**



Surveys of IWU alumni show that nearly nine out of every 10 alumni believe their Wesleyan educations were highly valuable to them personally and professionally. Yet data also show that fewer than two in 10 alumni are regularly providing support to the University through its annual fund.

In terms of alumni participation, this puts IWU in the bottom half of all private universities and last among 13 liberal arts colleges regarded as peers.

The consequences are serious, according to a volunteer task force appointed by President Richard F. Wilson to examine alumni giving to the Wesleyan Fund and provide recommendations on how it can be improved.

“Weak alumni giving rates have a direct, negative impact on current and future students,” says Scott Huch ’86, a member of the task force and president of a Washington, D.C.-based direct-marketing agency. Annual gifts, he says, “are essential to providing the financial aid upon which more than 90 percent of our students depend.”

Lower giving means that many students and their families are struggling to locate funds beyond what the University can provide. It also means that prospective students “who want to come here may end up choosing another college because that college can offer more help,” says Huch.

Alumni giving rates are also important because most foundations, bond-rating agencies and college-ranking publications use those rates as the primary measure of graduates’ satisfaction with their schools. “So, while University data show that the overwhelming majority of alumni are pleased with their IWU experience, it appears to outside agencies that fewer than two out of 10 alumni are satisfied,” says Wesleyan Fund Director Jeff Mavros ’98.

“When the University pursues funding from a granting entity such as the Mellon Foundation,” notes Mavros, “the feedback we sometimes get is, ‘If your alumni aren’t supporting your institution, why should we?’ And when the University gets ranked lower than other liberal arts colleges for the same reason, the hit our reputation takes affects all of us who have Illinois Wesleyan degrees.”

Why do so many alumni opt out of giving to the Wesleyan Fund each year? “It’s not because they don’t care about the University,” Mavros insists, but rather because the message doesn’t seem to be getting through to enough alumni about the importance of giving to the fund, even with smaller donations.

“The collective power of all the gifts of \$100 or less we receive annually gives a classroom of students their financial aid for one year,” he says.

“When we do talk to our alums one-on-one about our needs for financial aid for students, the light bulb goes on,” says Mavros. “Many don’t realize we have so many students with significant financial need that can only be fully met with donated funds — or that every dollar given to the Wesleyan Fund goes to support student scholarships,” unless otherwise specified by the donor.

Getting out these messages more effectively to more alumni will require an integrated communications effort, says IWU Trustee Kathy Larey Lewton ’70, a member of the task force and principal of a healthcare strategic communications counseling firm based in the New York City area.

“And at the heart of the messaging must be stewardship — caring about the University, taking care of the University, engaging and contributing,” Lewton says.

“The good news is that IWU’s participation rate is totally in the control of IWU alumni,” says Josh Butts ’01, who served with Lewton and Huch on the task force and is director of development at Harvard Medical School. “Each of us has the power to solve this problem, but it will only improve if each alum does something about it, one person at a time.”

Only 18.6 percent of alumni gave to IWU’s annual fund during the 2010–11 fiscal year. This placed Wesleyan last among 13 liberal arts colleges regarded as peers. At 46.2 percent, Carleton College alumni topped the survey. In-state peers such as Augustana (31.9 percent) and Knox (30.3 percent) also ranked significantly higher. It also represents a decline of nearly 40 percent in the number of alumni who gave to the Wesleyan Fund compared to just eight years ago.

The task force set an initial goal to raise the participation rate to 20.1 percent by July 31, 2013. To reach this goal — and thus return Wesleyan to the top half of alumni-giving participation among private U.S. universities — IWU needs 350 more alumni donors to the Wesleyan Fund than last year. This number is “highly attainable,” Huch believes, “and is an important first step in a multiyear approach to significantly increasing giving rates.” To reach the participation goal for this year and beyond, the task force devised a detailed, 10-year strategic plan. Developed under Mavros’ guidance and in collaboration with several alumni leaders, this plan “will be implemented immediately,” says President Wilson.



*Scott Huch ’86 helped lead a task force seeking ways to increase alumni giving.*

In its plan, the task force focused on ways to create a stronger culture of alumni stewardship. One way to do that is to build events and programs “that remind alumni how IWU remains an integral part of who they are,” says Butts. “It’s important for alums to know how IWU is strengthened, and how young people benefit, because of alumni giving of every kind — with their time and talents as well as their dollars.”

Reflecting on the strategic plan and its potential impact, Huch says, “I feel the message we have for alumni is a very positive one. It’s exciting knowing your personal actions have helped deserving students, and have helped IWU grow in stature, because you have joined with 20,000 fellow alums from all over the world in expressing your satisfaction with your Wesleyan education.

“In the best possible way, we’re all in this together,” says Huch. “I have faith in the people who attended Illinois Wesleyan. This strategic plan is also a call to action, and I believe alumni will want to help when they learn about this problem. And if that happens — if we can persuade more alumni to get personally involved — I am confident we can get things turned around.”

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