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### Forward Thinking

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In its new strategic plan, IWU builds on traditional strengths while encouraging innovation to meet future challenges.

Story by TIM OBERMILLER

“As you know, great institutions are never allowed the luxury of standing still,” said President Richard F. Wilson at the launch of the *Transforming Lives* capital campaign in 2009.

Those words resonated again this year when — just weeks before the successful conclusion of the campaign — the Board of Trustees adopted a new strategic plan in May that sets forth Illinois Wesleyan’s priorities and aspirations in the coming years.

Wilson says the timing for creating this plan, called *IWU 2020*, reflects “an acknowledgement that the challenges and opportunities we face today are quite different” from those envisioned when the last plan was created in 2006.

“Change has occurred very quickly,” Wilson continues, “and parents and students are looking at universities in different ways. The purpose of this plan is to examine ways we can improve on our strengths while reaching into new areas that are consistent with our mission.”

In setting *IWU 2020*’s strategies and goals, its planners built on data amassed for an ambitious self-study the University completed in 2012 as part of the Higher Learning Commission’s re-accreditation process that occurs every 10 years.

The process was also informed by the University’s vision and mission statements, adopted in 2003 and revised slightly before *IWU 2020*’s strategic planning began ([read the mission statement here](#)).

“We were very intentional about referring back to the mission statement, and that really helped pull the pieces together,” says Karla Carney-Hall, Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students, who chaired two of the six work groups formed to devise a new strategic plan.

One early discovery by the work groups — which included cabinet officers, faculty, trustees, staff, students and alumni — was that the 2006 plan’s outline of six major goals was still a workable guideline. “Everyone seemed satisfied with those categories,” says Wilson, “and it was a matter of refining and revising what was done the last time, as opposed to formulating a plan that might move off into a whole new set of directions.”

Provost and Dean of the Faculty Jonathan Green says, “A lot of this is really aimed at stimulating conversations about best practices that are already happening in pockets on campus and institutionalizing the best of what we do. In many cases, it was saying, ‘Let’s take some of the good things we’re doing to the next level.’”

The new plan differs from its predecessor in that it sets measurable outcomes to achieve its goals. Green says this enhancement reflects how “we now have systematic assessment throughout the educational slice of the University. Our faculty have become veterans of this process.”

Committed to an inclusive and transparent planning process, Wilson and the *IWU 2020* work-group leaders conducted open forums, web-based surveys, online feedback forms, communications with parents and alumni and several meetings with specific campus constituencies and committees.

Faculty were especially involved in the “Teaching and Learning” section of the plan, says Green. “All of the strategies and articulated outcomes were generated by faculty committees, vetted and edited by the work group and then reviewed again by those committees.” The entire faculty considered the plan at two meetings this past spring, approving it in April.

While Green says faculty feedback has been positive, concerns were expressed about whether all the plan’s goals were achievable by 2020. “And our response has been: none will be achievable if we don’t try. Some are low-hanging fruit from which we can have early victories, and some may not have been achieved by the time we do the next strategic plan.”

Wilson points out that many parts of *IWU 2020* were specifically designed to encourage innovation and experimentation, which invites an element of risk. “We need to have three or four pilot projects going on all the time,” he says. “Some of these may not pan out, but we need to encourage that process, to ensure we not become complacent when new opportunities arise.”

Several parts of *IWU 2020* had already been implemented before the planning process was complete — “a sure sign,” Wilson says, “that the plan is focused on the right priorities and provides the right direction.”

The following are some highlights of the *IWU 2020* strategic plan focused on key aspects of the “Teaching and Learning” and “Enriched Campus Community” sections. Future issues of *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine* will look at progress being made in the plan’s other major segments, including diversity and engagement initiatives.

### Building a stronger community

There’s an important reason why the section of the 2004 strategic plan called “Student Development” has been renamed “Cultivating an Enriched Campus Community” in the *IWU 2020* plan.



During “Turning Titan” orientation, the Class of 2018 assembled at Kemp Commencement Plaza. Parts of the new strategic plan focus on building strong community values and promoting “high-impact” learning experiences that lead to post-graduation success.

“It’s about being a safe and healthy campus, being a diverse and inclusive community of learners and scholars, and understanding that those aren’t things that are limited to your classroom experience — that’s the big message,” Carney-Hall continues. “It’s become not just about individual choices but about community values.”

The need to promote a sense of shared responsibility can be seen in the creation of recent programs such as Bystander Intervention Training. Designed to increase awareness of high-risk behaviors such as alcohol and drug use as well as sexual assault, the training teaches students to recognize warning signs and how to intervene safely and effectively.

Meanwhile, IWU continues to support positive student activities through resources like the Hansen Student Center, which hosted close to 1,000 different activities, events and meetings in 2013-14. For two consecutive years, the programmers and crew of the University’s Office of Student Activities have won the Programming Organization of the Year award for a small-budget program at the National Association for Campus Activities Mid-America Regional Conference.

To help new students make a smooth transition into the IWU community, the plan considers how programs such as “Turning Titan” orientation can more effectively address the different needs of transfer, first-year, international, MALANA and first-generation students through appropriate programming.

Another element of the plan is its emphasis on promoting among students the sense of a lifelong affinity with their alma mater. “That’s part of having an enriched campus community,” says Carney-Hall, who defines affinity as “strong connections that bring students back as alumni, that encourage them to recommend the school to others, that help create a system of legacy where they encourage their children to come here one day. Because Wesleyan is a fond place for them and because they’ve been able to maximize their potential as part of their experience here.”

Factors in students’ development of a lifelong affinity include “feeling connected to one another, or to a particular faculty or staff member, and if they feel that this was a nurturing place where they made a difference,” says Carney-Hall.

At the same time, “quality communication, affinity groups, campus spirit and a historical sense of place and tradition” can enhance a sense of community among both students and alumni.

“Institutionally, people are very fond of the University, but there aren’t many specific events or traditions that unite the campus community,” says Carney-Hall. “There are traditions within athletics, Greek life, theatre and other pockets of campus, but they are more niche oriented. We hope to develop activities that unify students across the classes, where they can all look back and say, ‘Oh, I remember *that* at Wesleyan.’”

To further spark affinity, *IWU 2020* recommends cultivating student leaders to become a networking group for their class through the class committee experience. “Our hope is those student leaders will form the basis for leadership for future class reunions and connections.”

Finding more ways to encourage meaningful exchanges between IWU students and alumni — including events, internships and donor connections to student scholars — is also emphasized throughout the strategic plan.

“The idea is to do a better job connecting our students to alumni,” says Carney-Hall, “so they begin to see themselves in those roles.”

## Skills to match a world of challenges



Programs that spark student innovation include the Zoellick Fellowship in Social Entrepreneurship founded by Todd Zoellick '00, shown below left with Josh Wiggs '15 and Vanessa Macias '14. The computer science majors launched a student-run business that provides IT, web development and Internet marketing services at a low rate for local non-profits.

Wanting to find out what colleges do to promote student success, the American Association for Higher Education and the National Survey of Student Engagement collaborated on a recent study. What they found was that experiences like study abroad, internships and research opportunities had the greatest impact on student learning.

That conclusion didn't surprise Carney-Hall, who says those kind of "high-impact" experiences help students "marry theory and practice."

"They are things that take students' intellectual process and classroom learning into a real-world application setting," says Carney-Hall. "Whether that's undergraduate research or travel abroad or being in the world of work, they are able to synthesize their learning, and that's really what makes it high impact."

Provost Green points out that Illinois Wesleyan has been far ahead of the curve in providing these kinds of experiences. Explorer and IWU professor John Wesley Powell "realized 150 years before it was popular that actually taking students out in the field, studying firsthand the things you were discussing in class, might mean more than looking at it on a chart on a wall. Or having a conversation with a Native American about his culture might actually have a bigger impression on you than reading a paragraph in a book. And so, for a century and a half, this institution has had a tradition of experiential learning complimenting traditional curriculum."

Keeping experiential learning an essential part of students' experience is emphasized in the "Enriched Campus Community" section of *IWU 2020*. Carney-Hall, who led the work group, says it's important these experiences be "high-quality and reflect the University's core mission and values."

That includes "preparing students for academic success, democratic citizenship [and] life in a global society," the plan states. "Students will engage in a robust, fully integrated student experience that emphasizes collaboration regarding community service, service-learning, human rights and social justice."

The plan also calls for "progressive leadership programs" that include peer mentoring and education. Experiential learning is among the best ways to help students develop leadership skills, says Carney-Hall.

"If we believe that liberal arts graduates will help solve the world's big problems, then they need to be able to have the leadership to do that," she says. "That leadership includes the ability to create a shared vision, to understand what it means to work in concert with others, to delegate and be able to involve and include others in our communities."

"It's high-quality communications and problem-solving skills. And those are the big skills. On a smaller level, it's how to plan a program and run a meeting. But I think all of that really leads to our graduates feeling confident that they do have the skills to not only understand but help solve those big problems."

"When our students go out into a very diverse, complex work world but don't have the communications skills, the comfort, or the confidence to be successful in that world," says Carney-Hall, "we've done them a disservice." College is the ideal place to test such skills, she adds. "The undergraduate environment is very forgiving as a learning environment, so our hope would be that students are using this learning laboratory, both in and outside of the classroom, to get better and better at how to live and work successfully in the world."

Talking with recent graduates, President Wilson often hears them say that "yes, they were happy to get that first job out of college. But the value of their liberal arts education came into sharp relief as they moved through their careers and found that the experiences they had here and the opportunities they were given really prepared



them for leadership roles within their organizations. They felt extremely grateful to have had those experiences.”

## From conversation to collaboration



Mallika Kavadi '15, left, consults with her advisor, Assistant Sociology Professor Meghan Burke, about her summer research as a Mellon Scholar. Kavadi continued her research during a yearlong program at University College London.

Variations of the word “collaborate” appear frequently in the *IWU 2020* strategic plan. In the “Teaching and Learning” portion alone, recommendations call for more collaboration in learning and research across the entire range of University departments, programs and divisions.

Provost Green, who chaired the “Teaching and Learning” work group, explains this emphasis on collaboration. “Almost every difficult issue or question we deal with today doesn’t live in a discipline. And so the interdisciplinarity of our curriculum and pedagogies should better prepare our students for life in a contemporary, complex society than a more traditional, siloed approach.”

Collaborating outside one’s academic silo should come naturally at a smaller liberal arts university like Illinois Wesleyan, says Green. He recalls being a graduate student in music at a large university where “it wasn’t just that the music faculty went to lunch together; the *composers* went to lunch together. Here, when I go to lunch, I have a biologist on one side and a French faculty member on the other, and there’s an anthropologist across the table. And then we start talking shop and what’s working in our classes.”

Green was struck by a recent exchange between professors — one in theatre and the other in physics — in which they discovered “a number of remarkable overlaps between certain things they teach their students to do. For example, if you’re doing lighting and sound you’re dealing with circuits and digital technology and if you’re working in the intermediate physics lab, you’re building circuits.

“If we were a large state university,” Green adds, “that conversation probably wouldn’t have happened.”

To help turn such conversations into academic partnerships, *IWU 2020* recommends strategies for “project-based courses and co-curricular activities across the curriculum” as well as “enhanced faculty collaborations across disciplines, departments, programs and divisions,” including team-teaching.

President Wilson notes how many such collaborations are already taking place on campus, such as the interdisciplinary Action Research Center and the Center for Human Rights and Social Justice. The recent launch of course-cluster themes also encourages faculty and students to examine a particular issue that stretches across the entire curriculum.

This year’s course-cluster theme, “Walls and Bridges,” examines the worldwide construction and demolition of walls and bridges in physical, economic, ideological and political terms. An October symposium ([read more](#)) examining questions of art, culture, public attitudes, economic development and politics related to the fall of the Berlin Wall inspired the campus-wide theme.

The event was funded by another recent campus initiative, “Re-Centering the Humanities,” which strengthens existing relationships and establishes new connections between the humanities and other disciplines. Led by English Professor Dan Terkla and funded with a \$300,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the project asserts the humanities’ importance in sustaining Illinois Wesleyan’s core liberal arts experience.

“History, philosophy, religion, languages and literature serve as a gateway to the study of other disciplines,” says Green. “The humanities help us understand complex issues, drawing connections between disparate media and messages, and allow us to locate our thinking in the history of ideas.”

Among the grant’s initiatives are opportunities for students to engage in full-time research as Mellon Summer Scholars under IWU faculty mentors. In her research, Mellon scholar Mallika Kavadi ’15, a sociology and history double major, looked at the comparative development of humanities and sciences since the mid-20th century.

Devoting an entire summer to a deep reading of literature that spanned several distinct academic traditions and disciplines, Kavadi says she came away with a better grasp of how the gap between humanities and science has widened over time.

Understanding how and why such academic walls exist is just one way that Illinois Wesleyan scholars are finding collaborative ways to build new bridges between them.

To read the *IWU 2020* strategic plan in its entirety, [click here](#).