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Forward Direction

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Forward Direction

President Eric R. Jensen will build on Illinois Wesleyan's strengths to lead it toward a future filled with both challenges and opportunity.

By TIM OBERMILLER

Eric Jensen clearly remembers the first time he considered becoming president of a college like Illinois Wesleyan.

It was right after Valentine's Day in 2007, and he and his teenage son, Joe, were traveling to see potential colleges that Joe might attend. From their home in Williamsburg, Va., they drove for several hours through a blizzard, finally arriving at their destination: The College of Wooster, in Ohio. Like IWU, Wooster is a private liberal arts college with about 2,000 students.

The blizzard had passed when they arrived at Wooster, "and it's just beautiful — white snow everywhere, cold enough that nothing's melting, your feet are warm, above is a brilliant blue sky," Jensen recalls. "And I'm walking around with Joe on the tour thinking, 'I like this.' I'd just started working as an academic administrator — I'd been directing the public policy program for about three years at William and Mary — and I thought, 'I've been thinking about how to make a difference in the world, and a presidency at this is the sort of place is how I could do that.'"



President Eric R Jensen

Jensen says he had that same strong feeling of connection when he stepped onto the Illinois Wesleyan campus for the first time in July, when he was interviewed for the job of serving as the University's 19th president. President Richard F. Wilson had announced he would be retiring in the fall after a distinguished 11-year tenure.

A search committee was convened to find his replacement and chose Jensen as a top candidate, citing his broad portfolio of experiences — from his work as a professor and administrative leader at William and Mary to his then-current job as provost of Hamline University, a private liberal arts-centered university based in Saint Paul, Minn.

Jean Baird '80 led the presidential search committee comprised of faculty, trustees, students and staff. She said the entire committee was impressed not just with Jensen's credentials but also with how well both he and his wife, Elizabeth, engaged with the Illinois Wesleyan community.

“It was very clear that both of them were meant to be a part of this campus, and for Eric to be the next leader of this university,” she says.

As a candidate, Jensen met with both faculty and staff in open forums where a common question was, “Why Wesleyan?” “This kind of a campus feels like home when I walk on it,” he answered. “Because there’s a scale that is livable, where everybody on the campus can play a role if they want to.

“This is a gem,” he continued. “I don’t know how to convey how much excitement I feel about it.” Asked what he felt his role might be at IWU, Jensen responded. “I like to build, to collaborate. I think that Illinois Wesleyan has a bright future, and I think that I could contribute to making it a little bit brighter.”

Getting into focus



In front of Magill Hall President Jensen and his wife, Elizabeth, chat with students. "I'm very much a management-by-walking-around person," he says.

As Jensen talks about his past, one gets the sense he was destined to become a college president — but, as he is the first to admit, it took awhile for him to fully realize it.

Jensen was born at Illinois Central Hospital in Chicago, where his father was a resident internist. Growing up in the Chicago suburbs, he attended Homewood-Flossmoor High School. Jensen’s senior year was an eclectic mix of AP science, honors economics and auto shop courses. He admits, he was often bored in school. He played bass in a rock band. He enjoyed

working as a service department gofer at a Homewood Chevy dealership. “Every once in a while a Corvette would come in and life was good.” He was less enthused about the summer he spent seal-coating parking lots. “I still can’t smell that coal-tar smell without getting a little sick,” hesays. Another summer job found him with an oxygen-acetylene torch in his hands, heating up I-beams that were then bent at the bottom of the spine of freight cars. “Fortunately, I left with all my fingers and toes.”

Jensen attended the University of Miami (Florida). That decision was validated in a lengthy classroom exchange with an English professor regarding interpretations of a poem about the Holocaust. Jensen was excited by the realization that, with proper preparation and focus, he could hold his own in a serious exchange of ideas. When he switched his major from chemistry to economics, “things really started to click,” he says.

Jensen was intrigued how economics, like the natural sciences, uses a “very structured approach” to problem solving. “That aspect [of economics] appealed to me — how you can take analytic tools and use them to address problems that had previously been poorly defined.”

After college, Jensen chose the University of Michigan for his doctoral studies. He was impressed by the school’s reputation and intrigued by Michigan’s Population Studies Center,

which is closely connected to the economics department while drawing faculty from other academic disciplines. Jensen's graduate work and later research applied this same kind of interdisciplinary approach to better understanding a wide range of subjects, including the economics of fertility, maternal and child health, and migration. His research had international focus, using large data sets and personal interviews to better understand public policy and attitudes in countries such as Bangladesh, the Philippines, Indonesia, Mexico and Romania.

At Michigan, Jensen also discovered how much he enjoyed teaching. After completing his Ph.D., he joined the economics faculty at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va. Though it is a public research university, William and Mary's curriculum and attention to its exceptional undergraduate students closely resembles a private liberal arts college.

He thrived at William and Mary. Awarded the college's Alumni Fellowship for Teaching Excellence, he also kept an active research agenda, winning prestigious research grants and authoring nearly 30 journal articles, book chapters and other publications. While on sabbatical and leave, he served as a senior fellow at the Honolulu-based East-West Center, where he worked extensively with teams at academic institutions in Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines.

In 2004, Jensen was asked if he would be willing to assume the directorship of William and Mary's Thomas Jefferson Program in Public Policy. He had never pictured himself an administrator and leaned toward declining the offer. His wife, Elizabeth, encouraged him to reconsider. She was sure he would excel at and enjoy the challenge. "To me, Eric can do anything he sets his mind to," she says. With its interdisciplinary and collaborative design,

the Thomas Jefferson Program was a perfect fit for Jensen. It was founded in 1987 to provide undergraduate and master's students with the intellectual tools needed to

improve the quality of policymaking in the U.S. and abroad. When Jensen took over in 2004, he sought ways to work with what he describes as his many talented colleagues to help it grow "from a good program into an exceptional one." Armed with ideas for improving and expanding the curriculum, he recruited and cultivated donors to support those changes. Program giving grew from under \$30,000 annually when he started to more than \$1.5 million in his final two years.

Jensen also recruited and maintained a 30-plus external board of advisors. The nation's capital was a 150-mile drive away, and he traveled there often, connecting with dozens of national leaders in the public and private sector. Sometimes those leaders returned the visit — Jensen



Another Homecoming event attended by Jensen was the Minority Alumni Network reception, in which current students also participated and spoke.

recalls how an FBI official arrived at his home one day in a convoy of black Suburbans and joined his family and friends for burgers on the Jensens' back deck.

Sharing a sense of purpose

Jensen describes his leadership style as “collaborative and transparent.” That style worked well for him at Hamline University, a liberal arts institution with 2,200 undergraduates and graduate programs in business, education and creative writing. As provost, he shouldered a broad portfolio as the university’s chief academic officer, also supervising both athletics and student affairs and developing a budget that supported the university’s academic priorities and attended to the needs of the university as a whole. “We worked to design a tool to assess programmatic needs and investment opportunities,” he says. Jensen led a small team that built a web-based assessment and planning tool, which allowed full faculty and staff participation in ranking Hamline’s priorities.



Elizabeth and Eric Jensen pitched in to serve students a late-night hot breakfast during Reading Day in December.

Jensen also found donor and internal support to launch new student–faculty internships and a new structured internship program. He led a group that successfully revitalized the school’s January term and proposed the new position of director of diversity initiatives, which helped better integrate diversity and social justice issues into Hamline’s curricular and co-curricular activities.

While his prior experiences will no doubt inform his decision-making on behalf of IWU, Jensen said his initial months on campus would be spent meeting and talking with as many people as possible to find out their concerns, and hopes, for the future.

When he was first introduced to the campus in the Hansen Student Center in September, Jensen told the assembled trustees, faculty, staff and students: “As I begin my work, I’m fortunate to have an experienced and talented senior leadership team. I look forward to working with each of them. This is a complex organization with many moving parts, and it takes a team to make it go. More broadly, I’ve got a lot of faculty, staff, students and alumni to meet, and to get to know. ... I’m very much a management-by-walking-around person.”

Yolanda Juarez ’17 says that Jensen immediately made himself accessible to students. Just days after beginning his presidency in November, he met with both the *Argus* student newspaper staff and the Council on Inclusion and Awareness (CIA), a group designed to promote leadership among the many student organizations that support and encourage diversity. Juarez is a CIA member who also served on the search committee that helped pick Jensen.

Beyond preparing IWU students to lead in a diverse, multicultural society, one area of diversity Jensen emphasizes is the need to find more sources for financial aid so that lower-income students can more easily afford an Illinois Wesleyan education. In his meeting with CIA, says

Juarez, the new president “just wanted to listen to us, wanted to know what the campus environment was like, and wanted to know ways in which he could include us in his future plans for the University. And for him to be on campus for probably less than a week and already want to do that with us, that was really important.”

It may seem like a no-brainer that students and their individual interests and needs should be at the center of a university’s mission, but Jensen knows that isn’t always the case at larger institutions. It’s what makes a place like Illinois Wesleyan so special, he says, and also so valuable in shaping the future of its students, turning them into scholars as well as leaders in their workplaces and communities.

In many ways, Jensen observes, the purpose of the liberal arts hasn’t changed much since the founding of Harvard, the nation’s oldest institution of learning, back in 1636. “One might assume that in early colonial America the emphasis of higher education would be to teach agronomy, or how to make warm, dry dwellings,” he says. “Instead, they launched a liberal arts college, with the purpose of training the ministers who were going to be the leaders of this new colony.

“And so the very first liberal arts college in the U.S. was designed around jobs — and not just jobs, but good jobs; training the future leaders of society. Liberal arts colleges still do that. And so, the question is: how do we adapt to modern demands while still remaining true to our essential purpose as a liberal arts institution? And how do we seize modern opportunities to let that form of education evolve?”

Jensen continues, “One of the things we hear is that today’s students are going to change not just jobs, but careers, six times

over their working lifetimes. That’s a story about adaptation. That’s a story about a fundamental ability to take what you are and the skills you’ve acquired and turn that into something new — by yourself, at some level. And so, the notion that we can help train students to do that is a very powerful one. It’s a strong message that we need to convey to prospective students and their parents: that the kind of education we provide is very likely the best investment our students will make in their lifetimes.”

While Jensen discusses Illinois Wesleyan’s future with faculty, staff, students and alumni, he’s made a point of emphasis on the power of experiential, or “high-impact” learning. This is already taking place, says Jensen, noting IWU’s emphasis on collaborative faculty–student research as well as programs such as the Action Research Center and internship experiences offered through



December graduates Monica Villegas and Nicole Jovicevic had their photo taken with Illinois Wesleyan’s 19th president during the traditional senior dinner.

the IWU Hart Career Center. Jensen would like to continue and perhaps improve on these efforts by giving internships and other experiential opportunities a more deliberate connection to students' overall experience.

“An internship, done right, is no more about the specific day-to-day tasks performed on the job than *Moby Dick* is a book about a whale,” says Jensen. “We know very well how to convey that message in a literature class. With less traditional experiences, like internships, the question is, first, how we bring to bear on internships the distinctive tools of the liberal arts experience — reflection, discussion and the like — in order to allow students to come to the broader lessons of problem solving, or leadership, or multicultural competency, or entrepreneurship; and second, how our students and graduates demonstrate the value of these skills to their employers.”

While considering possible areas of improvement, Jensen points to the many ways that Illinois Wesleyan already stands out among its peers, including “the breadth of what goes on here, not just in the liberal arts curricula and programs but in the Business Administration Department and our Schools of Art, Music, Nursing and Theatre. The athletics program here is amazing. It all combines to give this campus a different feel, and a real sense of excitement, which is unusual for a school of this size. ... This is not a cookie-cutter liberal arts college.”

Jensen says Illinois Wesleyan's most powerful asset is and will remain its people — faculty, staff, alumni and benefactors. “It goes back decades and decades, to the founding of this university. Everyone — and I mean everyone — whom I've met is a dedicated individual, committed to the liberal arts mission as it is implemented at Illinois Wesleyan.” He notes how “when people describe what past presidents, notably President Wilson, have done, it is always in the context of ‘what we had done with his leadership’ or a future that ‘he helped us to envision and attain.’ I hope to continue that same sense of shared purpose.”

There's also a distinctive friendliness and welcoming spirit at IWU that Jensen says has meant a great deal to both him and Elizabeth. Even while lodging for several weeks in an extended-stay motel in Bloomington while repairs were made to the President's House, Jensen says the campus and the surrounding community made them feel at home.

Although higher education is facing many formidable economic and curricular challenges in the years ahead, Jensen is looking forward to the opportunity to help Illinois Wesleyan not just survive, but thrive, in the face of those challenges. “Change creates both pressure to adapt and new opportunities,” he said on the day he was introduced as 19th president. “Higher education is in flux, and some institutions are facing existential questions. Illinois Wesleyan is not one of those places, but we can't stand pat in a changing environment.

“My goal in my first few months, beyond getting acquainted with the community, is to begin to fashion a uniquely Illinois Wesleyan response to our opportunities and challenges.”

[Learn more about President Jensen's wife, Elizabeth.](#)

[Learn what our "lightning round" of questions reveal about IWU's new president.](#)

[Visit the Office of the President's official web page.](#)