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A Signature Moment

In inaugurating Eric R. Jensen as its 19th president, the University embraces strong traditions and new opportunities to grow.

A new chapter in Illinois Wesleyan's 166-year history officially began April 2 when Eric R. Jensen was inaugurated as the University's 19th president.

Held in the Shirk Center Performance Arena, the ceremony featured calls to leadership from individuals representing faculty, alumni and student constituencies; musical performances; and a poem written especially for the event by English professors Michael Theune and Joanne Diaz.

The ceremony was the centerpiece of a weekend full of inaugural events and activities, from scholarly presentations to a vocal jazz concert. Over two days, representatives of IWU's many influential and inspiring alumni returned to campus to make public

presentations, speak to classes, share meals with student groups, pose for countless photos and help spread Titan pride in settings large and small.

Alumni also participated in the investiture ceremony itself, both as speakers and musical performers. In addition, several IWU graduates were among invited delegates from colleges and universities across the country — including Kathleen Murray '79, president of Whitman College in Walla Walla, Wash. When Murray was provost at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn., Jensen was provost at Hamline University across town, and it was Murray who first suggested Jensen take a look at the presidency of Illinois Wesleyan.

In an interview after the ceremony, Murray recalled that initial conversation: "I knew [Eric's] work well enough to think this could be a match. He brings a lot of experience as a faculty member and a chief academic officer, and he's had to work through the difficult times that most of us [in higher education] have struggled with in the past decade. I think he has a really clear understanding of how to maneuver through that. And he's just a really nice guy."

Jensen's presidential qualities were also noted by Board of Trustees Chair George Vinyard '71, who spoke prior to presenting Jensen with the silver presidential medallion that marked his investiture, accompanied by Secretary of the Board Jean Baird '80, who led the Search Committee that brought Jensen forward as a final candidate for the presidency.

"I will not attempt to repeat all of the impressive details of President Jensen's biography," said Vinyard, "but I will note a few aspects of his experience and personality that impressed the Search Committee and the Board at the time of his selection, and I'm happy to say have been clearly demonstrated in the initial months of his tenure."



Board of Trustees Chair George Vinyard '71 and Presidential Search Committee Chair Jean Baird '80 present Eric R. Jensen with the Presidential Medallion, a symbol of his investiture. Jensen was chosen to lead the University following the retirement of Richard F. Wilson, who spoke at the inauguration.

Vinyard cited Jensen's "real passion for the liberal arts" and his dedication to teaching and scholarly work, as evidenced by his prior experience as an economics professor at the College of William and Mary and his tenure as provost at Hamline University — as well as by his "leadership and work on important national and international issues of public policy and higher education."

"But perhaps the clearest indication of President Jensen's superior qualifications comes in the person of his spouse, Elizabeth," Vinyard continued. "Her manifest intelligence, charm, strength, grace and sense of humor provide ample evidence that this choice was a good one. Finally, and not least important, President Jensen is a genuine 'people person.' ... He is at once approachable, engaging, interesting and interested in those around him. He clearly understands the importance of service as a significant aspect of leadership."



With his wife, Elizabeth, and their children Jessica and Joseph, Jensen enjoys the relaxing ambience of the post-inaugural reception.

Vinyard described Jensen as a leader to face the "extraordinary challenges of the job and the uncertainties confronting academia" where "meaningful change always seems either to be happening much too fast or to be woefully slow in coming. This is why having the right kind of leadership is always critical." In Jensen, Vinyard said, the IWU community has found "the right kind of leader for these times and have every reason to be optimistic that his service will inure to the sustained betterment of our University."

In his inaugural address, Jensen shared his vision for Illinois Wesleyan as a place of "collaborative engagement," which served as a unifying theme for all of the inauguration activities. (For more on Jensen's speech, see page 10). Jensen also spoke on the purpose of the inauguration itself, after confessing that his initial instinct was to forgo having an investiture ceremony.

"It was a bit of an 'aw, shucks' moment, coupled to an initial misconception that this event was somehow about the new president," Jensen noted. "I was corrected, gently, by more than one person on this matter, and came to understand that inaugurals are at their core about institutions. More specifically, they are celebrations of transition, and stability; of continuity, and change.

"Inaugurating a new president helps us to come together as a community, to marry a long and storied history to an exciting future," Jensen continued. "It allows us a chance to celebrate unabashedly a place that we love, and especially to shine a light on the people who have both given and taken so much from Illinois Wesleyan — not just to highlight our spectacular students, but to show off the many accomplishments of our alumni; to acknowledge our talented,

dedicated and hardworking faculty and staff; and to thank trustees, donors and other friends of the University who have been so generous with their time and their resources.”

Among those to whom Jensen offered special thanks were members of the Inauguration Steering Committee. Co-chaired by R. Kent Cook, Professor of Music, and Rebecca A. Roesner, Chair and Professor of Chemistry, the committee included faculty, trustees, alumni and staff, as well as students.

Inaugural committee member Paxton Johnson '18 said seeing the committee's hard work come to fruition was personally rewarding. An inauguration, Johnson noted, is not about one person, but rather an opportunity for the University as a whole to celebrate a new era with new leadership.

“Having everybody come together, from students, faculty, staff to alumni, was the best way to celebrate IWU,” she said. “I was honored to be a part of that.”

The power of a liberal arts education

Invited to speak at Eric Jensen's inauguration, President Emeritus Richard F. Wilson took the opportunity to define what he saw as his successor's greatest challenge. “The niche that we occupy,” Wilson said, “is defined by our commitment to the liberal arts and to professional and pre-professional programs grounded in that tradition.

“The challenge for President Jensen and for the faculty is to continue to refine and focus that mission in ways that prepare students for successful careers and meaningful lives,” said Wilson. “I have no doubt that this will require creative thought about the curriculum



Jensen delivers his address, titled “The Liberal Arts in the 21st Century: Spotlight on Collaborative Engagement.”

and involve some disruption in traditional modes of teaching and learning. I am confident that President Jensen has the background and skills to lead this effort.”

In his address, Jensen embraced those challenges, which he saw as “different, both in their nature and scope, than many we have seen in the past.” He cited a parable noted by Harvard Professor L. Todd Rose. At the dawn of jet-powered flight in the 1950s, U. S. airmen were crashing at alarming rates. The cause was traced to planes' standardized cockpit size. Once cockpits were made adjustable, pilot performance soared.

“I agree with Professor Rose's subsequent claim that much of higher education forces students to fit the cockpit,” said Jensen. Teaching students as an audience was understandable during the influx of post-World War II GIs and then baby boomers. But at a time when the number of U.S. high school graduates is expected to plateau for at least a decade, “there is an undeniable need for colleges and universities to differentiate themselves in order to attract students,” said Jensen.

While Jensen acknowledged that many institutions face “difficult futures,” Illinois Wesleyan is among those who are instead “in position to stake out a portion of the educational spectrum that focuses on providing not just a very high-quality education, but a distinctly individualized one.

...

Jensen said the path to that distinction would build on IWU’s traditions of encouraging collaborative engagement and focusing on educating “the whole person.” Those strengths would be enhanced by providing more opportunities for “signature work,” both inside and outside the classroom. Such work ensures “that all graduates integrate and apply their learning to complex problems and projects in ways that make clear not just to potential employers or graduate schools, but also to the students themselves, the great things of which they are capable.” He predicted that institutions implementing initiatives “focusing and strengthening the quality of student–faculty interactions will increasingly differentiate themselves from the rest.”

While technology “can be used to expand both the breadth and the depth of these interactions,” Jensen said that faculty and staff “will remain the essential element in our work, a fact that will be incorporated into our planning and our future staffing decisions.”

“By blurring the line between what one studies in college and what comes afterward, we will allow each student not only to add significantly to his or her individual knowledge, abilities and experience, but simultaneously to do the things that matter to her or him. And through the very nature of their engagement in the collaborative process, we will both extend and enhance the lifelong learning capabilities of our students.”

“Our common purpose, the thriving evolution of this great institution, promises an exciting future,” Jensen concluded. “Thank you all for being a part of it.”

[The inauguration website contains transcripts and video of speeches, a photo gallery and more.](#)