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Signature Initiative

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Signature work provides a new level of engagement

"This guided work clarifies the enormous advantages of a liberal arts education," President Eric Jensen said. "It adds emphasis to what we have historically done well."

By ANN AUBRY

As Illinois Wesleyan works continuously to prepare students for a quickly changing world amid an increasingly competitive higher-education landscape, strategic plans are underway to expand on the rich faculty-student interaction and experiential learning opportunities that set the University apart.

"Opportunities for internships, study abroad and the creation of meaningful scholarly and creative work contribute to the long-term advantages that our graduates enjoy," said President Eric Jensen. "We want to go even further. We're working hard to create exciting, collaboratively engaged curricular innovations, with a goal to allow each student to be able to show the world just what he or she is capable of doing, even before graduation."

This vision of signature work was presented to the Illinois Wesleyan community in Jensen's Inaugural Address a year ago. A workshop the following month percolated with energy as faculty brainstormed proposals to develop or augment these opportunities in their unique disciplines.

Provost Jonathan Green, in a summary for the Board of Trustees last fall, noted the promising foundations of signature work at Illinois Wesleyan.

"Faculty members engaged in the mentoring of signature work can testify to the profound impact it has upon students," Green wrote. "These signature projects provide students an opportunity to integrate what they have learned and to apply it to the solution of real questions."

In some cases, the solutions may be applied immediately. Presented for inspiration at the formative 2016 workshop, the School of Nursing's "Quality Improvement" project allows each senior nursing major to collaborate with hospital leaders to identify an opportunity for improvement and enact a sustainable change on a clinical unit or across a hospital system.

"Student projects have had real health impacts on the local community," said Professor Vickie Folse '86, director of the School of Nursing and Caroline F. Rupert Chair of Nursing. "This really sets our graduates apart; they're designing and implementing projects that experienced professional nurses are doing."

As the initiative spreads across campus, more than 20 other departments and programs have submitted proposals tailored to the needs and interests of students in their disciplines. For example, Environmental Studies is working to expand meaningful opportunities for students to study the environment firsthand, and take advantage of the international expertise among faculty members to add a May Term course studying climate change in Vietnam. The University's Action Research Center — an exemplar of taking student learning into the community — will seek to replace lost funding for internship placements and to continue its work with the West Bloomington Revitalization Project as an incubator for many student projects.

Regardless of the area of study, signature work is intended to enhance students' engagement with the world and their ability to connect their own professional development to their research and study. Expanding possibilities for more students to access these experiences will become an increasing focus of fundraising efforts as the University seeks to strategically address the needs and economic pressures that impact families' college selection.

"This guided work clarifies the enormous advantages of a liberal arts education," Jensen said. "It adds emphasis to what we have historically done well. We are training leaders who are able to think and work clearly, analytically, creatively, critically and persuasively. An increased focus on signature work is a strategic move that will elevate and differentiate Illinois Wesleyan — and the students who engage in these experiences."



The signature work initiative builds on strong mentoring relationships that are key to the IWU experience. Above, Professor Irv Epstein served as faculty mentor for Martha Aguirre '17 during her Eckley scholarship.