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## Conference Marks 20 Years

Rachel Hatch  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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Contact: Rachel Hatch, (309) 556-3960

## Conference Marks 20 Years

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – As students begin their presentations at the annual John Wesley Powell Research Conference on April 18, they will be following a 20-year tradition at Illinois Wesleyan University. Throughout the past two decades the conference has evolved – expanding in numbers, encompassing more departments and integrating technology. The event, however, remains an example of one of the hallmarks of the University, a chance to celebrate the work of undergraduate research.

“Four-year, liberal arts institutions have the ability to develop students with research they would not experience until the graduate level at a large university,” said Roger Schnaitter, associate provost for academic planning and standards at Illinois Wesleyan, who coordinated the conference during the 1990s.

### Modest Beginnings

Schnaitter remembers the first conference in 1989, which fit neatly into one room in Memorial Center. “It was the brainchild of professors in the sciences,” he said of the collection of 27 research posters on display at what was then titled the “Illinois Wesleyan Student Research Conference.”

With poster titles such as “Ibotenic Acid-Induced Lesions of the Media Zona Incerta Decrease Lordosis Behavior in the Female Rat,” the first few years were a scientific affair. “The whole idea was to provide a professional setting to students to prepare for graduate school,” said Gail Lima, one of the conference organizers who was an assistant professor of biology at Illinois Wesleyan at the time. After a couple of years, it was suggested to extend the conference to more departments. “Some people were skeptical that posters could transcend science,” said Lima, “but it slowly took hold.”

### Expanding Fields

These days the conference consumes the entire first floor of the Center for Natural Science Learning and Research Building (CNS) – with nearly 130 posters, performances and

presentations that encompass diverse areas from psychology, English and music to religion, Greek and Roman studies and science. "Entries can now be seen from across the University's disciplines," said current conference committee member, Mike Seeborg, the Robert S. Eckley Distinguished Professor of Economics.

Fellow committee member Pat Neustel witnesses the diversity of topics the conference will hold before anyone else. From her desk on the second floor of Holmes Hall, Neustel assembles each year's program. "The abstract of each entry goes into the program. It's quite an array," said Neustel, holding a list of abstracts with names that vary from "Trust on the Internet: A Virtual Reality?" to "Accountability: Adapting Aid Solutions to Rwanda."

Seeborg noted he found "great joy" when the music department began including originally composed performances as part of the conference. "We're moving the performers to CNS this year so more people can enjoy them and speak with the composers. It's fascinating to understand their creative process," said Seeborg. See the schedule of events.

### **Speakers and Boomerangs**

According to Schnaitter, the conference took on a new life in 1996 when then-President Minor Myers, jr. took special interest. "It was Minor's idea to change the name to the John Wesley Powell Conference," said Schnaitter. "Minor always took great pleasure in relaying the story of Powell being the first to take students into the field for studies." The founder of the National Geographic Society, Powell is credited as advancing undergraduate fieldwork during his time as an instructor with Illinois Wesleyan, leading students on a research trip to the Green and Colorado rivers. Myers felt Powell's efforts reflected the spirit of developing undergraduate education with research, said Schnaitter.

Schnaitter recalled one memorable speaker, Charles Pell, an associate in research with Duke University, who specializes in developmental biology and is known for creating 3D models. "He gave a tremendous speech and then passed out these odd-shaped items that turned out to be boomerangs," said Schnaitter. "As boomerangs flew around the luncheon, you got a sense of the creative energy Minor loved."

### **Ongoing Advantages**

Other new elements were added to the conference throughout the years. It was when Professor Ram Mohan, the Earl H. and Marian A. Beling Professorship in the Natural Sciences, coordinated the conference that the official John Wesley Powell Conference Committee was formed, allowing input from faculty and staff across campus. Mohan also created workshops to

assist students. “We initiated the workshops to help students create posters presentations, and how to give an oral talk,” said Mohan.

This year, students will be able to take advantage of a new printer at The Ames Library, and the library’s Digital Commons site is making programs and abstracts available to students.

### **The Reward of Excellence**

In the early days of the conference, a panel of faculty and staff bestowed “Best Poster” and “Best Oral Presentation” awards. The practice was discontinued in the early 1990s, but will be revived this year by The Ames Library, which will award the “The Ames Library Artistic and Scholarly Research Strategies Award.”

The greatest reward of the conference, said Mohan goes to all students who participate. “The conference allows all research students to showcase their work, even if they do not have significant results,” said Mohan. “They are proud of what they do, and rightfully so.”

Seeborg agrees. “It’s one thing to learn how to do research, but it is just as important to learn how to make that research available to a broader audience,” said Seeborg, who notes many students are making oral presentation for the first time at the conference. “It’s an important part of the learning process.”

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