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Greetings and Call to Leadership

Greetings from a Presidential Perspective

Robert S. Eckley, President Emeritus, Illinois Wesleyan University

President Clark Kerr of the University of California described his presidency facetiously, in a much overused description of presidential concerns, as sports for the alumni, parking for the faculty, and sex among students. He was soon consumed by “The Free Speech Movement” of the 1960s, which we are still trying to define. Larry Summers of Harvard finds himself in a confusing contemporary dilemma, in which the difficulties are possibly not what they seem to be, especially for an outstanding, outspoken, and very worldly, economist. Some of his critics may not wish to face the realities of the outside world, let alone its global dimensions, and other just do not want to move across the Charles River.

What are the challenges for Illinois Wesleyan University? First, we are dedicated to our students, to whom we have chosen to promise an excellent education. This calls for an emphasis on good teaching and high standards, which are increasingly difficult to deliver to diverse students, particularly from our large cities and rural areas, where secondary school standards have been foundering for a generation.

For faculty and staff, it's not just the challenge of adequate salary, benefits, and freedom, as some might think. It's a matter of nurturing and encouraging their best instincts, for there is usually a wealth of ability to be found in the talents and minds available. Clearly, the emphasis is on teaching and excellence, again.

Trustees, alumni, the community (broadly defined), parents who pay the bills, the church and other constituencies - mostly they wish to be helpful, the questions relate to how they can best be melded together. This calls for an art form known as reconciling sometimes competing interests.

What are your choices? Since you have studied Illinois Wesleyan more intensely than most other people recently, I suggest that you follow your own compass, while keeping an open mind for suggestions and insights that may prove useful. You can do it, Dick, and thank you for coming.