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Breaking New Ground

The new Main Classroom Building promises to transform teaching and learning at Illinois Wesleyan.

Story by CELESTE HUTTES



The Main Classroom Building's design reflects the growing importance of collaborative learning, project work and professor-student discussions.

vacant since The Ames Library opened in 2002, Sheean itself will be demolished as early as next summer to provide space for the new facility. To be called the Main Classroom Building, it will bring students, professors and technology together in a framework designed for the 21st century.

“At the heart of everything we do as a liberal arts university is the classroom,” says President Richard F. Wilson. “This building will provide general education classrooms worthy of the kind of teaching and learning that goes on at Illinois Wesleyan.”

The new Main Classroom Building will also serve as an anchor to the north end of the Eckley Quadrangle and provide an aesthetic counterpoint to The Ames Library on the south end.

When it is finished, the 48,700-square-foot facility will replace Shaw Hall, which became Illinois Wesleyan’s primary instructional building when it opened in 1954. “While Shaw admirably served as the center of our instructional program for half a century, quite frankly it is coming to the end of its life expectancy,” Wilson says. “It meets our minimum needs, but it is limited.”

Shaw’s mechanical, structural and technological deficiencies and its lack of disability access were just a few of the problems cited when a new classroom building was first proposed in 2002 as part of the University’s master plan.

University history will come full circle when Illinois Wesleyan’s newest educational facility is constructed on the site of North Hall, which was IWU’s first campus building.

Old North was torn down in 1966 to make room for Sheean Library. Standing

Another of Shaw's shortcomings is the size of its classrooms. When Shaw was built, enrollment was around 1,600 students. Today it's nearly 2,100. In addition, nearly 90 percent of classes today have 30 or fewer students — only half of the classrooms in Shaw were designed for classes of that size. "The Main Classroom Building is being constructed to maximize the benefits of small-class learning at the University," says Wilson.

Perhaps Shaw Hall's biggest drawback is its inability to take advantage of technological advances in teaching and learning. "Having been built in the day when the primary teaching tools were chalk and blackboards, Shaw no longer meets the many and varied requirements for electronic resources in the classroom," Wilson says. "Faculty members have to work pretty hard to cobble things together to make it happen in some of our existing classrooms."

Room to connect and grow

Shaw Hall's shortcomings will be remedied in the design of the new Main Classroom Building. "We have made it a priority to construct spaces that speak to the learning styles of today's students," says Frank Boyd, interim provost and dean of faculty.

In the spirit of The Ames Library, the new facility will offer open, inviting areas for learning, day or night. The look of the library will also be echoed in the new classroom building's glass-and-brick exterior. Other architectural features will borrow from the classic buildings located on the Eckley Quadrangle.

The planned structure — which will meet or exceed building-code access standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act — includes three floors above grade and one below, with 27,000 square feet of usable space. The building's 19 classrooms will offer, on average, about 30 square feet per student, nearly doubling Shaw Hall's per-student classroom size.

"We created classrooms to suit a variety of class sizes and teaching and learning styles," says Katie Faulkner, who worked on the project as an associate principal at Shepley Bulfinch — the same architectural firm that designed The Ames Library and the renovation of the Hansen Student Center. "Illinois Wesleyan is very visionary in its way of thinking about these new classrooms," she adds. Sizes vary "from a traditional case-study classroom that seats 40 to more intimate seminar rooms seating 15 to 20."



The new Main Classroom Building will stand on the spot where North Hall (above) first greeted Illinois Wesleyan students.

Business and economics faculty will have offices on the third floor, along with space for administrative support, research projects and two conference rooms. “I’m certain that many more students will take advantage of faculty office hours once our offices are located in the same building as their classrooms,” says Rob Kearney, chair and associate professor of business administration. “This proximity will also be a big benefit to the advising process.”

The new building allows ample space for students to connect with each other and with professors in non-classroom settings. More than 3,500 square feet is devoted to group-study and lounge areas.

“We hope to see a buzzing, thriving community of students using these spaces before and after classes,” says Roger Schnaitter, professor emeritus and former associate provost for academic planning and standards, who has been heavily involved in planning the new classroom building.

“In the evenings, the building will become a campus study center,” Schnaitter adds, “serving as an alternative to The Ames Library.”

Continuing the tradition that established Sheean Library as backdrop for spring graduation ceremonies, the classroom building’s south facade will feature a commencement plaza. Its central location on the quad should imbue the plaza with a strong emotional connection for new graduates as well as returning alumni.

“The commencement plaza accentuates the fact that this building occupies a very important position on campus,” says Faulkner. “We are aware of the power this site holds in the hearts and minds of alumni.”

Anticipating the future

Along with facilitating interpersonal connections, the building will be well-equipped to connect students and faculty to the latest in classroom technology.

“We wanted to create a facility that takes advantage of existing instructional technologies,” says Wilson, “and anticipate where we think technology is going.”

Many of the classrooms will be outfitted with projection capabilities, control panels, smart boards and flat-screen monitors.

“We need instructional technology that is not obtrusive,” says Boyd, “but can be a catalyst for learning.”

The building’s design aims to prepare for — rather than precisely predict — future high-tech advancements. “You can be ready for future technology by building flexibility into the design,” says Faulkner, “so you can bring technology in as it comes.”



The classroom building, along with a new theatre complex, represent a fifth of the *Transforming Lives* campaign’s \$125 million goal. The rest will go to student scholarships, The Wesleyan Fund and faculty and program endowments.

Such flexibility can be seen in the planned “studio classroom.” Featuring moveable furniture, adaptable technology and writing surfaces on all of the walls, it’s designed “as a kind of laboratory for innovative instruction,” says Schnaitter.

“Faculty who want to experiment in adopting new technologies into their classrooms will want to teach here,” Schnaitter predicts. “We will be ready to reconfigure it, based on interests of the faculty, each new semester. If an idea catches on in the studio classroom, it can migrate from there to other classrooms in the building and around campus.”

As with the most recent campus building project — the Minor Myers, jr. Welcome Center — the new classroom facility will emphasize environmental sustainability. Insulated brick walls and energy-efficient windows and lighting are some of the building’s “green” features. Like the Welcome Center, the classroom building will be supported by a geothermal system that should cut heating and cooling costs by as much as 50 percent.

A free-flowing design process

Helping guide each step of the Main Classroom Building’s design was a user committee comprised of faculty, students, staff and administrators.

“We started the committee when we first began discussions about possibly building this facility,” says Schnaitter, who led the group. “We met regularly and had free-flowing discussions and brainstorming sessions.”

The committee also hosted open meetings, inviting all students and faculty to provide input. Much of that feedback sought to address the limitations of Shaw Hall and ultimately found its way into the design.

For example, “students were concerned that Shaw has no place to go after class is over,” says Schnaitter. “Students in Shaw take their classes and leave — there is no open space for them to study or interact outside of class. This produces a more mechanized learning environment than we would like.”

Such concerns led to a recommendation for a work-station area where small groups of students can collaborate on projects or simply hang out. This area will be equipped with flat screens that allow students to plug in their laptops and easily share information.

Even the distinctive “piano curve” design that accents the Main Classroom Building’s north side, and the wedge shape of the structure itself, originated in faculty feedback that encouraged planners to “think outside the box.”

“The user committee was a terrific cross section; they really were the eyes and ears of campus,” says Faulkner, who also met regularly with a steering committee and specific interest groups, such as Information Technology and professors from various departments. “Wesleyan has a very open, collaborative culture. People feel a great sense of ownership and go out of their way to be heard and to listen.”

Funding the transformation

While feedback was critical in making the new classroom building a reality, so is its funding. Wesleyan will spend an estimated \$14 million to create this 21st-century learning environment — and is well on its way to raising that amount. A longtime IWU supporter, who wishes to remain anonymous, has pledged \$10 million toward the project. The University is seeking donors for the additional funds needed to complete the structure.

“We are fortunate to have a very generous gift that will take us 70 percent of the way,” says Wilson. “I am very confident that we will receive gifts from alumni and friends to cover the balance that we need.”

Guided by a strong pay-as-you-go philosophy, Wilson stands firm in his stance that all of the remaining funds be raised before construction begins.

“In the current economic environment, we’ve made a commitment that we won’t build anything unless we have the money to do it. We don’t want to add to the University’s debt load,” says Wilson, who took the same prudent approach in funding construction for the Minor Myers, jr. Welcome Center.

If the necessary funds are raised in time, ground could be broken for the Main Classroom Building in the summer of 2011, and it would open its doors for classes in the fall of 2012. The long-range master plan calls for Shaw Hall to be demolished, though it may continue to be used to meet short-term needs.

The Main Classroom Building — along with a new complex to replace the 47-year-old McPherson Theatre — are the main capital projects in the [Transforming Lives: The Campaign for Illinois Wesleyan](#) that is now underway. Combined, these projects represent about 20 percent of the campaign goal of \$125 million. The remaining 80 percent of the goal is devoted to student scholarships, The Wesleyan Fund and faculty and program endowments.

The campaign's priorities were based on a Strategic Plan approved by Illinois Wesleyan's Board of Trustees in 2006. The new Main Classroom Building supports the strategic goal to transform teaching and learning at Illinois Wesleyan. Specifically, that goal aims "to augment teaching and learning resources to match our increased student body size, emerging curricular directions and evolving student expectations."



And when seeking to transform, a new foundation is often a good place to begin, quite literally.

Wilson recalls a conversation he had with a faculty member who taught classes in both Shaw Hall and the Center for Natural Science Learning and Research. The professor told him, "Where you teach does make a difference." The comment lingered in Wilson's mind. "For me, that was a compelling statement about why we need to do this," he says.

Says architect Katie Faulkner, "The commencement plaza accentuates the fact that this building occupies a very important position on campus. We are aware of the power this site holds in the hearts and minds of alumni."

Frank Boyd echoes that sentiment, noting the power of place in learning.

"Faculty are looking forward to teaching in the new classrooms because when you provide different kinds of learning spaces, faculty start rethinking their teaching to meet the space," says Boyd. "A new learning environment is likely to stimulate creativity on the part of the faculty."

Standing on the hallowed ground where North Hall was opened to Illinois Wesleyan's first students, the new Main Classroom Building holds the same promise of discovery and learning for future generations.

As President Wilson says, "I believe this building holds the potential to help us take a giant step forward in the quality of the educational experience that we provide to students."