ESSAYS OF LIVES

Transformed

Transforming Lives The Campaign for Illinois Wesleyan
Illinois Wesleyan taught me to trust that who I was was going to be good enough to succeed, if I only put in the work…" 

Carlina Tapia-Ruano ’77 
Immigration Attorney
Rarely in the history of Illinois Wesleyan has the University’s impact on student lives been more significant than it is today as we celebrate the successful closing of the Transforming Lives fund-raising campaign.

This booklet shares but a few stories of how your generous support has truly transformed the lives of our students.

Please accept our heartfelt thanks for your belief in the importance of an Illinois Wesleyan education.

Richard F. Wilson, president
One hundred fifty juniors and seniors were nominated by the faculty to share their life-changing, transformative Illinois Wesleyan experiences in essays of 500 words or less.

The students who participated could take any approach they wanted, from experiences that impacted their learning and worldview, to those that affected their confidence and relationships — in essence, the experiences that transformed their lives as students at Illinois Wesleyan.

On the pages that follow, you’ll read the very personal stories of 22 of these students who came from near and far to pursue their passions at Illinois Wesleyan. These essays you’ll read are about overcoming academic struggles, social awakenings, personal crisis and tragedy, changing worldviews, mentors and classmates, reassessing life goals, and so much more.

But, most of all, these are stories that you made possible through your generous support of the Transforming Lives campaign.
“I think if I had been thrown into the big, bad world at that time in my life, I would have curled up in a little ball in the corner. I needed that nurturing...”

Richard Jenkins ’69
Oscar-Nominated Actor

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A thought, even a possibility, can shatter and transform us."

The renowned German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche articulated this pithy pronouncement regarding the unlimited power of thoughts, and mentioned their two ultimate, not always synonymous, end products. A thought, no matter how insignificant or quick, at times does serve to "shatter" us, and may lead us temporarily to an unwanted destination—but that is how one learns. If we were never to break down or "shatter," we would never learn from our mistakes.

Simultaneously—and I personally think this transpires more often than not—thoughts along with the power of the mind influence us all as humans to be transformed. It is this motion that carries us through the many stages of life, from when we let out our first cries until the moment we articulate our last words. One of these stages obviously is the important time period that one spends attending an institution of higher learning. It is this stage where I currently find myself in my own life at Illinois Wesleyan University. I have been both shattered and transformed during my college years so far, and I know for certain this will continue for the time yet to pass.

However, when requested to explicitly label one experience at IWU in particular that has had the most impact on my life as a whole, I was lost in thought. How was I going to narrow it down? My education here at this institution has taken me within the walls of the United States Congress, halfway around the world to the Red Square during the Ukrainian crisis, to numerous conceptual and intellectual locations without my own brain, and every point in between. All of these are simply a small subset of the opportunities I have partaken of in my time here. All of these have profoundly impacted my learning, changed my view of the world I live in every day, and improved my self-confidence—and I have certainly forged many friendships and mentorships along the way.

But by far the most beneficial effect on me in my short time at IWU is the sense of discovery and the longing to analyze the world around me, both in contemporary and historic terms, that each and every one of my professors has instilled in me. Prior to my time here I looked at the world as a series of events that were, to a great extent, not connected. Now, with the intellectual exercises that all of my professors and mentors have taught me, I see the world inversely. It is not a conglomeration of mutually exclusive events, people, and concepts, but it is a beautiful interconnected community possessing within it many unseen values, traditions, and things that I can surely learn from. These intellectual thoughts that I have come to know and love at IWU that have truly shattered and transformed me into who I am today, and will endure in perpetuity into my future.

Austin, from East Peoria, Illinois, is the 2014 Student Senate President, and is majoring in history and political science. He plans to graduate from Illinois Wesleyan in 2016.
As a self-proclaimed, proud tomboy, I thought the last thing I would ever do in college was join a sorority. I wanted nothing to do with the bows, songs, and chants that the media had come to make me expect from a Greek organization, and the only meaning the word “ritual” had to me was how I would have described the routine I performed every morning to get ready for class.

When Recruitment Week came around my freshman year, I was heavily persuaded, if not forced, to “at least try it” by my mother, a Sigma Kappa in her time at Illinois Wesleyan. I come from a long line of family members who went Greek, but I was still absolutely positive that it was not for me. Little did I know, every time I entered the Sigma Kappa house, I would be more drawn to it.

Once Bid Day came around, I was overwhelmed by all of the beautiful, enthusiastic, and loud women I would now be spending my college career with. Immediately, I realized that as an awkward and shy girl who was more likely to play a game of basketball with the boys than go to the mall with a group of girls, there was no way that I would ever fit in with all of the women I was surrounded by. My small-town, rural lifestyle had in no way prepared me for the new life I was about to immerse myself in, but I stuck it out, and found myself running for a very small position in the house my freshman year, writing articles for our national magazine.

As time went on, I found myself becoming more vocal and confident with the girls and in myself, and I decided that I wanted to be even more involved. All of the positions on the Executive Council were appealing, but president had a certain ring to it that made it even more desirable. Soon enough, after a stressful period of what we’ll call “campaigning,” I was elected president for the year of 2014.

Looking back, it’s hard to believe that I ever thought that I would not fit in with the girls I now call my sisters and best friends. Being at the helm of an organization that strives to better every individual in it, as well as those whose lives it touches, has helped me develop in ways that were unfathomable to me as a naïve college freshman. One of the values of Sigma Kappa is personal growth, and I believe that the sorority has shown me — not only in myself, but in those around me — how to be the best person possible. I’ve learned how to stick up for myself, and for others too. Talking in front of crowds, which used to induce anxiety, is now a breeze. Without Sigma Kappa, and Illinois Wesleyan, the school that introduced it to me, there is no way I would be the woman I am today.

Jessica, from Watseka, Illinois, is majoring in accounting and minoring in business administration. She plans to graduate from Illinois Wesleyan in 2016.
When I think about how I’ve transformed as a person, I apply to participate in Engaging Diversity. While moving in early sounded great, the chance to meet other students from varying locations made it even more appealing. That program provided a place for me to ask questions and recognize that there are so many opportunities in college to grow as a human being. That may be where it all began, but it’s definitely not where it ended.

I decided early on that I needed to join organizations where I could meet others and potentially take on leadership positions. Like any other IWU student, I signed up for too many. Unfortunately, learning to manage my time effectively meant taking things off my schedule, but it also meant I could spend my time in influential ways. I learned more slowly than I care to admit that, as Edward Everett Hale put it, “I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”

Sigma Kappa offered me a multitude of different philanthropic opportunities, but it also gave me a sisterhood to grow up with and test out different leadership perspectives. It took me some time to learn that one style does not fit every situation, and it takes a strong person to lead your peers and friends. Being in places of power takes trust, but it also takes self-purpose to give all that I have to an organization.

I believe that I have not changed from a good person to a better person, but I have learned this: What matters is not how much time I spent at an institution. It is how much I took and gave back, and with how much love.
Eighteen-year-old me was not sure of much, but I did know this:

I was going to play softball at Oklahoma State. It was my main focus. I was on top of the world, not understanding that there was more to life than playing softball. Remembering this now, I am astonished that not only am I about to graduate at Illinois Wesleyan, but I value so much more than the game of softball: my friends, family, and education are at the peak of my priorities. Illinois Wesleyan unexpectedly transformed how I prioritize my life, carry myself, and treat others. It changed my overall perspective on life.

In my freshman year of college, I was eight hours away from home. I had lost the love for a game because it had turned into my job. I was ready to move back closer to home. Following many nights of consideration and prayer, I felt drawn to Illinois Wesleyan. I saw this as a new opportunity, not knowing this decision would transform my life forever.

In the classroom at Illinois Wesleyan, my professors knew my name. They were able to get to know me as an individual. This was amazing to me, coming from a setting where I was a number in a class of 200 or more students, and teachers never even recognized my face. This transformed my appreciation for engaging in class, not only because I was able to talk to my professors every day, but because they made each class relevant to my life. I developed a newfound appreciation for knowledge, which extended beyond the classroom.

This desire for knowledge seeped into every relationship that I have made at Illinois Wesleyan. For instance, I can sit down with a core group of my new friends and talk about deeper issues such as spirituality or the prevalence of stereotypes, and other aspects of life that have sparked our interests in and out of class. I had heard the phrase “Illinois Wesleyan bubble” around campus before, but it took me a little while to grasp what it actually meant. This bubble refers to the open-minded, nonjudgmental, and unbiased person that each of us is molded into here at Illinois Wesleyan. I have searched to understand what creates the Illinois Wesleyan bubble, and my only clue is education. The education we have been provided with molds us into better people and allows us to see the world with an unbiased view. This alone produces confidence in every one of us, which oozes kindness, justice, and compassion and is otherwise known as the “Illinois Wesleyan bubble.”

The adversity that I faced going into college only allowed me to appreciate where I am and who I am today. Before I came to this university, my relationships and I were narrow-minded. However, seeing Illinois Wesleyan from both an outsider’s and an insider’s perspective has led me to these realizations. I feel blessed to have been transformed by this university; it is where I am meant to be.
As I was preparing for what I knew would be a spectacular second year here at Illinois Wesleyan University, I experienced the largest crisis of my life. College was a long time coming for me. Growing up in an extremely strict household, I was yearning to experience freedom and to thrive as I knew I could, not only academically but also socially. All it took was one year at IWU for me to create lifelong friends and to be inspired to pursue a career in international education. That summer after my first year, I could already notice changes within myself, within my spirit! Knowing the transitional struggles that many first-year students face, especially first-generation college students like myself, I felt blessed to truly feel a connection to and a sense of belonging in this prestigious collegiate environment.

It was the beginning of July when a tragedy occurred in my life. Wanting to be proactive in my finances, since that is really the only thing that could come between me and my IWU education and IWU family, I contacted my financial advisor, asking what I needed to do to prepare financially for the coming school year. He told me that all I needed was for my parents to fill out the FAFSA. I have learned in the hardest way possible that the FAFSA is a staple in higher education. But it was this experience here at IWU that led me to have the most transformative experience of my 21 years of life.

For some reason I had to ask my parents over and over again to fill out their portion of the FAFSA correctly. My father kept trying to send in the form with just his information on it and not my stepmother’s. (My biological mother passed away when I was very young.) He thought that since he was my only biological parent, his information should be enough. My financial advisor explained to my parents that since they are married, both of them needed to provide information. But my stepmother refused to provide hers. She did not and still has not given me a reason why she is unwilling to provide her information. I tried everything I could to get around her obstinacy and still be able to receive FAFSA benefits, but to no avail.

I could not speak to either of my parents for a very long time after that, and suffered severe bouts of depression that summer. All my life I dreamed big dreams that I knew would be attainable only if I had success in college. I am smart, driven, and ambitious, so I knew success in college would not be a problem for me. Sure, I anticipated some hardships with finances, but I never could have dreamed that they would come from the actions of my parents. To this day, almost halfway through my junior year, there are still programs and scholarships, like the Gilman Scholarship, that I cannot apply to or participate in because information from the FAFSA is a part of their application process.

Each time I realize that the FAFSA is a barrier between me and something that would be beneficial to me, strong feelings of confusion, pain, and disappointment are evoked inside of me toward my parents. I have learned to deal with these feelings, as they are what have led to my most transformative experience here at IWU. After not knowing what in the world I was going to do because I would be forced to leave IWU, I feel that I can handle almost anything, and I can handle it on my own or with the help of my mentors.

Delving more into the brighter side of this incredible experience, my financial advisor was phenomenal in helping me through this and will forever have a special place in my heart. If it were not for him and the monetary donors of IWU, I would not be writing this right now! I would probably be working three to four jobs, trying to save up money to attend a different university that I could only hope would be half as great as Illinois Wesleyan University.

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Christy, from Freeport, Illinois, is majoring in philosophy. She plans to graduate from Illinois Wesleyan in 2016.

Essay by Christy Cole

Christy Cole, from Freeport, Illinois, is majoring in philosophy. She plans to graduate from Illinois Wesleyan in 2016.
Articles from Essays of Lives Transformed 

Four years. Four years to explore, learn, discover your passion, or pursue the one you have had your entire life, make lasting friendships, try new things, grow, and most importantly, learn about yourself. As I reach the halfway mark of my fourth and final year at Illinois Wesleyan, I am fortunate to say that I have accomplished all of these things.

My love of learning and passion for helping others helped me choose my major and career path. I am less than a year away from receiving a degree in elementary education. I have known that I wanted to be a teacher ever since kindergarten, when I began to play “school” in a classroom I made in my basement. IWU’s Educational Studies Department has provided me with amazing opportunities to learn and grow as a future teacher. The courses I have taken have opened my mind, and the diverse experiences I have had through my field placements in Bloomington-Normal schools have opened my heart. I am beyond excited to enter the teaching profession, and I look forward to putting what I have learned at IWU into practice.

“I’ve heard it said that people come into our lives for a reason, bringing something we must learn. And we are led to those who help us most to grow, if we let them, and we help them in return.” I adore these lyrics from the song “For Good” from the musical Wicked, specifically since they capture how I feel about the life-changing friendships I have made at IWU. I have met some remarkable people here, and I have made friends in every area I have been involved in. However, the most amazing friends I have ever known have been the girls that I have lived with each year. These women know everything about me, and they understand what is important to me. I know I can rely on them for anything. I hope I have influenced them as much as they have influenced me. Because of these friends, I do believe I have been changed “for good.”

These are just a few of the ways Illinois Wesleyan has impacted my life. However, I could fill an entire book with how this school has transformed my life. I have learned so much about myself and have grown as a person during my time at IWU. I am a much more confident and strong woman than I was when I stepped onto campus. I never imagined I would be vice president of my class, planning events for the student body, or being included in conversations about the future of Illinois Wesleyan and its students. I would like to believe that I have impacted Illinois Wesleyan through these roles. My hope is that my values, character, and passion, and the way I live them out, will be remembered on campus and noticed wherever I go in life. And I have God, my family, my friends, and Illinois Wesleyan to thank for that.
My parents once told me a story about the time I tried to escape from my crib.

They said that when I was not even a year old, they found me with one leg over the bars, apparently about to check out. When they came in, I looked at them and said, “I get out.” I guess that’s what I’ve been attempting to do ever since. I can’t say I really knew where I was going, but I knew that my life was bound for bigger things.

I had dreams of going away to college, and it wasn’t long before the world of film and theatre arts swept me off my feet. I was lucky enough to have a close friend and mentor from my tiny hometown who was the most talented actress and musician I had ever met. She relentlessly begged me to check out her alma mater, Illinois Wesleyan, and that’s what my heart set its sights on. I couldn’t be persuaded to consider another option.

Getting my acceptance letter seemed like a fulfillment of prophecy, and the generous financial aid from alumni was a blessing I didn’t yet know how to appreciate. When I finally arrived on the campus laden with trees and academia, I discovered hundreds of other souls that were just as passionate as mine. At first, this was intimidating, but then it became a comfort. That passion was and is the spirit that unifies us all.

When Bill Damaschke, the chief creative officer of DreamWorks, came to visit the theatre department during my first homecoming, my narrow worldview didn’t allow me to recognize the magnitude of such an event. I didn’t yet have the courage to introduce myself to him, but I do remember what he said. He told us that when he graduated from Illinois Wesleyan with a degree in musical theatre, he simply gave Disney a call and asked for a job. Stunned by his blunt confidence, whoever answered the phone that day set him up for an interview. Because Mr. Damaschke believed in himself, his name appears in the credits of many of the films I cherished as a child.

It was sometime after that visit that I had an epiphany. I realized that I didn’t have to settle for a career because it may or may not be lucrative, or something with a recognizable label. Film was and always will be my passion, and I have decided to follow it. I decided the only way I would end up where I wanted to be was if I made it happen.

So I’m making it happen. I’ve set my move-out date. Wesleyan’s alumni network has been a godsend. I have enjoyed making connections, and look forward to making many more along the way. But I think what sticks with me the most is this: whether you’re at Wesleyan now, or have taken what you’ve learned there out into the world, all of us who have grown up at this school share one passion: We live to help each other achieve our dreams, and for that, I will be forever grateful.
When I came to Illinois Wesleyan, I knew I was a girl with leadership experience, but I was not yet a leader in the true sense of the word. As I prepare to leave my university, I know I will emerge as a leader with success on my horizon. It is here that I learned how to speak confidently in front of large groups of people, how to interact with differing personalities, how to stay organized while juggling many commitments, and how to hold my peers accountable. These are critically important skills for a future manager; they are far more essential than the diploma I will receive in May. I will carry these skills with me for the rest of my life.

In high school, I served as the co-president of my choir. I applied because I was and continue to be passionate about the Quincy Music Department, and I knew I had the time and energy to give, but I didn’t know if I was meant to lead. I’m reserved by nature and historically nonconfrontational, so this position was new territory for me.

Fast forward a year and a half. I was halfway through my sophomore year at IWU when I knew it was time for me to lead again. My home was Kappa Delta, and I was ready to take on some responsibility in the organization that brought me countless new friends. Living in KΔ had already taught me how to live with different personalities, but serving on council taught me how to work with them in a mature way. In one instance, I shoved “nonconfrontational me” aside and asked a sister to treat my position with the respect I hadn’t been given. I learned two important lessons: that passive aggression is never helpful and that people will respect you more if you ask for it. I also learned to speak in front of eighty women without breaking a sweat, something for which I will be forever thankful.

One year later, I was elected as the VP of membership for Alpha Kappa Psi, the professional fraternity. In Kappa Delta, I was used to leading my friends, but in Alpha Kappa Psi, I had to learn to lead acquaintances and become a disciplinarian. My position was in charge of recording absences. National policy required me to suspend my peers after three unexcused absences, and it was never easy to be the bearer of bad news, but I learned that it is sometimes necessary.

In addition to my commitments to Kappa Delta and Alpha Kappa Psi, I maintained an “A” average and was a part-time musician through my scholarship. Every hour of my time was meticulously managed so that nothing could slip through the cracks. I was devoted to every aspect of my life. Illinois Wesleyan taught me to be a student, a leader, a musician, an employee, and a friend, and most importantly, it allowed me to be everything at once. I am gratefully multidimensional because of Illinois Wesleyan.
Life-changing, transformative experiences are usually common for a person who has lived in or visited over ten countries and four continents. However, in my case, none of my transformative experiences—such as moving from Morocco to Los Angeles, California, as a child or visiting relatives in low-income areas of Pakistan—have been more life-changing than my time at Illinois Wesleyan University (IWU).

During the fall of 2012, I came to Wesleyan with the goal of reaching my full potential in everything I have a passion for, but had no clear idea of how to achieve it or what my passions were. Then, during the first week of college, I went into the career center for advice on how to get the most out of my college experience. I was told to get involved in activities that I have an interest in and obtain internships in careers I want to pursue. Since then, I have become an avid partaker of the resources that the career center offers, and have developed strong relationships with Warren Kistner and the Hart Career Center staff. With their assistance, I have been able to serve multiple internships, including the YMCA, State Farm, and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). In addition to their career advice, I got involved in a diverse group of activities on campus.

During my time at Wesleyan, I have attained leadership positions in the Accounting Society and Alpha Kappa Psi (professional business fraternity). I was residential advisor for Dodds Hall and participated in multiple student leadership programs, and have been a member of the football team, which has given me a unique college experience. All of these activities have been influential in my personal growth and taught me life lessons. For example, my head football coach at IWU, Norm Eash, instilled in me the life lesson not to react, but to respond when faced with adversity. This concept of overcoming obstacles and adjusting your plans, instead of reacting or giving up when faced with challenges, is relevant in all aspects of my life, including the football field, classroom, personal life, and professional world.

Through the guidance and opportunities I have received at IWU, I have been able to achieve many goals, find my passions, and set a foundation for the rest of my life that I never could have imagined as an incoming freshman. The work I do in these organizations may be impactful only during my four years at IWU, but the life lessons I have learned and relationships I have made with my football teammates, Accounting Society members, Alpha Kappa Psi brothers, and residential advisors, as well as professors, coaches, and the career center staff, will last much longer than my time at IWU. These relationships will last a lifetime.
My transformation here at Illinois Wesleyan University has been met with many struggles.

As most college students can attest, the hours are long, the stress is high, but the rewards are so worth it in the end. I spent most of my first and second years just trying to find my niche.

During the end of my sophomore year, I realized I needed a passion. I needed a career goal. I needed a life goal. I decided to become more involved in my life and try new undertakings. I joined the chemistry club, became a TOL, and worked to help mentor incoming classes of chemistry majors. All were valued and rewarding experiences.

My greatest impact thus far has come from an unexpected challenge. I was given the opportunity to research organic chemistry under Dr. Ram Mohan of the Chemistry Department. He has been such a wonderful mentor, due in part to his honesty. Although it was harsh at times, that reality is what makes him such a passionate and supportive professor. Dr. Mohan pushed me to achieve and he would not hesitate to call me out for laziness. I truly enjoyed organic chemistry, but it was hard. Most of my life I have shied away from challenges as a defense. It was always easier to walk away than fail. He saw through this façade and challenged me.

To sum up my experiences during research in a few sentences would not do them justice. I spent months of tedious work, self-doubt, and tears trying to figure out if I really had the kind of passion for organic chemistry that Dr. Mohan saw in me. Without his help, I would not have tested myself, learned new topics, or set myself up for such a boundless future. Despite some bumps in my road through college, I am now traveling on a path toward graduate school for my Ph.D. in organic chemistry.

If I could go back and ask my freshman self to predict the future, I doubt she could imagine what IWU has allowed me to accomplish. In my four years here, I have grown leaps and bounds as a person. I met my fiancé, become involved in the community, gained independence and responsibility, and changed in ways I probably cannot even tell. I am forever grateful to IWU and Dr. Mohan for what they have offered me, and I now welcome the challenges of the future.
When I entered Illinois Wesleyan as a first-year student

I, like many others, intended to pursue a degree in biology with a pre-medicine focus. I had my mind set on becoming a doctor—not because that is what I necessarily wanted to be, but rather because that is what I thought was expected of me. After taking General Biology, I quickly discovered that I preferred humans to plants and that perhaps biology was not the ideal mode of action to achieve my goal. In my sophomore year, I switched my major to psychology, but despite this, I was still at a loss when it came to what I wanted to do with my life. It was not until I got involved with research that I truly found my niche.

As a rather quiet individual, I found that I frequently held myself back—fearing the unknown and the unfamiliar, afraid to share my voice. But one day I was working at campus security and my child development professor walked into the office with his wife. This is my chance. I just need twenty seconds of courage. That is all it takes. So I held my breath, took a leap of faith, and asked him about his research. This short burst of courage has shaped my experience at IWU in ways I never thought possible. I did an independent study in the spring with Dr. Sheese and was honored with presenting his research at the John Wesley Powell Student Research Conference in April, which has now segued into my senior thesis. Working with Dr. Sheese, working in the lab, and becoming wholeheartedly devoted to the detailed aspects of research have been liberating. Dr. Sheese has challenged me not only as a student, but also as a scholar, and has provided me with opportunities to grow, to find my voice, and to fight for it.

Doing a volunteer internship at St. Jude’s in Peoria over the summer was by far the most rewarding and life-changing experience I could have ever imagined. Halfway through sophomore year I learned that I had a third chronic autoimmune disease—one that attacks the healthy connective tissue in the body, such as the skin, heart, kidneys, or brain. While the disease has progressed over the past two years, I wanted desperately to give back and help children living with chronic illnesses. St. Jude provided me with the opportunity to experience the selfless love, joy, and devotion affiliated with child life. Taking this knowledge together with my own experience and wisdom, I could connect with the kids on a deeper level, with the understanding of what it feels like to have a war going on inside your own body. My experiences thus far at IWU have shaped the person that I am today and have had a large influence on the decisions that I make on a day-to-day basis. I have gained the confidence to succeed and have learned that while twenty seconds may not be very long, it can be just enough to do something incredible.

Essay by Casie Henrikson

Casie, from Grayslake, Illinois, is majoring in psychology and minoring in Hispanic Studies. She plans to graduate from Illinois Wesleyan in 2015.
IWU alumni and students had frequently told me of the many great experiences IWU had to offer. As a result, before I even began my IWU application I started writing something else: a list of opportunities I must take advantage of while here. From the Saturday afternoons spent at Best Buddies, providing companionship to individuals with intellectual disabilities, to mentoring residents as an RA, to dancing twelve straight hours to raise money for pediatric cancer awareness at IWU Dance Marathon, I have dedicated the last two years to a variety of organizations and causes that have ultimately influenced me far more than I affected them. It truly has been transformative. However, nothing has challenged me or impacted me more holistically than living and studying in Barcelona; three months in a beautiful city allowed me to think more critically, to adopt new perspectives, and to nurture personal growth.

No matter which organization I joined, I take pride in the fact that Wesleyan has encouraged me to stay true to my values, but has also encouraged me to adopt new ones. Coming to college is a big step in and of itself, but being thrown into a place where there are new people, new ideas, and new cultures is a leap. IWU challenges its students to explore other cultures and reach across barriers to truly get to know another person or culture. This challenge is evident through the university’s study abroad program. As a nursing student, it was nearly impossible to find a university that would allow me to study abroad, but IWU offers this for the nursing students.

Let me just say that my study abroad experience was incredibly awkward. (They don’t tell you that in the nice pamphlets). My face still burns red when I think about the time I followed Felip, the nurse I shadowed, into the bathroom because I misunderstood his Spanish. Whether it was something as harmless as following Felip to the men’s room or learning to navigate the Barcelona subway by myself, the confidence I gained and personal growth I experienced while abroad will stay with me throughout my career as a nurse when I get my first job and completely blank on everything I learned in nursing school.

Overall, I know that engraining myself in a new culture and learning about its history and customs will allow me to deliver culturally competent care to my future patients. Since studying abroad, I see the world in a different light. I often find myself thinking about what is going on in Barcelona right now. Since studying abroad, I’ve realized that I’ve caught only a small glimpse of the rest of the world. IWU and studying abroad have instilled in me a thirst to understand and experience as many different cultures as possible.
Transferring to Illinois Wesleyan University is one of the best things I’ve done in my life.

I never thought how many changes I could experience until I came here. At IWU, I learned how to jump out of my comfort zone as an international student and how to speak professionally during interviews, and have been inspired by the events I attended.

The first time coming to a different place and trying to get involved with the people always makes me feel nervous, especially as an international student coming to a new campus. But I changed my mind after I came IWU. I remember that the first semester I came, I was afraid to talk with Americans, because I think I have an accent when I speak English. But when I went to class, my classmates were nice and communicated with me patiently. They asked me what I thought of the differences between here and China. Since then, I like communicating with them more, I talk more in class about my opinions, and now I have a good friendship with my classmates and professor. I feel like this is a big change for myself; I have learned how to jump out of my comfort zone and make more friends.

The place on campus I visit most is the Hart Career Center. When I transferred to IWU as a junior, I didn’t know how to write a resume or communicate with a recruiter. I felt panic when I applied for my first internship, because I didn’t know what to do at all. Then I sought help from the Hart Career Center, where I received help with my resume and learned some tips for performing well in interviews. After practicing in the mock interviews, I became more confident. Last semester, I got my first internship in the U.S. as a finance intern at the Community Cancer Center in Bloomington. Thanks to the Hart Career Center’s help, I became more confident in communicating with recruiters.

Besides academics and internships, IWU has lots of wonderful clubs I can join and inspiring speeches I can attend. About half a month ago, I attended the First Generation event on campus. I found out that many students are the same as me; we are all the first generation in our families to attend college. At this event I also met my mentor on campus. I feel inspired and enlightened by stories that professors and students share with me. I am thankful that IWU has so many events to let me attend and communicate with so many great people, and share ideas with them.

Above all, I feel IWU is a place where I found my values, the place I feel like home. I appreciate all the people I have met and the classes I attend, which have made me more confident and more willing to communicate with other people.
Throughout the morning,

there were soft whispers

about what was to take place that afternoon. Even I was apprehensive about the event. Nonetheless I, along with a rather large group of people, gathered in front of the Joslin Atrium steps. One by one, people began to speak. They told stories of their experiences and pledged to make sure IWU was inclusive of all people and cultures. I was overwhelmed by the kind and encouraging words. My eyes began to swell and tears streamed down my face. How could these people, who did not even know me, care so much?

The IWU race rally two years ago was the first time I began to feel like a Titan. It was the first time I felt like I was enough at Wesleyan. It was the first time my experiences were validated; this reignited a fire and passion inside of me that I thought had died. That day, I vowed never to be silent again, and to share my experiences in hopes that they would help other students. I also vowed to be a part of a movement and culture that valued the individual and inclusivity.

With my newly found drive, I applied and was accepted into the Summer Enrichment Program. Through this program I gained not only lifelong friends, but confidence. I spent my summer interning at Westminster Village Inc. The Village is a prestigious continuing care facility in Bloomington. I learned two very important lessons from the residents. The first is that every day we should challenge ourselves to learn something new, no matter how minute that new thing is. There was one resident who asked me what I learned every time I saw him. Admittedly, at first it was a bit bothersome, but by midsummer, I began to look forward to seeing him so I could tell him about my day and all the new things I had learned! He made me appreciate learning again and reinforced the value of it. The second lesson the residents taught me is multifaceted. It is to enjoy life, not to stress over the small things, and to value the relationships that I have. In our society, it is easy to lose sight of what is important.

The second experience that has helped shape me into the woman I am is being the president of Black Student Union (BSU). Through BSU I have had the unique opportunity to get to know and build invaluable relationships with many men and women of color on campus. One aspect of my position I have found truly rewarding is talking to first-year students about their experiences at IWU and being able to help them through their transition into college and with other issues that arise from being a minority at a predominantly white institution.

Had it not been for IWU, I would not be the person I am today. I have learned how to be a leader, and most importantly, I have gained confidence in myself and my abilities.
I have had to transform the lives of those around me. It is impossible for one person or one institution to be able to transform everyone’s life. However, what can be established is a ripple effect. An institution can be established in order to equip its members with the proper tools to advance that transformation outward. Looking back at the experiences I’ve had, my life is truly transformed knowing I have been empowered with the capabilities to make a difference in others’ lives.

I have been able to leverage the opportunities provided to me during my time here at Illinois Wesleyan in order to maximize the impact for others. My involvement with cross country and track, the Action Research Center, Alpha Kappa Psi, and academics all have shaped my time at Illinois Wesleyan into what it is today. It would be impossible to single out involvement in one particular group or activity as the most impactful. In fact, it is the combination of all these activities that makes my experience significant. The worth of each individual part pales in comparison to the value of the whole experience. Illinois Wesleyan has provided me the ability to have a hand in so many different roles.

Coming in to college, I knew I would be a part of the cross country team and be a student. This was the extent of my initial expectations of involvement. I quickly learned Illinois Wesleyan is more than just a school; it is a community. Students became friends, staff became advisors, and Illinois Wesleyan became home. Little by little, I became more attached and more involved. It wasn’t until I stopped and looked up that I realized how much I’ve grown. As each new opportunity presented itself to me, I was eager to pursue it.

My experiences as a co-founder of the Annual Westside 5K Run and Walk exemplify how the Illinois Wesleyan experience can transform lives. Utilizing my involvement with the cross country team and teaming up with the Action Research Center, I helped to establish the event upon the foundation of bridging Illinois Wesleyan with the surrounding community. The west side of Bloomington is a hidden treasure lost in time. Just a few blocks from campus is a neighborhood rich with history, yet easily unnoticed. The Westside 5K, just like Illinois Wesleyan, serves a number of different purposes. The event is a fundraiser for eight different local nonprofits and helps promote businesses that are located on the west side. The race serves as a community event encouraging a healthy lifestyle. Each year, the Westside 5K allows community members to see what potential the neighborhood holds.

Growing to be a part of this community, I recognize the powerful position Illinois Wesleyan sits in. We are able to make a positive impact on every student who walks onto this campus and on every community member who lives in this neighborhood.
“What, I got into Illinois Wesleyan University!?  
Yay, I got accepted into another university on scholarship!

College number two, check!” This was my reaction when reading though the letter I received from Illinois Wesleyan. IWU was simply acceptance letter number two. Back then, it didn’t fully hit me how important being accepted really was. IWU was just that “other university” I happened to get into. Only after talking to people, including my cousin, an IWU alumnus, did I realize, “Oh, wow, it is a big deal after all.”

Being a biology/pre-med major, I kept myself on my toes — although college has taught me you can prepare only so much before life intervenes and nothing makes sense any more. During MALANA Orientation, I met many amazing people and learned so much, I felt ready to take on the world — and classes had not even started yet. That year, academics were good; I got involved in a campus RSO’s executive board and became involved with my hall through hall council and my desk aide job. I tried new things and became familiar with the resources on campus early on, and they gave me my launching platform, but I hadn’t really taken off yet. I thought I figured things out, but second year rolled around, and I rode the scariest roller coaster ride I had ever been on.

I was a practicing hermit, drowning in two of my hardest classes, and a new first-year RA in one of the biggest campus halls. That first semester, I was juggling everything at once. I encountered problems at home and school, from family finances to academics to my declining health due to sudden weight gain and rising blood pressure. Homesickness consumed me. I reached out to some people in my life, but the drowning feeling did not leave. “But why? I was doing the right things, just like first year.” One problem: it was not first year, it was a brand new game, and as in any game, anything can happen. I was physically, mentally, and emotionally burnt out, with my drive fleeting by early November. During winter break, I even considered giving up, but I realized I would never find out what my path really was if I gave up there, and I am no quitter.

Despite having failed one class and barely passed another, I began with a new approach the following semester. I soon realized this point in life was necessary for me to get to where I needed to be, so I utilized the skills I gained being an RA and used the situation to my advantage. I figured things out academically and made the tough decision to switch majors. I re-applied for an RA position, giving one of the best presentations of all the applicants. I re-applied to the Summer Enrichment Program, giving one of my best interviews, applied to an internship at Planned Parenthood, driven by my year-long interest to work with the organization, and helped found a campus organization driven to better connect international and United States students.

I was accepted into each position I applied for, and made some new friends and connections along the way. Things soon came together after becoming more involved with the Bloomington-Normal community and the rich diversity it offered. This year, I felt such powerful connections with my surrounding IWU and local communities, and felt everything come full circle, giving me insight into who I was and wanted to be. I don’t know what would have happened if I hadn’t been pushed to my limits and given the appropriate resources Wesleyan has to accommodate that push. It’s interesting to think that three years ago Wesleyan was just another college acceptance letter, but now it has become part of my identity. College is a wonder, but Wesleyan is my blessing.
I do not know what lies ahead in my future.

My uncertainty does not reflect a lack of motivation as my stimulating classes never fail to challenge and enrich me. It does not suggest an absence of skill, as I keenly pursue my passions for reading and writing. And it does not indicate insubstantial experience, as my diverse work positions have opened my mind to various paths.

Quite honestly, I cannot pinpoint a singular reason for my ambiguous future. Although I have a penchant for meticulously planning many aspects of my life, my own uncertainty often baffles me. I am, and always have been, one to plan, execute, and achieve every goal in my mind. This perfectionism has worked well, sometimes; my diligence has led me to the university, work-study job, and summer internship that I desired.

Yet when I look ahead to the future—the long-term future—the horizon is still so hazy, and the fog so thick, that I cannot seem to find the flashlight I need to see the path that I will eventually choose.

I am currently enrolled in one of the most challenging courses that I have ever taken: Writing Poetry. It maddens me; it invigorates me. I have realized the reason why I find my lower-level poetry class so paradoxical is because it puts me entirely out of my comfort zone. Writing Poetry exemplifies the inner struggle I have had during my time at Illinois Wesleyan: I try so hard to plan every poem, yet every time I try to do so I realize that my efforts are futile. When I write, I see the outcome of my poem the same way I see the future events in my life: hazy, vague, and inexplicable.

The lesson I am still learning in my poetry class is one I have encountered throughout my time at Illinois Wesleyan. As a nervous first-year, I often felt apprehensive about the friends I had made, and doubted that my relationships with them were as strong as I wanted them to be. When I was a more-confident sophomore, I often questioned if I was getting everything out of my college experience that I had hoped to. But now, I have come to realize that worrying is quite pointless. A single event, conversation, or class cannot epitomize the many impactful experiences I have had at Illinois Wesleyan. But they all have led me to my newfound joy in letting go of my apprehensions.

After a great deal of thought, and plenty of frustrations, I have embraced my mysterious future. No longer do I see my future as cruelly uncertain and frustratingly vague; my yet-to-be-known future career, home, and life now represent my boundless opportunities. I am uninhibited by a carefully mapped-out future, with deadlines in my life that would determine my happiness. I am free in my uncertainty, limitless in my ambiguity, and very excited about what my future holds.
This summer, my intern project happened like a flood.

Slow and steady drops of information came in, puddles of knowledge left from previous interns and splashes of advice from residents. The ideas and conversations soon gathered momentum, and before I knew it, my project was rushing forward like an oversized river pushing its boundaries.

On my second workday as an intern with the West Bloomington Revitalization Project, I walked around the neighborhood and saw what I considered to be a profound need. Fresh food does not abound on the Westside; grocery stores are nonexistent. Mini-marts sell Bud Light with more success than they sell apples, and so they have removed the latter from their shelves in order to keep making a profit.

In my initial research, I felt so frustrated with the lack of access. I spoke with single moms, who talked about how taking the bus to Wal-Mart can take two hours. Without a car, trips to the grocery store need to be spread out over weeks at a time, forcing parents to stock shelves with food that will last for the time in between, rather than highly nutritious foods like spinach or berries. I felt like I was up against such a big problem, and it was overwhelming.

In my quest to understand more, I wanted to keep talking to residents. I did not plan for my project to be revolutionary or transformative, just a simple way to talk to people. It seemed logical to offer free food at a table in order to keep making a profit.

Volunteers have poured in and continue to fill weekend slots, and the excitement continues to grow. My heart continues to be lifted by the incredible power and tenacity of community members showing their support for my project, in every way imaginable. What an honor it’s been to be a part of this movement, and to fall in love with the people of the Westside.
Illinois Wesleyan University is distinguished for its dedication to attain the true essence of a private liberal arts institution. Its mission statement further elucidates that "the Illinois Wesleyan experience affords the greatest possibilities for realizing individual potential while preparing students for democratic citizenship and life in a global society." I believe that my experiences as a student have molded my academic learning, world view, relationships, and personal identity.

The biology department staff have intellectually challenged and encouraged my curiosity for the field. From taking general biology as a first-year student to exploring specific topics in microbiology and evolution, I have learned that completely immersing oneself in the subject matter allows for deeper understanding and appreciation for science as a whole. Moreover, biology professors have allowed my curiosity to blossom, which enabled me to discover my passion for physical therapy.

My academic advisor encouraged my application to the Summer Enrichment Program (SEP). In this program, I learned valuable insights and gained work-related experiences through my internship. This experience further increased my passion for physical therapy. Furthermore, I was trained in various professional skills, such as public speaking and presentations. Lastly, the volunteerism component opened my eyes to various societal issues in the surrounding community. Through our group project, the SEP members personally experienced these issues, and we played a part in supporting the efforts of alleviating them.

As a result, my experiences in this program have improved my professional and citizenship competency.

My work-study positions have also exposed me to other experiences. I had the privilege of working as a resident assistant (RA) and residential community advisor (RCA). Through these positions, I have met and developed diverse relationships with a plethora of individuals. These individuals also taught me the ideology that everybody originated from different backgrounds and experiences. Through them, I recognized the importance of celebrating global diversity and maximally educating ourselves about it. As an RCA, I was also able to practice leadership skills when supervising the residence hall’s desk aide and RA staff. Through this position, I discovered that I had a laissez-faire and encouraging leadership style. This style enabled my peers to successfully attain their positional goals and fulfill their responsibilities.

Additionally, my involvement in the men’s tennis team enabled the development and practice of several important characteristics. For a student-athlete, communication and time management are imperative skills. These skills have positively impacted my overall success, considering the extent of my school involvement. Furthermore, my coach emphasized dedicating maximal effort in every aspect of the sport. Such emphasis also indirectly advanced other important and practical qualities, such as focus, determination, and drive. These qualities have been critically useful when applied to settings outside the tennis court.

Therefore, being involved within campus and the Bloomington–Normal community has allowed for skill development and the discovery of new strengths and areas of improvement. My experiences at Illinois Wesleyan University have collectively shaped me into a well-rounded individual and into the best version of myself.
My time at Illinois Wesleyan has been one of transition.

I came to IWU because of the theater program, and yet I am graduating as an English–writing major. I joined a fraternity that no longer exists, because a good friend of mine left before his time. I have gone abroad and seen the world, and at the same time have watched IWU grow from a small liberal arts college to a pre-professional oriented institution.

Exceptional events have shaped my experience here. The raising of State Farm Hall, writing and producing a play, taking a girl to the hospital, having a friend die, and watching a group of friends crumble underneath the pressure of the outside world—all these have their place in my heart and mind.

Yes, moments in our immediate reality shape who we are, just as global events and catastrophes that we have no control over construct the world we live in. But it is not these things that have made me into the person I am today. The people I have met throughout my life, especially in my time at IWU, have helped me learn how to be a better person, how to live a life that I can be proud of living.

I have made excellent friends who I can confidently say support me when I am in the right, and who can call me out when it is necessary. I have had professors who exploded my mind and taught me how think creatively and analytically in ways that I never thought possible. I have worked in offices around Bloomington–Normal, and expected the worst white collar nightmares to occur, but instead found people with warm hearts and open minds, who have taught me how to be a man in a modern world. I have met strangers in foreign lands who have opened their home to me and fed me, who gave me all of their love just because they knew they could and realized how much it means to another person.

All of this is because of IWU. It is easy to say that I never would have encountered the people I have without coming to school here. And if I had gone to a different university, perhaps I would be in the same place I am in now. But I cannot know that for certain. What I do know is that the people I have shared space and time with over these past four years have made me a better, more empathetic person. Going to Illinois Wesleyan has opened my eyes to how other people live, how other people think, and how other people feel. And there is no greater lesson that I could have learned during my time here.
In the summer before my senior year here at Illinois Wesleyan, my life changed forever as my eyes were opened to a whole new side of the world, literally. I spent six weeks in Greece studying, researching, and writing with other students from all over America. While I expected to learn about Greece and its culture, I didn’t expect to learn so much about my own life and culture.

I realized as soon as I met my classmates that I had never been among such a diverse group of people. For entirely different reasons, all of us were lucky enough to be brought together in Greece. We traveled all over the Peloponnesse and to the Greek islands together, and somewhere along the way we, including our professor and travel guide, became a close-knit family.

I was also fortunate enough to spend my twenty-first birthday with my classmates in Delphi, and when we all went out to dinner to celebrate I realized I had made some lifelong friends. At that dinner I was looking around the table and it hit me that these were types of people I would never have become friends with if it weren’t for this program. This might sound shallow, but it is a fact of life in an American university. As a student-athlete here at IWU I naturally spend more time with my teammates and other athletes, and as a result my best friends are all athletes or Shirk-addicts. I unfortunately rarely have the time or opportunity to get to know other demographics of people on such a close level. However, Greece was a different story. My two roommates were a “sorority-girl” from Florida and a “hipster” from Pennsylvania, but we could not have been closer. On the surface it seemed like we would have nothing in common, but somewhere between gabbing about boys and discussing literature, we became best friends.

My point is that I became much more aware of the ways I have been restricting myself. I went halfway around the world to find diversity when I could have found it on my own campus! I must clarify that I would not trade my time in Greece for anything in the world, but I learned so much about connecting with a diverse group of people that my life will never be the same here in America.

I vowed to make an effort to create more meaningful friendships across all of campus in my last year here at IWU, because of the power I now know that connectivity can have. My life feels more full knowing that I have best friends all across America who will be happy to chat and bond with me whenever I need a fresh pair of ears. I am also thankful that I attend a university that reveres diversity and supports adventures abroad.
I am currently a senior at Illinois Wesleyan and I am a worker at the Admissions office.

As an Admissions employee, my job is to tell students why they should commit to this university. I was a prospective student who placed Illinois Wesleyan at the very bottom of my list. I applied as a biology major, was hunting for only large universities, and thought I knew what was best for me.

However, my admissions counselor, Bob Murray, convinced me that IWU was the place for me, so I figured I’d try it. He suggested I enroll as an English–writing major, with a focus on biology, because I had no interest in going pre-med.

During my time at IWU, I have discovered more about myself than I believe I would have at any other university. I kept English–writing as my major, and developed a passion for poetry. I discovered poetry through a required class, and I fell in love with my ability to create new things. I followed my interest with a seven-week research project for Poetry Daily, leading me to present at the John Wesley Powell Student Research Conference. My research in Poetry Daily fired a spark. Before I knew it, I was writing poetry left and right. In my spare time I found new books to read, poets to follow, and a new career ahead. I joined the Argus as a writer and continued as an editor. I received a scholarship for my study abroad in New Zealand to create another poem-a-day project. I am hoping to continue my career in poetry with graduate school.

Aside from my academic success in poetry, I made many personal discoveries through my writing. I learned how to write about the laughter in life, the beauty of family and friends, and love for the tiny things. I also learned how to write about my struggles. I learned how to put my difficulty in words, and how to express my emotions when I felt I couldn’t. During my freshman year, I befriended a student who tragically passed away. I took my first poetry class the semester after his death, and I believe writing was the perfect therapy. I had never struggled so much personally, but I was encompassed by support. My professor worked with me one on one to encourage me to do my best when I didn’t feel like it. I believe the support from my professor, along with the support of my friends and the IWU community, is the reason I am who I am today. I overcame a very large struggle, but fortunately I didn’t have to do it alone.

I may have attended IWU on a whim, but when I talk to prospective students and speak of my experiences, it sounds wholly intentional. Illinois Wesleyan changed my life in many ways I didn’t expect. I have a very strong community that embraces my struggles and my success. It may just be the “Wesleyan Bubble,” but I’d prefer to call it home.
“All the opportunity I have going forward is in large part possible because of the foundation of what’s behind me and Illinois Wesleyan really is a fundamental part of that foundation…”

Dr. Stephan Ondra ’80
Health Care Executive and former White House Advisor
It always comes back to people.

It comes back to a member of the faculty or staff, or a classmate, or someone like you who made a difference at a particular point in time. That’s how lives get transformed and for that we cannot thank you enough.

*President Richard F. Wilson*