

CALCULATED

Competitive and bold, Alan Dachs '70 leaves the Board of Trustees having led his colleagues and the institution through ambitious projects.

BY WILLIAM HOLDER '75

Photography by Bill Burkhart

Alan Dachs '70, president and chief executive officer of the San Francisco-based investment company Fremont Group, recently concluded 14 years of service on Wesleyan's Board of Trustees, eight of those as chair. He played key roles in the selection of Douglas Bennet '59 as president, in Wesleyan's \$281 million campaign, and in the development of comprehensive strategic plans that have guided Wesleyan during the Bennet presidency. He met with *Wesleyan* editor William Holder '75 in May to reflect on his tenure as chair of the Board.

WH: What do you see as the highlights of Wesleyan's progress during the past decade?

AD: We have accomplished a lot. We improved the stu-

dent-faculty ratio from 10:1 to 9:1. We established 140 new scholarships and streamlined the tenure process. We brought into the information age more than 80 classrooms, built or renovated three dorms, restored the Patricelli '92 Theater and Chapel, constructed a state-of-the-art film center, and broke ground on the \$43 million Usdan University Center. We raised a record \$281 million in new pledges and gifts and increased participation in the annual fund from 44 percent to 55 percent.

But that's the least of it. The big idea was to emphasize institutional improvement, to develop a greater sense of confidence in ourselves and an optimistic "can do" attitude that combine to build upon what we have and make it even better.

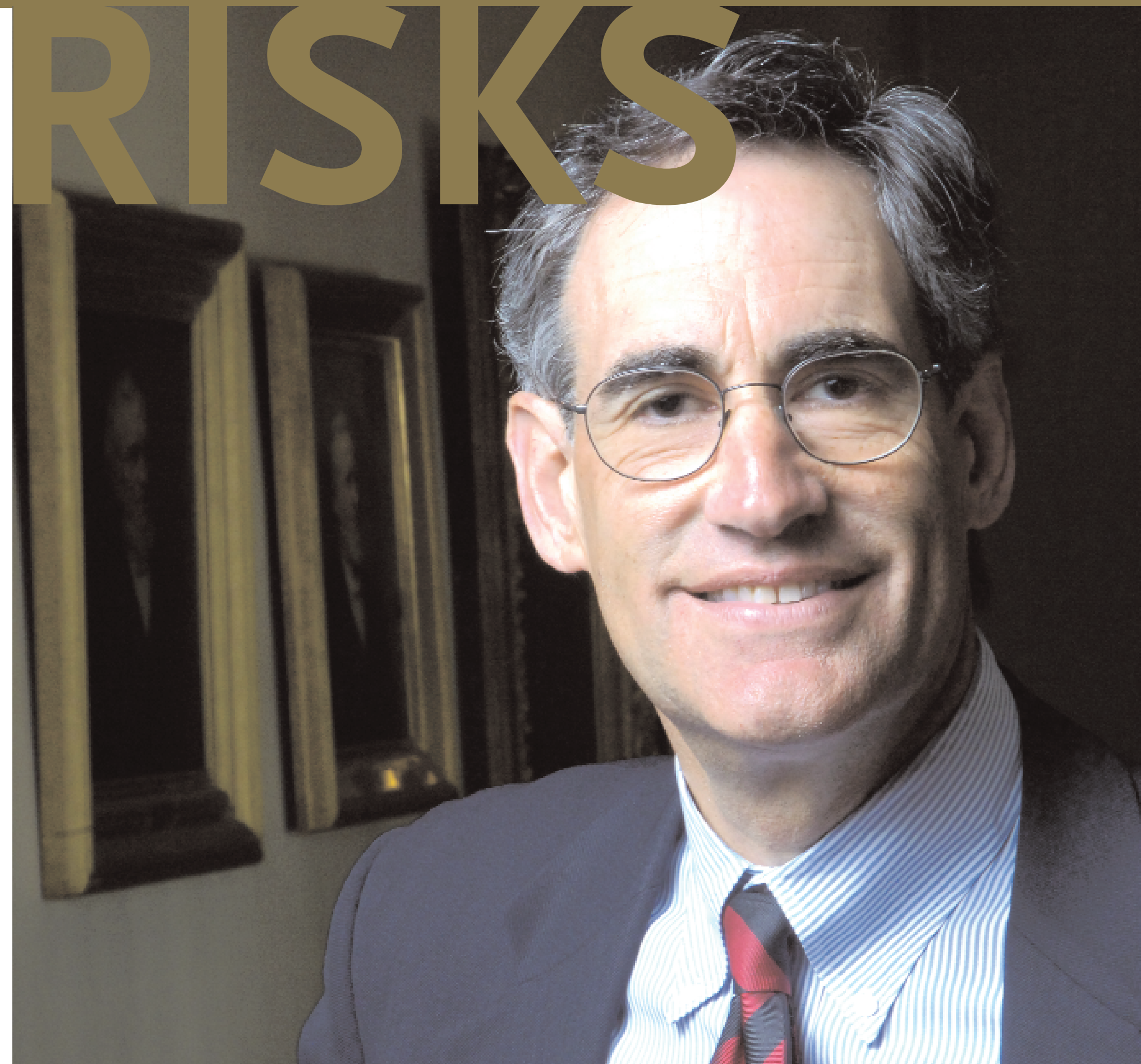
WH: How would you characterize the Board's willingness to take risks?

AD: To answer we first have to understand we are competing with colleges and universities that have two to three times our endowment per student. We have no choice but to act boldly, creatively, and efficiently.

It is gratifying to see how successfully we compete. More students apply to Wesleyan than ever. We get our fair share (perhaps our unfair share) of the faculty we recruit, but we have to accomplish this with fewer financial resources than our peers.

When the stock market declined so dramatically in 2000, other institutions cut back. We were confronted with the same issue, but we decided to forge ahead on

RISKS



all fronts. We increased our campaign goal. We accelerated construction of the campus master plan and capped the student loan component of financial aid. More recently, we decided to substantially increase the annual development budget to build an endowment on a par with our peers. These are some of the bold—calculated—decisions we made and they are paying off.

WH: What is a succinct articulation of your vision for Wesleyan?

AD: You mean besides beating Amherst and Williams? Wesleyan is so incredibly robust, sophisticated, and challenging. It has the important advantages of a research institution, yet it's compact and intimate. Students can make real and lasting connections with their professors and other students. Our scientists do more research and publish in professional journals more often than our peers by a factor of more than two, and they still teach at all course levels. Across the curriculum, in economics, film studies, and the other major disciplines, we shine. Wesleyan is incredibly dynamic and rich in its offerings. I know how outstanding Wesleyan is, you know it, and it is time others knew it too.

Moreover, I believe, as does John Woodhouse '53, chair of the Wesleyan campaign, that we have a higher calling and responsibility to educate young men and women. We share this responsibility with other serious institutions of higher learning. It's not an overstatement to say that our nation depends upon our ability to do it well. The standards we set, the faculty we hire, and the students we matriculate will determine Wesleyan's and our nation's success.

WH: What is the proper role of the board?

AD: In addition to its fiduciary responsibilities, the board raises money and is directly responsible for the management of the endowment. It is a sounding board and a source of support, when appropriate, for the administration's initiatives. The board also approves tenure recommendations and, as I like to say, it should "carry the banner" for Wesleyan.

Board members have to respect that they don't manage the university. Because of the strength of this administration, this board is able to do what a board should do and avoid the worst of all problems—micromanaging. Also, when a board functions well, the less experienced trustees are able to learn and grow in their roles. It is particularly gratifying to see the younger trustees and student representatives develop in that way.

WH: So the job of the chair of the board is primarily to ensure the integrity of that relationship to the administration?

AD: In addition to setting the agenda, the chair can also be a sounding board to the president. Doug is comfortable with that kind of relationship. The top person in an organization understands that he or she oftentimes must make decisions with imperfect knowledge. A chair can help by asking questions and by providing a source of support and encouragement.

You have to spend a lot of time making sure that people are informed. It just takes a lot of time. There is a basic respect among the faculty, students, and administration for the roles and responsibilities of the board, but there is very little tolerance for unilateral action. If I had any advice to give a new chair, it would be to listen, consult, and communicate, and to do so as frequently and as widely as possible.

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WH: What does a board need to be successful?

AD: A board needs to focus on strategic and policy level issues and opportunities. We believed that comparing Wesleyan to its peers would help focus our strategic choices. Where we felt we were performing better we would try to lengthen our lead, and where we were behind we devised ways to close the gap.

In the early days Doug and his staff, in collaboration with faculty members and student representatives to the board, developed plans that would accomplish those objectives. I can't say enough about our faculty. I

don't accept the notion that an institution's faculty and administration will necessarily be at odds. Nonsense. Of course, there are points of disagreement, but we found many more areas to build upon.

I think the board did some of its best work in the area of strategy. Later, I saw it as my job and the board's job to keep things on track and moving forward. It didn't take much prompting on our part, but university life has many ways of diverting one's attention. At times, Doug would have to devote considerable attention to situations which had little or no direct impact on our objectives, but were nonetheless very important.

At those times, as a sounding board for Doug, I would offer my advice, but in my role as chair I would remind him of our objectives and the central tasks at hand. As an adviser to the president in a critical situation, I knew the grand plan was the last thing he needed to worry about at the time, but it was my job as chair to call it to his attention, and I did. Doug understood that aspect of my role and his appreciation of it was an enormous help to making the board and me more effective.

During Wesleyan's recent reaccreditation process, our approach and dedication to planning and managing strategic objectives to the extent we do were approvingly noted by the reaccreditation committee and its chair, Diana Chapman Walsh, president of Wellesley. Doug has now joined the Wellesley board.

WH: Tell us more about your relationship with President Bennet.

AD: It's as good a professional relationship as I've ever had. Doug and I have different styles, but I have a tremendous respect for his way of thinking, his intellect, his analytical skills, and his sense for what is right and wrong; not only in a moral or ethical sense, but also situationally. He sets very high standards of behavior and performance.

Doug is a very strong-minded individual, but he is inclusive and an active listener. He is also decisive. I appreciate those qualities. Sometimes, but not often, we found ourselves on different sides of an issue. But there wasn't any issue where we came to loggerheads. I've enjoyed working with him, and I've learned a lot from him. Mostly, I've enjoyed helping him accomplish the objectives for Wesleyan.

WH: Talk about a couple of things you've learned.

AD: Doug is very politically astute. In the early days I said, "Look, if you have a vision, tell everybody about it so they can help you accomplish it." Doug was very reluctant to do that, and I discovered why. In the university setting especially, you need to build consensus— not total agreement—

if you are to move forward. You need to have the patience to let your vision emerge as the organization advances.

Doug is very skilled at this process. Don't be mistaken; Doug has a very well-defined idea of what he wants for Wesleyan and the patience and resolve to see it through.

WH: Are there any lessons from your undergraduate years that you've carried through life?


AD: There were many, but in my opinion what makes Wesleyan truly outstanding is its values. For example, the value of a rigorous and demanding education in a wide range of subjects; the value of intellectual integrity and clear-mindedness; the idea that any student accepted for admission should be able to attend Wesleyan regardless of financial capability; and the value of individual expression, which should be encouraged and enjoyed, but which also should be civil.

Ideas are scrubbed hard at Wesleyan. We're not for the faint-hearted or thin-skinned. We challenge what we think in the classroom and around the dinner table. As a result, the ideas and the people discussing them improve. In the end, individuals make things happen and individuals can and do make a difference in this world. Wesleyan men and women understand that and they act on it.

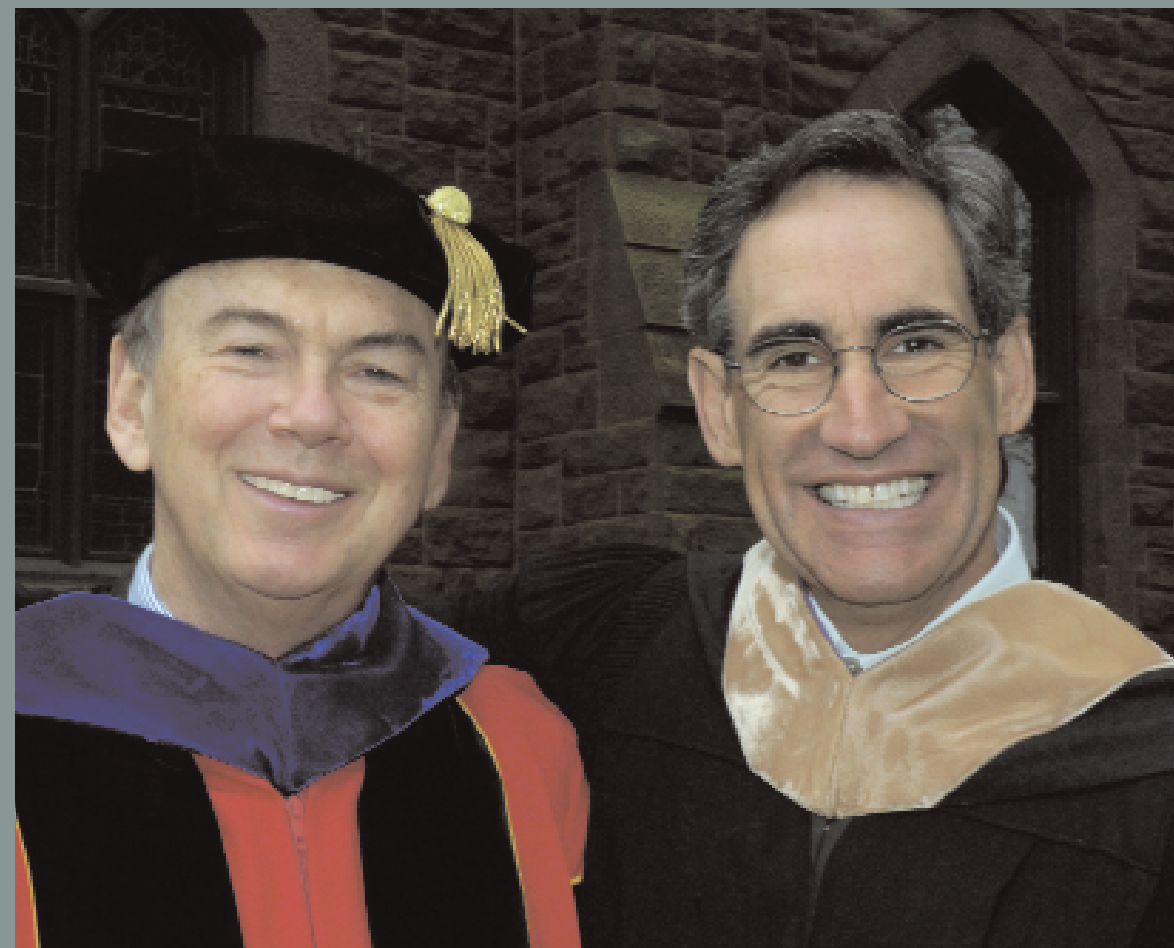
Wesleyan people work hard and they are passionate about Wesleyan. I learned that as an undergraduate nearly 40 years ago, and I still see it today.

WH: What are some of your more pleasing personal memories during your time as chair?

AD: Serving as a trustee and later board chair were utterly satisfying. I worked on many of the most absorbing issues in higher education with people I respect and admire. Many became close lifelong friends. There is nothing quite like helping to channel the passion and insight that typifies the Wesleyan trustee, faculty member, or student. I like to say I had two transformative experiences at Wesleyan: one as an undergraduate and another as a trustee. In a heartbeat, I would decide to do both again.

As chair I also officiated at commencement when our son Eric graduated in 1998. He climbed the steps of the platform, got his diploma and shake from Doug's hand, and came over and gave me one of those hugs a father can't get enough of. It was a great moment for both of us. 

Do you have an opinion about this topic?
Please write us at letters@wesleyan.edu.



Extraordinary Partnership

Alan was on the Board of Trustees when I began my tenure as Wesleyan president in 1995. Because he had chaired the Presidential Search Committee, we got to know each other before he was elected to a second term and then made chair of the board two years later.

I knew that Alan's objective was to improve every aspect of academic and residential life at Wesleyan and to be sure that Wesleyan's reputation matched its quality. He asked the rest of us to push ourselves and to keep both the big picture and the small details in mind. For his own part, Alan has very high expectations of himself and has worked very hard as chair to lead Wesleyan.

In 2003, the Board extended Alan's term though 2005 so that he might serve through the completion of the Campaign for Wesleyan. He agreed to serve and, with his generous leadership, the campaign exceeded its goals. Alan will continue his leadership as chair of the newly established University Development Committee.

Alan comments in this interview on the demands of board leadership in a university and on his and my working relationship. To succeed, a university needs effective leadership at all levels—faculty, student, alumni, administration, and board. Alan's genius has been to bring very high personal standards of success, built in from the start but honed in business, to a university setting in a way that has challenged and enabled the rest of us to perform.

Wesleyan is succeeding in important ways that help guarantee its future. Alan and I have had an extraordinary partnership. I have learned enormously from him. I salute and thank this partner and friend.—*Douglas Bennet '59*