



THE BENNET STYLE

The Bennets have put an indelible stamp on Wesleyan during the past 12 years, highlighted not only by an impressive list of accomplishments but also by a warm personal style that resonates with alumni and campus constituencies.

BY WILLIAM HOLDER '75

President and Midge Bennet take in the view from the Usdan University Center under construction.

Students present at Doug Bennet's inauguration remember the event not for the speeches but for the party that followed. Hours after the formalities had ended, a drenching rain turned the Center for the Arts courtyard, site of a dance party, into a mud pit.

Undeterred, the new president showed up to party with mud-splattered students.

Jed Hoyer '96, now assistant general manager of the Boston Red Sox, was impressed. "It was wonderful to see that he wanted to be involved, and he was not afraid to get his hands dirty. That became symbolic for his presidency."

Although President Bennet never repeated his mud dancing performance, he did develop a reputation for wrestling with issues large and small, doing whatever was necessary to move the institution forward.

Wesleyan needed to gain traction. When Bennet left a senior-level position at the U.S. State Department and arrived on campus in the summer of 1995, Wesleyan had reached a precarious point. Fundraising was anemic, faculty positions had been cut to balance the budget, the financial aid program was inadequate, and the campus was sorely in need of physical renewal. An accreditation report had criticized the institution for its inability to execute strategic planning.

On paper, Bennet looked like the answer to Wesleyan's needs. His leadership of a turnaround at National Public Radio was well known, but he had also held a variety of positions in the federal government, including the Senate Budget Committee. Alan Dachs '70, who served as chair of the Board of Trustees for eight years during Bennet's tenure, says, "Doug has a great ability to analyze and understand policy and budgets. He knows how to get the most out of our intellectual and financial resources."

In person, Bennet conveyed to everyone what his résumé could not capture: that as a Wesleyan alumnus, a Wesleyan parent, and a former alumni-elected trustee, he loved Wesleyan and would give it everything he had to give. Students sensed his joy in being president when they danced in the mud with him.

Bennet wasted no time in getting started. Barbara-Jan Wilson, vice president for university relations, recalls: “Doug began moving us forward by something very simple. He said let’s make sure the washing machines work; let’s do the fix-its. We had a list of fix-its, and at every senior staff meeting on Tuesday mornings, we checked off the fix-its. Were letters to alumni addressed to the right alumni? That sort of thing.”

The small fix-its led to some large fix-its, such as redesigning the computerized course preregistration system so that it delivered students more courses they wanted and less angst. Throughout the fix-it phase Bennet made it clear that he would hold himself and administrative staff members to high standards.

At the same time, he started a series of conversations with the entire Wesleyan community, but with special attention to faculty, about the purpose of a Wesleyan education. The conversations led to a substantial set of papers on the future of liberal arts education produced by faculty and others. Out of this Bennet fashioned “Wesleyan Education for the 21st Century,” the central strategy document for his administration. It is the accomplishment that he considers to be most significant during his tenure because it lays out a rationale for the kind of education Wesleyan offers.

As he told Anna Quindlen (see page 25), “We asked how you define a curriculum these days. The answer is that you don’t have a set curriculum with Greek history, but there is a way to decide what capabilities people need when they leave here, so the whole curriculum is being reorganized to reflect those capabilities. The theory is that you can study almost anything as long as you are picking up these capabilities. Russian history might be as good for ethics as anything else.”

Joseph Bruno, vice president for academic affairs and a longtime member of the chemistry department, believes that the capabilities are an invaluable tool for faculty and students.

The capabilities “differ entirely from more traditional distribution expectations or major requirements,” he says. “Rather, they constitute those skills the faculty believe our students should master during their Wesleyan education. Numerous faculty committees have worked diligently to identify and define the capabilities, and to

establish the characteristics of courses that provide students with them.”

As the strategy document took shape, Bennet’s leadership style was becoming more apparent. Individuals working with him observed the way in which he worked an issue, probing every aspect of it, seeking to understand the players, not letting go until he was satisfied with his comprehension of whatever was driving it.

Common threads quickly emerge when people are asked to reflect on Bennet’s leadership style. He has liked large, complex problems. He has been consultative and never hesitated to reach out to obtain diverse points of view. He has often been funny and gracious, as well as challenging and stubborn. He has listened attentively and has welcomed a well-reasoned argument. He has placed great emphasis on process, believing that sound process produces sustainable decisions.

Jim Dresser ’63, chair of the Board, was struck by

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—KOFI APPENTENG ’81, TRUSTEE EMERITUS

Bennet’s instincts. “He always seemed to know when to let the debate roll, when to intervene decisively, whom to consult with, under what circumstances to talk to different constituencies, when to delegate, when not to delegate. I learned to appreciate his emphasis on writing, coherent writing (preferably without split infinitives), because I was reminded that so often unclear writing masks unclear thinking.”

His conversations with faculty about Wesleyan’s academic mission laid the groundwork for what many soon saw as a positive, productive relationship. “Very early on,” says Bruno, “people began to realize that this was a guy who believed in the institution, believed in what the faculty were trying to do, and was confident we could achieve gains we hadn’t achieved in years.”

Bennet differed from his recent predecessors in the Wesleyan presidency in that he was a Connecticut native who had grown up near the mouth of the Connecticut River

in a politically engaged family. That connection helped him establish relationships throughout the state, which proved to be highly beneficial when Wesleyan sought to acquire 165 acres of state property adjacent to the campus, used for a juvenile correctional facility. Wesleyan’s success in this venture was far from assured. The state was proposing to build a new, higher security facility on the same site. Only through diligent effort over a period of years and the assistance of numerous individuals capable of influencing the state’s decision did Wesleyan succeed in purchasing the property for \$16 million.

Bennet sought other ways for Wesleyan to engage in an ongoing partnership with Middletown. Wesleyan became a participant in the Main Street USA program, thereby helping the city coordinate efforts to improve the downtown area. The university made a significant financial investment in the Inn at Middletown, a modern, attractive hotel on the south end of Main Street that has enabled Wesleyan to host guests comfortably.

The university’s largest off-campus project in Middletown by far has been the Green Street Arts Center. Wesleyan led the creation, staffing, and fundraising for this facility in the city’s North End. It provides an important cultural resource for the city, but also an anchor for the rehabilitation of this economically advancing area only a few blocks from campus.

“None of this would have happened without Doug’s leadership,” says Peter Patton, vice president and secretary of Wesleyan, “but he said right from the beginning, ‘Let’s do this in a grass roots way. Let’s work with community members to find out what they want and what we can give.’ I think it is a durable relationship, built on mutual respect.”

No university president meets with universal acclaim, and Bennet faced some difficult controversies. Early in his tenure, he relieved the chair of the dance department of her duties over a personnel matter and weathered intense criticism from her loyal supporters, including a small plane trailing a “Fire Bennet” banner at that year’s Commencement. A newspaper story about a pornography course unleashed a storm of national publicity and radio talk show criticism. Controversy over the use of sidewalks for chalking messages was settled after discussion about the complementary principles of protecting free expressions and, at the same time, enhancing Wesleyan’s civility. Through these controversies and others, Bennet has

sought to find what he sees as a principled stand and then move on, always returning to the principles of academic excellence and civility.

With the strategic plan in place and a growing sense that Wesleyan was regaining its momentum, Bennet and the trustees were able to launch a highly ambitious fundraising effort. Consultants had told Wesleyan it would be lucky to raise much more than \$100 million, but Bennet and the Board had far higher aspirations of \$225 million. Buoyed by early successes, they soon raised the goal to \$250 million. Even after the stock market collapsed with the technology implosion and fundraising became harder, Wesleyan persevered with its ambitious goal. When the campaign closed on December 31, 2004, at \$281 million, Wesleyan had entered a new era.

The campaign supported extensive physical renewal of the campus, which will be the most tangible aspect of Bennet’s legacy (see p. 31). It also raised about \$100 million for financial aid, which was critical to Wesleyan’s continued success in admissions. Shola Olatoye ’96, who knew Bennet when she was a student and later as an alumni-elected trustee, cites this accomplishment as particularly important:

“Doug has continued the tradition of need-blind, therefore ensuring access for all qualified students. I think it is a no-brainer for him because it’s what the modern Wesleyan is all about. He realizes that some people make great sacrifices to send their children to this school, and I think he feels a responsibility to those families.”

The campaign invigorated virtually every aspect of the campus. Through it, Wesleyan expanded the size of the faculty and renovated nearly every classroom with attractive furnishings and appropriate technology. Wesleyan substantially enhanced its physical plant, from a major addition to Freeman Athletic Center on the southern end of campus to the exquisite, award-winning Center for Film Studies on the northern side. The opening of the Suzanne Lemberg Usdan University Center and the renovated Fayerweather Gymnasium, scheduled for fall of the 2007–08 academic year, will cap the Bennet presidency with its largest, most ambitious project.

“Doug has brought a new way of looking at facilities,” says Wilson. “First, you look at restoration, and you decide what you are going to do to make every building the best that it can be. Then you figure out what new buildings you need to be competitive.”



PARTNERS IN EVERYTHING

It’s possible that no job has less definition than spouse of a college president.

No one told Midge Bennet that she would accumulate scads of frequent flyer miles visiting alumni worldwide, or serve as a trusted adviser to the Board of Trustees, or participate in planning the significant facilities program that is a hallmark of the Bennet administration, or spend time one-on-one with students who seek her counsel.

That she has done all this and more, bringing gracious Southern charm to a New England campus, has added immeasurably to the Bennet presidency.

“Their partnership is really something to behold,” says Alan Dachs ’70, former chair of the Board. “People respond to Midge and Doug. They are compelling and draw us into the community. They simply shower us with warmth and grace. They are very much in love with each other and with Wesleyan.”

Opening doors has been her theme from the outset. She discovered during a renovation of the President’s House in 1996 that many of the craftsmen had fathers and grandfathers who had worked on this historic building, but none of them had been invited to an event at the house. So the Bennets threw a party just for them. After that, the Bennets frequently opened the house to the Middletown community.

“Sharing with the community in individual ways helps open the community in larger ways,” she says.

Shortly after they moved into the house, an *a cappella* group, the Spirits, showed up to serenade them with love songs. Midge wanted to invite the group to dinner but quickly learned that inviting one *a cappella* group meant that she needed to do the same for all eight groups—70 students. Students arrived at 6:30 one evening to sing for their dinner and soon started to compete through a marathon lasting until 11:30 p.m., which gave the Bennets one of their fondest Wesleyan memories.

Many students have taken advantage of her “light on” policy: if the kitchen light is on, she is available for tea and conversation at 5:30 p.m., while she makes dinner. Most recently, six students from Well-Being House arrived with homemade banana bread. Others talked to her about breast cancer, which led to annual participation in the Walk for the Cure. She has also opened her door to students and families at the hardest moments, offering comfort during times of intense grief following tragic deaths.

“We all need people who can empathize with whatever we are going through,” she says. “Students really miss being in a multi-generational society. They are so welcoming when they find older adults who are interested in them.”

Midge has worked with every major constituency of Wesleyan—from Middletown citizens to local and state officials to parents, students, alumni, faculty, and staff. Her work with the Friends of the Davison Art Center and Green Street Art Center boards has been especially satisfying to her. She and Doug are “partners in everything we do,” she says. On the road, they talk about the essence of Wesleyan to everyone who cares about the institution, and they listen. Their work has produced enormous support for Wesleyan.

“I am always interested in the way things work, and I like knowing what is going on around me,” she says. “I learned long ago that it’s not just the people who make the decisions who count, but that the people who invest themselves in those decisions count even more. I hear so many stories from people who play both major and minor roles to affect what’s going on at Wesleyan, and it’s lovely to share the excitement and momentum.”

As she prepares to leave the President’s House, she knows she will miss her constant contact with Wesleyan people and the warm interactions she experiences all the time, whether on the road or walking down a campus sidewalk or meeting neighbors in a Middletown grocery store aisle. “We are so grateful, and I want people to know that we appreciate all they’ve done for us. Wesleyan and this city are a remarkable community of good will.”

The campaign transformed giving at Wesleyan. When Bennet became president, 36 percent of alumni participated in annual giving. Ten years later, that number is 54 percent. On an annual basis, Wesleyan is raising three times as much money as it did in 1995. This support from alumni and parents has carried beyond the campaign. In the first year after the campaign closed, Wesleyan raised \$35 million, more than in any year of its history.

Wesleyan’s endowment almost doubled during the Bennet presidency, going from a market value of \$345 million at the outset to \$631 million on March 31, 2006. Bennet streamlined the processes for making investment decisions and established Wesleyan’s first dedicated investment staff. He set an objective of reaching top quartile investment returns, as compared to Wesleyan’s peer institutions, and achieved it. At the close of his administration, he is leading efforts to reduce Wesleyan’s budgetary reliance on its endowment and to increase the proportion of new gifts that are invested in the endowment.

Confidence and optimism imbue Wesleyan today. Kofi Appenteng ’81, an emeritus trustee and Wesleyan parent, reflects the view of many by saying, “I would define the Bennet era as one where Wesleyan regained its footing, regained its confidence, and started to see the possibilities rather than the problems.”

That view comes from individuals who are well aware of the challenges facing Wesleyan. Chief among those is that nearly all of Wesleyan’s peer institutions have endowment-per-student ratios much higher than Wesleyan’s. As a result, maintaining Wesleyan’s competitive position on a range of measures—admissions, financial aid, faculty resources, and endowment growth—will present the next administration with ample opportunity for hard work. Wesleyan urgently needs a new science building, the cost of which will easily top \$100 million. The pace of fundraising cannot slow down.

The president’s office in South College soon will have a new occupant, but that person will benefit greatly from the accomplishments of the Bennet era. As Bruno says, “Doug has been able to establish a momentum at Wesleyan that is going to carry us forward for years and years to come.”

The editors of Wesleyan magazine express their heartfelt thanks to Moira McNamara James ’78, a former trustee, for her significant contribution to this article.



Twelve years of hard work and accomplishment lay ahead, but inauguration was a day for smiles.

HOW WESLEYAN HAS CHANGED

STRATEGIC PLANNING:

Bennet led two successful strategic planning initiatives. The first, “Strategy for Wesleyan,” defined key institutional priorities which became the foundation for the \$281 million Wesleyan Campaign: an enduring commitment to need-blind admission; an expansion of the faculty in order to improve teaching ratios and expand scholarship and teaching in new, interdisciplinary areas; and the beginning of a program of campus renewal. The second strategy, adopted in 2005, describes priorities for the period 2005–2010, including continuing curricular innovations and renewed commitments to international studies and to science.

ACCESS:

The Wesleyan Campaign created 140 new scholarships. It enabled Wesleyan to reduce student borrowing by 25 percent and supported the university’s ongoing commitment to need-blind admission. Fully 44 percent of undergraduate students receive some form of financial aid.

FACULTY GROWTH:

The Campaign enabled the addition of 20 new positions to the faculty and reduced the student faculty ratio to 9:1. Many of the added positions were in new and interdisciplinary areas. The Campaign also established six endowed professorships: in economics, environmental studies, global issues and democratic thought, Jewish studies, public policy, and medicinal chemistry.

CAMPUS RENEWAL:

Wesleyan adopted its first formal master plan for the campus in 2003. The plan lays out more than \$200 million in new construction and renovation for academic, campus life, and residential facilities.

RENOVATIONS COMPLETED TO DATE INCLUDE:

- More than 40 classrooms renovated to include computers, high-resolution data projectors and high-quality sound systems
- Center for the Americas, housing American studies and Latin American studies programs
- Stewart M. Reid Admission Center
- Patricelli ’92 Theater and the addition of the Ring Family Stage
- Memorial Chapel, with 600 seats and new Holtkamp pipe organ
- Clark Hall, first-year student residence
- Humanities District, including renovations to Downey House

CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS COMPLETED OR UNDERWAY INCLUDE:

- Zelnick Pavilion, atrium linking Patricelli ’92 Theater and Memorial Chapel
- Center for Film Studies, with the Goldsmith Family Cinema, a state-of-the-art screening room, and production facilities
- Freeman Athletic Center addition, including the Silloway Gymnasium, seating more than 1,000 spectators, the 7,500-square-foot Andersen Fitness Center, and the Rosenbaum squash courts
- Fauver Field Residences, for first-year students and seniors
- Suzanne Lemberg Usdan University Center, to open in 2007, will consolidate dining facilities for students and faculty, include the Daniel Family Commons, provide seminar and meeting spaces, and house the Wesleyan Student Assembly, the post office, and retail space.

PLANNED PROJECTS INCLUDE:

- Molecular and Life Sciences building, roughly 80,000 square feet of new space for teaching and student-centered research in the life sciences
- University Museum, to house Wesleyan’s collections of art and material culture
- Center for Film Studies, second phase, to house the Wesleyan Cinema Archives and to be named in honor of Ogden and Mary Louise Reid

- In 2000, with Bennet’s leadership, Wesleyan acquired the 165-acre Long Lane tract from the state of Connecticut. This tract is being used now for expanded athletic facilities and provides options for the future.

ADMISSION:

Since 1995, Wesleyan has seen a 25 percent growth in applications, as well as an 8-point increase in selectivity.

FUNDRAISING:

Bennet led an ambitious effort to build Wesleyan’s volunteer and professional fundraising organizations in order to expand alumni participation and dramatically increase income from gifts. In 1995, 38 percent of Wesleyan alumni contributed \$10.4 million; in 2006, 54 percent of alumni contributed \$35 million.

ENDOWMENT MANAGEMENT:

Wesleyan’s endowment almost doubled during the Bennet presidency, going from a market value of \$345 million, as of June 30, 1995, to \$631 million on March 31, 2006.

ATHLETICS:

Bennet strongly encouraged an initiative in Wesleyan’s athletic league, the New England Small Colleges Athletic Association, to keep athletics competitive while increasing academic standards and ensuring that student-athletes admitted are representative of the academic strength of the rest of their classes.

MIDDLETOWN:

Bennet collaborated with civic leaders in Middletown on economic development projects, including investing university funds to bring the city its first modern hotel, the 100-room Inn at Middletown. Under his leadership, Wesleyan established the Green Street Arts Center, a community arts center in the city’s North End, offering classes and workshops for children and adults in music, visual arts, dance, and literary and media arts. The center is an important part of revitalization efforts in the North End; last year, the center provided 41 scholarships for North End children.