

PEOPLE OF ACTION

Dan Johnson

daniel.johnson@wlc.edu
(Member since 2008)

What if you wanted to make a difference now and for a generation or more to come? Where would you focus your life's work to make that difference?

For Dr. Daniel W. Johnson, president of Wisconsin Lutheran College (WLC), his life's work came into focus at a very early age. Education was the place where he knew he could make a big difference.

Johnson, or Dan as he is known since joining the Rotary Club of Milwaukee in 2008, is a life-long educator. Ask when he knew that would be his path in life and here is what he'll tell you. One day in elementary school his principal, Dave Habeck, took him aside and told him he would make a really good teacher. Even being so young, Dan took that to heart.

Dan grew up in Phoenix, AZ where he attended Christian elementary and high schools. He went on to Martin Luther College in New Ulm, MN which is well known for producing many secular and clerical leaders among Lutherans. After obtaining his degree there, he became a history and physical education teacher, and coached football.

He quickly moved from teaching to being an administrator. Much like Habeck had helped him realize education would be his career, he felt called into school administration. He admits, "I didn't seek it out, it sought me out." For the 15 years before coming to WLC, he held a variety of administrative positions from assistant principal to administrator of the Arizona Lutheran Academy.

In 2008, Wisconsin Lutheran College was looking for a new president. At about the same time, Dan had broadened his calling in education to include educational leadership which had been the focus of his doctoral studies. He was drawn to WLC, almost compelled to seek the opportunity there, because of WLC's emphasis on servant leadership. Using both his administrative experience and the energy of his leadership skills, he knew he could inspire students, staff, donors, and the community to embrace WLC's institutional mission where outcomes matter. He was a good fit for WLC and was hired.

As Dan looks at his now 13-year tenure, which is among the longest of any public or private college president in Wisconsin, he will point to several factors that stand out as contributing to WLC's success.

The first factor is enrollment. Coming in Dan knew that WLC had the capacity to serve more students. He pursued that aggressively and now there are 60 percent more students than when he started. Contributing to the increase in students was the adding of majors and capitalizing on the reputation of programs like business, accounting, and nursing to name a few. The quality of these and other majors make WLC students much sought after in the post-graduation job market; the ultimate delivery of a promise made to those who would



consider enrolling there. He also made sure that students had a fulfilling campus life with great residence halls, quality sports and connections to the community.

Another factor is philanthropy. If the adage “Success breeds success” is true anywhere, it’s true at WLC. Over his time there, the college has received millions of dollars in significantly sized donations which have funded everything from new and enhanced academic programs to large physical improvements on campus.

A third factor is the way WLC navigated through two challenging times. One was the Great Recession of 2008 that hit just as Dan arrived. It required cutting and adjusting as quickly as possible, while pushing his vision for increased enrollment and donor funding. The other was surviving the more recent COVID 19 Pandemic. He credits that happening to the college’s organizational agility to stay open all this academic year, as well the cooperation of the student body to comply with mask, distancing, and sanitation requirements.

Dan has taken on additional leadership roles with the 24-member Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities and the Northern Athletic Collegiate Conference representing 13-Division III private colleges. He looks at these involvements as an extension of his servant leadership philosophy, so important in his life and the institutional culture of WLC. It also embodies Dan’s efforts to create win-win opportunities through collaboration. To date WLC has initiated over a dozen collaborative programs, typically with other colleges or medical institutions, both locally and regionally.



Dan and his family.

Dan sees his faith and family playing prominent roles in his success. He is a person who recognizes and regularly counts the many blessings that have gotten him to where he is today. Highest among those blessing is family. He and his wife Jana have been married 30 years and have three children: two at WLC and one in high school. Despite his busy schedule, he makes it a point to be present as a father and spouse for important family, school, and sports events.

To best understand how Dan has responded to the two questions posed at the beginning of this article, there is one more story to tell.

In college, Dan played basketball and football as the team’s quarterback. As a senior, he suffered a broken back in a football game. Being sidelined like that afforded him time to contemplate his future and how he could have an impact as an educator.

Fast forward to a recent 21-mile hike in the Grand Canyon. As he completed the last grueling segment it reminded him of how far he had come from that devastating football injury. But it also reminded him of how far he had come on his own career journey from teacher to college president. He thought about the thousands of students he has positively affected through his work and how his work impacted his own life. While the physical hike is done, his career journey is definitely not. As he continues to lead Wisconsin Lutheran College, he continues to count his blessings and is using them to propel successful outcomes for all those he serves.

Editor’s Note: Rotary People of Action is a bi-monthly series written by a group of Rotarians. This feature was written by Joe Caruso.