John Wagner voted Union College president

Monday, Feb. 6, 2012

Often the best person for a job is the one with the most experience. When Dr. Smith announced he had accepted a call elsewhere last year, the Union College Board of Trustees asked Dr. John Wagner to step in as interim president for the 2011-2012 school year. Having served as Union's president from 1986-1991, as well as having lead another college and several non-profit organizations, Wagner was the man with the right experience for the job.

As the search for a new, permanent president progressed this year, the committee had a difficult time finding anyone who better fit the role than the man Union's alumni already love. According to Tom Lemon, chair of Union's board, Wagner told him, "I'm willing to stay as long as Union College needs me."

During its regularly scheduled meeting today, the Union College Board of Trustees took Wagner up on that promise, removing the "interim" from his title, and naming Wagner once again president of Union College.

"John already has a strong relationship with our alumni and is able to articulate the Union vision," Lemon said. "The Our Promising Future capital campaign is at its peak right now. As the new science and mathematics building will begin to come out of the ground in the next few months, a president who knows the alumni, history and vision of Union College is extremely important."
During Homecoming Weekend (April 5-8), Union will hold a special dedication ceremony to welcome Dr. Wagner to his new/old role. We hope wherever you may be, you can join us in celebrating his continuing contribution to the future of Union College.

For more complete coverage of this decision, please visit http://www.ucollege.edu/wagner.
The Union College Board of Trustees has removed the "interim" from John Wagner's title and invited him to stay on as president. Wagner has been back at Union since July 2011 after serving as both academic dean and president in the 1980s.

“This is a very exciting time for Union College and I am honored to be here,” Wagner said. “As we move forward and build a new science and math building and develop other initiatives, I know God will continue to bless this great college.”

Though he didn't march the aisles of College View Church, diploma in hand, Wagner's previous service at Union helped him develop a love for this midwestern campus. “My wife and I have felt more loyalty to Union than we ever did to the colleges we attended,” explained Wagner, who previously served as academic dean at Union from 1980-83 and then as president from 1986-1991.

Tom Lemon, chair of the Union College Board of Trustees and head of the presidential search committee, believes Wagner's track record at Union speaks for itself. “John already has a strong relationship with our alumni and is able to articulate the Union vision,” Lemon said. “The Our Promising Future capital campaign is at its peak right now. As the new science and mathematics building will begin to come out of the ground in the next few months, a president who knows the alumni, history and vision of Union College is extremely important.”

As the college begins construction on the new science and mathematics building this spring and raises at least $2 million more to reach the $14.5 million capital campaign goal, Lemon feels that a consistent vision from the president will be vital to Union's continued success. “A college campus is more organism than organization,” Lemon said. “By definition, organisms either grow or die, but they never stand still. John has demonstrated his ability to meet difficult circumstances in the past and we believe he can lead the college through this period of campus change and growth.”

Though daunting, the challenge of building a large new facility on campus is welcome compared to what Wagner faced during his first presidency at Union. “When I arrived as academic dean, Union was riding high,” he remembered. A new Larson Lifestyle Center, computer terminals in every dorm room and a campus radio station made for lots of excitement both on and off campus. “But all the great ideas came with a price tag that none of us were aware of at the time.”

Wagner left Union in 1983 to become the president of Southern College, now Southern Adventist University, in Tennessee. In 1986, Union asked him to return as president, reeling from the realization of more than $9 million in debt. “There was a lot of belt tightening right from the start, but the campus understood that,” Wagner remembered. “Even though we had to cut or say no, there was still a good spirit on campus.”

During his time as president, his wife, Lilya, served as vice president for Advancement, and the two worked side by side to help reduce the college debt. When they left in 1991, the debt had been cut in half. Although Wagner went on to found and serve several not-for-profit foundations, the work he started at Union ultimately resulted in complete retirement of the debt in 1998.

“I think the highlight of that first term as president was the spirit of the campus,” Wagner remembered. “We all worked together to achieve a goal that was really the salvation of Union College.”

“When he was president, obviously we were struggling to make every penny count,” said George Gibson, a professor of history who had been hired by Wagner during his time as academic dean. He remembered Wagner putting the entire budget up on the wall during an employee meeting. “He told us that everything was up for grabs, including his own budget. He didn't give himself preferential treatment, and that's probably one reason why he was so well liked.”
Gibson recalled one encounter with Wagner during his previous presidency that summed up his leadership style. During a late afternoon hallway conversation, Wagner inquired how Gibson's doctoral dissertation was coming along.

“You're using a computer aren't you?” Wagner asked.

Gibson didn't have a computer at home or in his office and explained that the one computer in the division office was always tied up during the day. Wagner beckoned him into his office.

“In those days, the computer department always made sure the president had a laptop as well as a desktop,” he remembered. “John handed me his laptop and told me to use it write my dissertation.” Gibson went on to finish his Ph.D and has taught at Union ever since.

“John is the epitome of servant leadership,” said Gibson, who also served on the presidential search committee. “He has the ability to grasp what is on the horizon, know what should be done and support the campus leaders who make it happen.”

“I see myself as a cheerleader,” Wagner explained. “I don't get much done by myself, but I can be supportive of the people who have the expertise and success. I think it's very important to recognize people's accomplishments, even with just a note or an email.”

Wagner also believes in his “ministry of presence,” a term he borrowed from his former boss at Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church where he served as part-time administrative pastor before returning to Union last summer. He makes it a habit to be as many school events as possible—from awards ceremonies to basketball games to social events—and “I try to get to every building on campus every week or two, just to say hi and see how things are going.”

“That's John,” agreed Gibson. “He loves to be around people.”

Already once retired before serving at Sligo church, Wagner doesn't expect to lead Union for thirteen years, as his predecessor did. His primary goal is to help the college see the successful completion of the science and mathematics complex and help develop initiatives to position Union for future success and growth. “We'll see what happens,” he said. “but I'm hoping when I'm finished, God can say, ‘well done.’”