

Stephen Stewart Bowen '68
Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters

Presented May 14, 2017

Stephen Stewart Bowen, native of Peoria, Illinois, to say that Wabash had a life-changing impact on you is as big of an understatement as saying you have had an immeasurable impact on the trajectory of this great institution over the last three decades. Both are factually accurate, but both statements miss the mark.

You were a standout Wabash student, who exhibited a clear and quick mind en route to Phi Beta Kappa. Graduating at the top of your class as a political science major, your only regret is that you majored in political science. But you acknowledge having “saved yourself” by pulling together a minor in religion and philosophy. Eric Dean and Ben Rogge were your mentors, and you have said about Dean that he cultivated a classroom environment where “a love for intellectual inquiry took root, understanding was gained, and growth was experienced.” Rogge taught you that “in business, as in all of life, there are no substitutes for honesty, integrity, and fair dealing.”

Service to your country in the Marine Corps and law school at the University of Chicago followed your time at Wabash. The international law firm Latham and Watkins lured you to launch its tax practice, an area of law you found intriguing because the work often boiled down to a chess match between you and the IRS. Over a 27-year career, you literally built the firm’s practice, and served as a member of the Executive Committee, Managing Partner of the Chicago Office, and Global Chair of the Tax Department. Your colleague, Michael Pucker, said that you were “instrumental in setting the culture of Latham & Watkins, with great focus on excellence, collegiality and human care” and that you were “ranked among the most respected and revered practitioners in your field.” Michael also said that you were “an incredible mentor, teacher, friend, and all-around Mensch.”

While under consideration for an appointment to the Wabash Board of Trustees, you said, “The obligation I feel to the College and its future is huge.” You were elected to the Board in 1996 and jumped right in to shape and execute our College’s greatest philanthropic endeavor — the \$136 million Campaign for Leadership. You served on the Campaign Steering Group, and provided wise strategic counsel. Your biggest contribution, according to President Andy Ford, was your “patient efforts to help us find the language to capture the spirit of this special place.”

Perhaps there was no happier day when you — with an excuse to catch up with your faculty friends Bill Placher and Raymond Williams — brought your son, David, for a campus visit. Little did you realize then that David would not just follow in your footsteps to Wabash, but become a Little Giant on campus in his own right.

During David’s senior year, you gave a Chapel Talk and said, “It seems to me that the highest duty of a Trustee of Wabash College is stewardship. Stewardship is not merely a legal duty; it is also a profoundly moral duty.” Indeed, your service to the Board — as a Trustee, committee chair, campaign volunteer, and presently as Chair of the Board — is, indeed, a profoundly moral commitment. As the fifth-longest serving Chair in our College’s history, you have provided unwavering support for this very special place, which you have described as “an institution nurtured on and promoting learning, virtue, and service in a world that sorely needs these things.”

Your Board colleague David Shane said, “Over the terms of multiple presidents, through times of radical and accelerating change, amid countless confounding challenges and wicked opportunities, Steve’s steady hand; his clear vision; his calm and perceptive counsel; and his quiet but strong leadership continuously has lifted the College’s trajectory. He has been counselor to the College’s leadership, its Board of Trustees, its faculty and its students; he has led us all to higher planes of possibility.”

John Fox, strategic planning guru, applauds your ability to see the big issues with clarity, and to achieve buy-in from all. He says you have a “bias for action.”

We cannot possibly list all that you have accomplished as Board Chair, but we can highlight a few. Twenty-three new Trustees have come on the Board during your tenure; you presided over the \$60 million Challenge of Excellence campaign, while providing a guiding hand on the College during the Great Recession; you served on two Presidential Search Committees; and you led the construction of the Residential Life District, Shelbourne Wrestling Center, Goodrich Ballpark, Mud Hollow Stadium, and the Martindale Hall renovation.

Throughout your time as a Trustee, you have long focused on the Board’s relationship to the faculty, insisting that Wabash can be only as good as its faculty and students. You have constantly sought opportunities to strengthen the relationship, and you established the Placher Fund for Faculty Support.

At the time of your retirement, you agreed to commute from Chicago to teach a Wabash course on ethics. You lived on campus, attended virtually every event, ate in Sparks, and became a valuable teacher/mentor — so much so that you will return for a third semester this fall. When you do, you will teach alongside Dr. Derek Nelson, the newly designated Stephen S. Bowen Professor of the Liberal Arts. It’s hard to imagine another College where a Trustee is so easily and readily welcomed to the campus by students, faculty, and administrators. Your very presence gives us a giant symbol of the kind of academic environment for which we must always strive.

One of your star students, Sam Vaught, says that you missed your calling; that you bring a lawyer's preparedness to the classroom, with keen attention to detail and close examination of an author’s argument. Sam smartly points out that you hold the mantle of teacher with humility, and were consciously aware of the limits of your experience in the classroom.

In that 1998 Chapel Talk, you said, “Wabash is not our achievement; it is the achievement of others. We did not create it; we inherited it, with the implicit obligation to cherish it, to preserve it, to develop it, to pass it on — let us hope improved, to the others who come after us.” On this point, Dave Shane, believes you leave your service as Board Chair with Wabash well-positioned for success. Dave said, “Thanks to Steve, the College sits on a stronger strategic and financial foundation, retains its historical strengths of mission and community, and provides a still vital, but freshly relevant education to the students we send out to lead us into the future. Wabash College and the students we serve are and long will be in a better place because of Steve.”

Therefore, by the authority vested in me by the Board of Trustees of Wabash College and delegated to that Board by the State of Indiana, I do hereby confer upon you the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters, *honoris causa*, with all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities thereunto appertaining, of which this citation shall be a permanent witness.

Gregory D. Hess
President