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Faculty Reflections

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Faculty Reflections

Greg Shaw

Professor of Political Science
The 2012 Student Senate Professor of the Year

Sunday, April 29, 2012

Good afternoon, and congratulations for getting to this day. I'm touched by your recognition. You know, winning this award while on sabbatical is a bit odd. I suppose that one interpretation is that you're trying to tell President Wilson that he should give me more time to read, and write, and think. I'll try **not** to interpret this as a case of you telling me that you like me ... to be a few blocks that way. In any case, thank you.

I've been asked to be brief, so I'll get right to it.

For each of you, being here today is somewhat improbable. As biologists will tell you, from your very beginning, one-half of your biological material started out as 1 of something like 250 million sperm. Why that one? ... Completely improbable. Many of you went on to enjoy being raised in families with higher-than-average income, education, opportunity, and perhaps determination to help you get into a place like Illinois Wesleyan. Again, a somewhat improbable accident of birth. From there, your probabilities improved and you came to occupy a seat here, along with the 85% of your entering class that has reached graduation. This achievement was perhaps less improbable, given your motivation to stop paying tuition bills, but also your courage and creativity.

My friends, courage and creativity are important parts of what has made the improbable, more probable. (Of course, there's still that accident of birth thing.) I firmly believe that the courageous habit of thinking BIG accounts for much of the difference between college graduates who change the world and those who merely survive it. Up to now, your families and teachers have gone out of their ways to provide you with opportunities. From here on out, however, opportunity will probably knock on your door a lot less. From here on out, it's going to be up to **you** to make your **own** opportunities, and to have the courage and creativity to do BIG things with them. Tell yourself that you can lead your basketball team to a national championship, like Amy Burton, Britney Hasselbring, Olivia Lett, and Karen Solari. Swing for the fences, like Hank Aaron ... or, Albert Pujols, if you're not sure who Hank Aaron is. And borrowing from the 13th century Persian thinker, Rumi: start a large, foolish project, like Noah and his ark.

Now, most of you have the intellectual and emotional wherewithal to wander into viable careers without too much drama. But if you're really going to make a difference – and many of you will – you'll need to muster the courage and creativity to think BIG on a regular basis. This Great Recession may be a minor hindrance, but a lack of courage and creativity will be lethal to the highest ambitions that you have allowed yourself to consider.

As you know, the world is full of really difficult problems. When it comes to developing BIG solutions, there will be no shortage of people and situations that tell you that it can't be done. I believe that's counter-productive thinking, and I think that somewhere inside of you, you know it

too. Improbabilities are largely what you make of them. And because I believe this, the late poet Shel Silverstein gets the last word. His poem is titled "Listen to the Mustn'ts"

Listen to the **Mustn'ts**, child, Listen to the **Don'ts**

Listen to the **shouldn'ts**, the **impossibles**, the **won'ts**

Listen to the **never haves**.

Then listen close to me –

Anything can happen, child, **Anything** can be