



Spring 5-3-2015

## Faculty Reflections

Given Harper Faculty Advisor  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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### Recommended Citation

Harper, Given Faculty Advisor, "Faculty Reflections" (2015). *2015 Highlights*. 4.  
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# Faculty Reflections

## from R. Given Harper

George C. and Ella Beach Lewis Endowed Chair of Biology  
The 2015 Student Senate Professor of the Year

May 3, 2015

I am honored to speak to you today, and I commend you for your hard work in reaching this milestone. Of the world's 7.2 billion people, only about 7% have earned a college degree. This is quite an accomplishment, and one in which you and your family should be proud.

As you embark on the next stage of life's journey, I believe that the key ingredients for success are these: do something that excites you, persevere in pursuing your goals, get out and experience nature, and work directly with others to address the challenges facing humanity. As most of my students know, I am passionate about the natural world, and in particular, about birds. I can still remember the tremendous excitement I felt as a five-year old when I had a close-up view of a captive American kestrel, which is a robin-sized falcon. That kestrel was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and seeing it was the start of an over 50-year quest to observe and learn about what I consider to be the most spectacular organisms on the planet. I was so passionate about birds that when my sister and I were out in our yard, every time I saw a turkey vulture soaring overhead, I would fall to the ground and play dead, hoping that one would think that I was a meal and fly down for a closer look. I knew from a very young age that I wanted to study birds, and the fact that I am standing before you today is due, in large part, to the passion that fueled me and my perseverance in pursuing my dream.

I urge you to get out and experience the natural world, which provides the processes necessary to sustain life. By experiencing nature you will have a better understanding of the reasons we need to protect it, and you will find that its beauty can also be a powerful source of inspiration. In our increasingly digital world in which we can communicate, shop, and work without ever leaving our homes, it is

imperative that you get out and work directly with others to address the major challenges affecting society. The well being of our planet—its ecosystems and species—including the human species—will be determined by the ability of people to come together to solve some of the most pressing problems, such as global climate change. Your liberal arts education and the knowledge and skills in your chosen disciplines will allow you to bring meaningful insights to addressing these issues.

Graduates, cherish this day. I wish you success and I hope you derive much satisfaction from your future endeavors. Thank you.