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Faculty Reflections

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Meghan Burke - Faculty Reflections

Assistant Professor of Sociology
2013 Student Senate Professor of the Year

May 5, 2013

I want to start with a warm congratulations to you, students, and to your families on this day. You have all worked so hard to get here. I also feel a special kinship with this class because this is the end of my fourth year here, too. Like most of you, I arrived here in fall 2009 trying to find buildings, wondering who was who, and trying to figure out whether it was pronounced My.EEE-woo, or My.EYE-woo. So, although *unlike* you, I hope to stay many more years, there's something special about speaking to this class. Thank you for this opportunity.

I must also admit that I'm always a bit surprised when students remark that they like me, or my classes. After all, I *break bad news for a living*: disrupting the myth of meritocracy, calling attention to contemporary racism, discussing with students the subtle forms of sexism that pervade our lives, slowly dismantling your childhood as we critique Disney films — *sorry, parents...* you name it. I've lost count of the number of times I've ended a class session with some of the world's most depressing news —the sterilization rates of Puerto Rican women during the Cold War, for example, only to encourage students to "Have a nice day!!!!" So when students tell me that they liked my class or even that I'm bubbly, I'm always a bit surprised. *I insist: I am a thundercloud!*

But I promise that today, on your commencement day, I am *not* here to depress you. Instead, I'm here to tell you that you're **all a bunch of dorks**.

Now, this may sound like depressing news. But instead I want you to see it as a badge of honor. You see, you are *not geeks*. Geeks are full of zest but don't have the goods to back it up. In your time here at Illinois Wesleyan you have learned to fuse your passions with knowledge, careful insight, and your growing expertise in the fields that you once merely "geeked out" over.

You're also not *nerds*. Nerds have all the information and technical expertise, but little to no perspective or passion. Even as you have developed specialized knowledge, learned technical jargon and received advanced training, you have refused to become narrow or insular. You've studied abroad, worked with a faculty member on research to ask and answer questions far more difficult than those you started with, closed the books to take in a provocative theater or musical performance, and even wrote some poetry along the way.

No, for these reasons, you are *dorks*. Dorks are the epitome of the liberal arts tradition. You are math dorks with a vision to share with others its elegance and its philosophy. You are trained in medical fields with an eye toward both disparities and innovations. You are a business student who partnered with the local community, and came away with a new definition of growth. You have studied literature and made connections to your political science courses; you are a sociologist who understands biologically what Foucault meant by the "capillary functioning of power". You have begun to follow developments in your field in your spare time, discussing what you learn and care about with your friends and your family. You can likewise talk to your friends in

other fields, and tell jokes in French or in Spanish. Only *dorks* can really achieve this balance of knowledge, perspective, and passion. Only *dorks* can truly embrace the kind of education you've received here at Illinois Wesleyan, and we know from our alums, even those dorks just a year or two out, that it will serve you well in your future.

So, while it may sound like yet another depressing thing to say, I promise it's not. You've earned this distinction, and your education and friendships here will be with you forever. *Congratulations, ya dorks.* We're all very proud of you.