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Honors Convocation Speech (text only)

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Honors Convocation Speech
Michael Seeborg
April 14, 1999

President Myers, Provost McNew, distinguished guests, colleagues and students, I appreciate the opportunity to stand before you today and share some of my thoughts about Illinois Wesleyan University. I want to focus on a few of the important ways that the university helps students learn by talking about boats and Gateways. That's right, boats and Gateways! But first a little background.

I grew up on the Oregon Coast at a time when it was largely unpopulated and very beautiful. It was a wonderful place with beautiful beaches and mountains. I was particularly fascinated by the rivers of Oregon, especially the Columbia River. I spent many hours of my youth working near the river, first on a dairy farm and then on the waterfront in the fish industry. During breaks from work, we would often sit on the docks and watch commercial fishing boats and ships, many with cargoes of timber bound for Japan. Oh how I yearned to be on one of those vessels.

Well, I've yet to fulfill that seafaring dream. And here I am, surrounded by corn and soybeans in what must be the flattest place on earth! And where's my river? Sugar Creek?

But, I can always take refuge in my imagination and a good metaphor. Could Illinois Wesleyan University be that ship I've always yearned to work on? Let's call it the Good Ship Titan. But what kind of vessel is it? A fishing trawler? I think not. After all, trawlers take on live fish and deliver dead ones! Our seniors still seem to be on their feet when we deliver them, the Senior Walk notwithstanding. Nor is it a tug boat, although "Little Toot" would make quite a metaphor. Love Boat? No! I hope that no one is thinking Titanic. Although the temptation may be great. After all, Titan is only two keystrokes short of Titanic. I think we are approaching the tip of a great metaphor here, don't you? I'd like to think that Illinois Wesleyan is most like a cruise ship? Maybe it looks something like this.

-----Show slide of Cruise ship-----

My cruise ship is designed for adventure. The ship calls on many ports where passengers disembark and explore an island or city that is new and different. Upon return to the ship, they meet in groups and excitedly share their adventures with fellow passengers. And then, its off to another port and another adventure. A successful cruise leaves passengers enriched. They have improved their health through meditation and interesting physical activity; they have increased their knowledge of the physical world through observation, reading and discussion; they have learned about a culture different from their own; they have grown by sharing ideas with passengers and crew; and in the process have made new and lasting friends. The voyage has actually transformed the cargo. There is, in short, value added. This is the kind of cruise I want to take. Is our own Good Ship Titan like this?

Let's get on board and find out. On deck, we find quite a scene. Captain Minor Myers is at the Wheel trying to leave other national liberal arts universities in the wake, as Carl Teichman and Susan Bassi chart the course. And we can be assured that no collectable will escape the grasp of our multi-talented Captain's hook. On the upper deck, we have eagle eyed Ken Whitlock and Ben Rhodes peering through binoculars in hopes that they might sight the surfacing of a big time donor, or other large mammal currently on the endangered species list. Provost McNew, Associate Dean Gardner and Associate Provost Schnaitter are busy supervising, or should I say mentoring, a rather unruly group of faculty members as they batten down the hatches, swab the deck, and contemplate minor acts of mutiny for the next faculty meeting. A promising group of new passengers, of course, have been recently Shanghaied by Dean Routi and his gang of lovable pirates in the admissions office. And, Bob Aaron, along with his crew of creative swashbucklers are busy finding stories in all of this. Below deck, we find many faculty at the oars providing the energy that moves the craft forward. In the economy class are my favorite colleagues, Bob Leekley, Margaret Chapman, Carrie Stumph and Mingmei Jones busy supplying economic advice on demand.

But what about the Freshmen? Landlubbers all of them! How are they to get their sea legs? Our students come from diverse backgrounds. As an institution, we must help all students adjust to this new culture. I am especially impressed by the recent efforts in the Dean of Students Office to reform the orientation process and to structure a new year-long Freshman Experience. As a university community, we need to do everything we can to support the orientation reforms being developed by Dean Matthews and his staff. In fact, we must continue to give high priority to all parts of the university that seek to assure the overall wellness of our students.

So, we are now ready to set sail for Fall Semester. I'd like to share some thoughts about my gateway class. As you know, every incoming Freshman now must complete a gateway colloquium. It is here that Freshmen begin to bond as a class in an academic setting, and learn of some of the most important values of the university. And, if all goes well, it is here that they begin to develop higher standards for written and oral discourse..

Let me introduce a few students from my Fall Semester Gateway class. What a wonderful group! I want to show you some pictures of these students on their maiden voyage on the Good Ship Titan and read some entries from their own journals. Watch and listen carefully. We can learn a lot from our students. I'd like to thank Mark Featherly, the University photographer, for taking these photos of my class. He has terrific talent. Thanks also to Patrick McLane for the computer generated graphics. The technical support available to us at Illinois Wesleyan University is great! Let me show you thirteen slides quickly so that you can begin to get acquainted with my class.

-----Show thirteen slides; Stop at the first group picture of five students----
(Comment on C.J. and Alison, and on Maneesh)

My Gateway course focused on the economics of race and poverty. Through essays, journal writing and small group discussion, I tried to get my students to explore issues from different perspectives.

-----Show the second group slide: Sam, Mike and Dora ----

We know that the ethnic face of America is changing. And these photos of my Gateway class reflect the future face of America and Illinois Wesleyan University; a face that is increasingly non-European.

-----Show the third group slide: Sarah, Megan and Brandi-----

As our student population becomes less homogeneous, there are more opportunities for students to learn from each other.

Unfortunately, the tendency in society, is not to embrace diversity as my Gateway students have, but to segment on the basis of race and social class. We are horrified by the ethnic violence in Kosovo, but if we look inward, we see the same disease incubating in racially divided America, often erupting in discriminatory behavior and racially based violence. One of the great challenges of the next millennium is to learn how to live peacefully and prosperously in an increasingly diverse world. And what better place to start learning than at our university!

-----Show the fourth group slide: Sarah and Allison-----

So we have a great opportunity on the Good Ship Titan, to encourage the kind of interaction and dialog about issues of diversity that society finds so difficult.

I'd like for you to meet Megan Stombaugh.

-----Show first slide of Megan-----

In her journal, Megan reflects on how diversity at Illinois Wesleyan University has affected her life. Let me read briefly from her journal.

-----Show Second slide of Megan-----

"I was thinking about the way the diversity of IWU, even our class, has improved my life. I have truly learned to love and appreciate cultures other than my own. Living with a roommate from a suburb of Chicago has been great. I tell her all about small-town Southern Illinois and she tells me about the city-life. The whole diversity thing is great!"

" I guess my first real experience with diversity has been here at Illinois Wesleyan--particularly in this class. I have found that working in a diverse environment stimulates many ideas and thoughts from many angles and views. I guess it's like each person contributes a point of view, and we combine them to form a 360 degree image. I like being in a diverse classroom because I've never encountered it before. I love to hear the way a minority feels so I can learn more about them. I've always been around people who look just about like me, and I love the change.... Wouldn't it be boring if everyone thought alike and agreed on everything?"

I totally agree with Megan. Learning is a lot about developing the skills to listen to people with different points of view.

Now let me introduce Shera Hernandez.

-----**Show first slide of Shera Hernandez**-----

Shera, who has a parent of Mexican descent, reflects in her journal about the role of affirmative action in promoting a diverse student population. The class was divided in its support of affirmative action. The discussion was sometimes intense. Shera says,

-----**Show second slide of Shera Hernandez**-----

"Affirmative action is obviously a very touchy subject. Being a minority myself, I find that affirmative action effects me. I think affirmative action is a very good thing because it adds diversity to education and diversity is one of the best educational experiences."

Next, I'd like for you to Meet L.J. Hachmeister.

-----**Show slide of L.J. Hachmeister**-----

L.J. is one of several student athletes in my class. She sits between Sam and Shera in this slide. She does the heptathalon in track and plays soccer. She has a grandfather who immigrated in poverty from Cuba but through hard work and entrepreneurship became owner of 16 restaurants in the Chicago area. L.J. writes the following in her journal:

"Though late, a revelation has finally struck me. I guess after doing this essay on immigration, the numbers really hit me. I never really saw America for what it was: a true menagerie of culture. America is not just one people, it is a little of everything. As corny as that statement sounds, its really true. I just wish that our country wasn't so balkanized and that our class was the paradigm for all areas."

L.J. chose this quote from Herman Melville as a header for one of her essays. Melville says,

-----**Show Melville quote**-----

"Americans are not a narrow tribe. Our blood is as the flood of the Amazon, made up of a thousand noble currents all pouring into one."

I like Herman Melville because he too likes boats.

Could it be that our academic ship called Titan is buoyed up in large part by the contributions of people from many cultures? But, when we peer into the river from over the protective guardrail on the deck we see mostly a murky sameness, broken up by occasional whitecaps and whirlpools.

And when we are able to discern something below the surface, its image is often a gross distortion of the reality below. Is it a fish? A harbor seal? A submerged log? Or could it be a reflection of something on the distant shore? Most of the gazers would like for it to be a harbor seal, and therefore, conclude that it is. But these student gazers need to understand that the light is bent by the water's surface. There are better ways of knowing what is below than gazing at the surface.

-----**Show Group slide: Hysear, Romi and Brandi**-----

As a university, we help to develop tools that students can then use to discover for themselves what is really below the surface. Exposure to good literature, development of critical thinking skills, and the improvement of writing and discussion skills are a few of the things that help all of us to see more clearly below the surface. When students perfect these tools of inquiry, they sharpen their focus and begin to see a cultural and intellectual diversity that is at once fascinating, mysterious and somewhat frightening. We need to get students off the deck into the library and seminar rooms below. We need to launch some lifeboats for exploratory excursions to distant shores through carefully planned field trips and study abroad opportunities. We need to penetrate the surface with scopes and submersibles. We need to bring on board experts who can share their own personal experiences with our students. We need to spend time in labs where we can simulate the realities that lie below the surface. In short, we need to get away from the rail on the deck and take some chances. Only then can real value be added to this precious cargo.

Let's go below deck for a moment and revisit my Gateway class.

Meet C.J. DeVera:

-----**Show first slide of C.J.**-----

C.J.'s parents immigrated from the Philippines. He had this to say about a seven minute video clip that I showed in class:

In class today, we watched a short and very disturbing video about an African-American woman's struggle to survive in inner-city projects. The woman's name was Trudy and sadly accompanying her on this tragic journey are her five children.

-----**Show second slide of C.J.**-----

C.J. went on in his journal to describe the families living conditions in some detail. He then concludes by saying,

Its hard for me to fathom situations like these. I know that these problems exist, but you can't grasp the seriousness of it all until you see it; seeing it in person would be even more devastating. I would go as far as saying that I have empathy for Trudy and her family--not just sympathy, but empathy. I can feel what she is going through, and it tears me up. I have deep respect for the less fortunate who are courageous, strong, and persevering--people like Trudy."

I believe that we learn best when we care about the subject. Wherever possible, we need to attach contexts and faces to the abstract principles that we teach. Sometimes I take students to Chicago to see a market in action at the Board of Trade. And sometimes I take them to inner city Chicago neighborhoods to see the face of poverty and to hospitals to talk to victims of urban violence.

Meet Hysear Walker.

-----Show first slide of Hysear-----

Hysear was very interested in the visit to our class by Richard Paine, author of *Getting Beyond Race*. In his journal, Hysear says,

“Being biracial myself, I can identify with his points and statements, especially those pertaining to classification. I, too, have dealt with, and continue to deal with, a society that wants to label me.

I like Payne’s views. He believes that interracial relationships and transracial adoptions are essential to tearing down the existing stereotypes and prejudices.

-----Show second slide of Hysear-----

Hysear wrote his last essay on how we can promote greater racial harmony on college campuses. In this essay, he reflected on why black students tend to be found in small groups. He concludes that:

“Whites tend to rationalize that blacks segregate themselves. But, in fact, black students experience an aloneness mostly because their white counterparts, in general, do not seek them out for friendship. To further interpersonal contacts, everyone must take initiative.”

Hysear sees race as an artificial barrier to meaningful relationships between students;

“To burst through this barrier, we must see each person as a unique individual, not as a member of a certain racial group or ethnicity. College campuses which bring together many unique individuals, aid in changing negative attitudes, breaking down race barriers, and helping people to see others for who they are, not what they look like.”

I couldn't agree more!

Meet Mike Malinowski.

-----Show first picture of Mike Malinowski-----

Reflecting on the visit to our class of local activist Mike Majteka, he says,

“The talk during today's class was really fascinating because the speaker was actively participating in the community to reduce racism. The speech gave me hope that problems caused by discrimination do not have to be a part of a community if citizens decide to take action against it.”

-----Show second picture of Mike Malinowski-----

In small classes like the gateway colloquium, it is possible to create an active learning environment where students assume more control over classroom activities. Mike had this to say about active learning:

“During today's class I watched the presentations of my classmates and was amazed at the average level of speaking ability. They were very good at presenting their ideas in a clean concise manner.... I feel that I have much to gain from standing up in class before my friends to explain my thoughts not only because it is a safe opportunity to take the risk of verbalizing my thoughts, but because I can actively add my part to our discussion. Active learning is a total joy to me because only I know how to best teach myself.... When we present to class, we need to see our weaknesses, work through them, and improve our skills.”

I totally agree with Mike. Students learn best when they are actively involved and when there is something at stake.

Now, I'd like for you to Meet Sarah Beyers.

-----Show first slide of Sarah-----

Here is what Sarah had to say about participation in sports as it relates to interracial relations:

-----Show second slide of Sarah-----

“Throughout my life I have played many sports with many different people of various races; and never once on the court, field, or track have I thought about someone's race. Sports is definitely a unifying force because when you are on a team with people of different races, you are all working for the same goal and thus for at least the time you are playing, that goal becomes more important than any of your differences.”

I agree with Sarah. Students can learn to work past their differences through sports. This type of learning also takes place in the performing arts and other meaningful extra-curricular activities.

Here is another photo of Maneesh Mehra.

-----Show Slide of Maneesh-----

Maneesh reflected in his journal about a trip that he took to India when he was a boy.

“...being exposed to a completely different culture and people who were different from me, opened me up to my cultural roots. I felt honored to hail from a place that most people had never even seen. The fact that India is so different compared to any other country I have visited made me feel proud. At the same time I felt sorry for the number of impoverished individuals that I saw there.”

Like Maneesh, I believe that students can learn a lot by traveling off campus and by studying abroad.

Students can also learn much from interactions with international students.

Meet Samuel Kwainoe

-----Show first slide of Sam Kwainoe-----

Sam is an international student from Ghana. Several of Sam's journal entries reflected on the relative ignorance of American students about Africa. And he talked quite a bit about how he enjoyed sharing information with students about his home country and culture. He also spoke about how Americans might improve their own racial relations if they observed other cultures. For example, he says:

-----Show second slide of Sam Kwainoe-----

“Recently , I heard a junior, who studied abroad for a year in Britain say that she valued her stay there and that her experiences in Britain have changed her perceptions about race. In Britain, race is not an issue and every one, whether black or white, is treated equally except that sometimes classification according to social status may be used. She was surprised at how blacks and whites hugged and danced during soccer games and also at the regular scenes of black and white children playing together. These observations changed her attitude and now she does not make hasty conclusions by just looking at the color of a person.”

Right on Sam! We can learn by studying and observing other cultures.

Meet Trinette Lee.

-----Show slide of Trinette-----

Trinette is an international student from Singapore. She shared with the Gateway class how a number of Asian ethnic groups in Singapore manage to thrive in this small market oriented economy. She explained that the "soft" dictatorship that rules Singapore aggressively encourages ethnic harmony and asks whether there might be some lessons here for the United

States.

Here is a picture of Alyson Daugherty and Hysear Walker.

-----**Show slide of Alyson and Hysear**-----

There are many ways of learning outside of the classroom. Many of our students learn experientially through internships, through travel, through study abroad, and by informal interaction with students and faculty from other cultures. Another powerful form of experiential learning comes when we perform service off campus. Listen to Alyson describe some volunteer work that she did in Chicago.

“I was involved with an organization located in Downtown Chicago called Bottomless Closet, which is a non-profit organization. It helps to gear women coming from the inner-city for jobs in the suburbs. It prepares them with appropriate attire for the occasion, and also trains them so they will have the skills necessary to keep a job. I am already excited for winter break, my first opportunity to volunteer there again. This has stirred my drive to help out in at least some minor way. I wish I knew how to help in a major way.”

Through this type of service students are adding value to their own education. At the same time, they are adding value to the lives of others. They are learning about parts of society that may be unfamiliar to them and are developing values that lead to good citizenship. It is important that we encourage students to learn through service to others.

-----**Show again the slide of the Cruise ship**-----

So, those are some of my views of the Good Ship Titan. Let's keep this wonderful cruise on course through study, research and seminar activities. Let's promote a healthy balance in our lives and continue to connect the residential life of campus with the academic life. Let's experience the world through internships, travel, and meaningful service to others. Finally, let's be tolerant and appreciative of the diversity of perspectives and cultures that are represented on this campus. Bon Voyage!

END