



2018

Faculty Reflections

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Recommended Citation

Furlong, Ellen, "Faculty Reflections" (2018). *Commencement*. 70.
https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/commencement_docs/70

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I am so incredibly honored to be here today. And so humbled as I look out at this sea of influential people -- my wonderful faculty colleagues, your friends and family, and you, the class of 2018.

I am well aware of the power of professors to shape lives and open doors; they've done it for me my whole life. My first professorial influence came from the guy whose robes I'm wearing today, my dad. As far back as I can remember my dad and I have enjoyed long walks-- with dogs of course-- while talking about ethics, psychology, philosophy, and even sometimes Dr. Who. During these long walks I learned to argue a point, to feel energized by something that made me curious, to be a scholar. Sometimes the greatest influence can occur in these quiet moments when you don't even realize it's happening.

Influence can sneak up on you, but it can also come in with a roar. When I went to college, my first year advisor, Dr. Nancy Wolsk, an art historian, knew about my passion for animals, and thought I should intern at the Louisville Zoo. After getting "we don't have internships here" from call after call to the zoo, she demanded to talk to the zoo director who, after a few uncomfortable minutes getting set straight by Dr. Wolsk, created an internship just for me. That internship was the first big step of my career and I think back to that today and wonder -- what would my life be like if Dr. Wolsk hadn't harassed that poor zoo director...

Now, more years later than I care to count, I am so pleased to find myself among a faculty who, like my dad and Dr. Wolsk, are so giving of their time, energies, and passions to influence their students. I've seen them move mountains to create opportunities for you, challenge you to reach goals you thought you could never attain, and inspire you by their obvious delight in their chosen fields.

The point here is that influence can take many many forms -- it can be quiet influence that you don't even recognize until later, it can be big earth moving moments, or it can be something in between. Just like I had some excellent models influencing me, you've had a bunch of wonderful models through your time here at Illinois Wesleyan. So now it's your turn. Introduce someone to something you're passionate about. Create opportunities when you can. Give a pep talk when it's needed. Provide quiet, every day, influence. Provide big life changing influence. Get out there and use your good influence.

But what am I doing here? I've already seen you do this. I've seen you support each other. I've seen you provide each other incredibly tough intellectual challenges. I've seen you open doors for each other, and for the classes of '19 and '20 who come after you. You're already doing it. And you're amazing.

So I'll just leave you with this: keep it up. Because the world sure can use more of your great influence.