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Faculty Reflections

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Commencement

Faculty Reflections

Scott Sheridan, Associate Professor of French & Italian Languages and Literatures

2016 Student Senate Professor of the Year

May 1, 2016

Dear students of the graduating class of 2016, alumni, honored guests, and colleagues,

First of all, *Bonjour et félicitations! Buongiorno e congratulazioni!*

It's my great pleasure to offer a few remarks today as the 2016 professor of the year. I agonized over what I might say. I detest filling space with empty platitudes reserved for these occasions, such as "the journey has been a long one, but you've arrived," or "never be afraid to do what you have to do." Then I realized: why not comment briefly about the nature of platitudes?

I have here a thank you card given to me a few years ago by a graduating senior. The front of this card reads, "Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting in a fruit salad." I LOVE this card. It sums up the university motto perfectly. Our motto, *Scientia et Sapientia*, Knowledge and Wisdom, is what you have gained from four years here. As you begin your incredible lives after IWU, you'll need to put into practice what you have learned. Here's where your critical thinking skills come into play. And so, during these brief comments, I'd like to challenge you as an IWU graduate to reflect on something as mundane and banal as a greeting card.

Critical thinking, as defined by the 1987 National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking is "the intellectually



disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.” I’d like to focus on the institution of card giving. After all, most if not all of you will be receiving cards today. As you look at them, think of the following:

In the context of your own interdisciplinary education here at IWU, how might you critically consider the greeting card—in this case, the graduation card—and its purpose or impact in our world? What does it say about who we are as a society, and what our expectations are, regarding this event we call commencement? For instance, an historian might think of the graduation card as an extension of the traditions of card giving that date back to the ancient Chinese who exchanged New Year’s messages, or the Egyptians who sent greetings on papyrus scrolls. A sociologist might examine the social function of such cards, which acknowledge and celebrate achievement, officially marking a rite of passage. An economist could ponder the fact that 90% of American households purchase 6.5 billion greeting cards each year, spending in excess of 10 billion dollars. An artist might pay particular attention to the aesthetics of the card, looking at the beautiful interplay between text and image, in a melding of popular and high culture. A psychologist might discuss the emotional value of such greeting cards, in their affective charge and elicited response. An environmentalist would undoubtedly lament the continued practice of using virgin paper for greeting cards as well as other environmentally damaging manufacturing processes, such as toxic printing inks and waste. Even more compelling for a businessperson would be the fact that, with increasing postage costs and decreasing interest among millennials to send cards for holidays or birthdays—which is attributed to a rise in using social media for such purposes—the greeting card industry expects to see a major decline in sales by the year 2020.

Especially from my field of literary and cultural studies, I find graduation cards (which academia has positioned with the category of paraliterature), to be fascinating. After visiting two supermarkets, two large discount retailers, and a greeting card store, I’ve perused the selection of graduation cards. Given my mania for genre theory, I’ve discerned that no fewer than ten categories of graduation cards exist, based on the prevalent themes featured in the cards and the frequency of the words that are used. Such genres range from the “definition card,” (which poses the question “what is graduation?” or “what is commencement?”) to the “poetic card” (that has a particularly heart-warming verse on it), as well as the religious card (that quotes biblical passages). And of course there’s the humorous card—which tends to comment on the money found inside the card. Another particularly common card is the type that has a famous quote on the front, from literary and historical figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Cervantes, Shakespeare, etc., which adds an appropriately scholarly touch to the occasion.

The frequency of certain words and themes really strikes me as significant, however. Can you guess which words are by far the most commonly used on these cards? Besides the words congratulations and graduate, of course, they are, in order of increasing frequency: *Future, accomplishment, enjoy, proud, special, and dreams*. Why are these words the most appropriate to reflect upon for the occasion of commencement? If graduation cards are a social artifact of our way of sharing in the celebration we call “commencement,” what I am expressing to you here is more than an intellectual trifle of sorts. Despite their amorphous nature, such words are salient, in that they highlight the nature of this occasion. I practically need to say nothing more, because these lexical choices are a reduction of the commencement discourse. I would argue—and ask you to disagree with me—that these six words are all you need to remember today, since everything anyone will ever say at any graduation can be summed up with these six words. *Future, accomplishment, enjoy, proud, special, and dreams*. As you think about what you have achieved, be proud, and celebrate this moment! Recognize that you’re an individual, plan for what is to come, and don’t ever limit yourself with assumptions or expectations.

You are all what we call lifelong learners, and Illinois Wesleyan will always be with you. Along with the good memories and permanent friendships, you’ll take both the knowledge and wisdom with you wherever you go.

Thank you.

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