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Commencement 2020, ceremony in 2021, 6:30 PM President's Welcome

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Good evening! And welcome to Illinois Wesleyan University's 171st Commencement celebration—IN PERSON. Members of the Class of 2020, faculty and staff members, parents, families, and friends: we are just thrilled to be able to come together today to hold the celebration of a very significant milestone that we weren't able to hold in person last year. Thank you SO much for coming back. You're already showing your spirit as IWU alumni!

I think this past 14 months have led us to realize perhaps more than ever—that no one makes it alone. So, to begin, I invite the members of the GREAT Class of 2020 to join me in expressing appreciation for their parents and all those who have helped them along the way to become university graduates. [Applause]

And now, let me ask our guests to join me in congratulating this evening the Class of 2020 graduates of Illinois Wesleyan University. [Applause]

Historic Class of 2020: Your last semester here was....well, what can we say? Unprecedented, extraordinary, challenging, stressful, unique...You had to adapt, overnight, to conditions the world had not experienced for more than 100 years. And you did it. You made it to the finish line, ready to go out into the world with a uniquely well-earned university degree. We are so very proud of you.

To open this (belated) Commencement ceremony, I want to tell you of an eye-opening experience that I had just a few days ago.

Last Thursday, I was leading a discussion among about 40 college presidents. We had come together to discuss the many challenges facing higher education. At one point in our ZOOM meeting we were creating a word cloud. I'm sure many of you are familiar with this technology: every participant can submit a word, and the software assembles the words in such a way that the most frequently mentioned ones stand out—by their size, bold print, color, etc. It's fun to do this in real time, because you see

the words shifting and re-arranging, some coming forward, others shrinking and fading into the background.

Well, I expected to see words like: COST or FINANCES, COVID or PANDEMIC, RACIAL TENSIONS or RECKONING--topics that have necessarily dominated our thoughts this year. And those words were there. But I did not expect what became so clear on our screens. Eclipsing all other terms, large and bold was the word, SACRIFICE.

I asked for reflections: why had folks entered that term? What did it mean to them? It meant two things. First, it was a recognition that we have all had to experience sacrifice. For some of us, the sacrifices may have been mere inconveniences. For others, some in this very room, there has been the terrible sacrifice of losing a loved one. But all of us, in one way or another, had to sacrifice some of what we considered “normal,” some of our expectations. Certainly, that was true for the Class of 2020—hugs, parties, regular athletic seasons, in-person theatre and concerts, an in-person commencement—these and many other things were sacrificed to the pandemic.

But, second, the presidents recognized that not only had our campuses experienced sacrifice, they had also offered sacrifices—for one another. This, too, is certainly true of our campus. Illinois Wesleyan--beginning with you and continuing through the Class of 2021--has managed to make it through the pandemic remarkably well. Yes, we had individual cases. But we had almost no “outbreaks.” And we had no instances of infection originating on campus. I truly believe that’s because, as a community, we determined that we would get through this together. Faculty and staff worked incredibly hard to find ways to make our campus as safe as we could. And you, the Class of 2020, set an example by really committing to the Titan Pledge. In other words, we sacrificed for the good of the whole, we sacrificed for one another.

We are living in a period where the vocabulary and concepts of “self-care,” “me time,” and “love yourself first” have become very prominent. But I hope

that one of the positives that we can take away from this COVID era, and that the Class of 2020 has away from your experience is that we can override that default setting that we all seem to have, of “me first”. We can reach out and care for one another, and—yes, even be prepared to sacrifice for one another and for the greater good.

You, Class of 2020, are already on the path to building your futures, our future. And our country needs you to go forward, as citizens, to overcome the many voices today urging love of self above all and to think instead about the good of the whole—of our nation, and of our world. We have seen you do it here, and we believe in your ability to make a difference.

And now I want to invite the Chair of our Board of Trustees, Tim Szerlong, to offer his Greetings.