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Program Awarded \$100,000 NSF Grant

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— The National Science Foundation has awarded \$100,000 for a national proposal co-written by Illinois Wesleyan University Provost Beth Cunningham to develop leaders in science education.

Cunningham, a physics professor who came to Illinois Wesleyan as provost and dean of faculty in 2006, is a member of Project Kaleidoscope (PKAL), a national program which works with faculty to promote undergraduate education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics – known as STEM fields. Over the decades, the number of students graduating from STEM fields has declined nationally. PKAL's aim is to inspire faculty who are teaching undergraduates in the hopes of igniting student interest in pursuing STEM fields as careers.

“Why concentrate on undergraduate faculty? Undergraduate students are at a crossroads. It is here they decide to become professional scientists or science teachers,” said Cunningham, who wrote the grant along with PKAL Director Jeanne Narum of the Independent College Office in Washington, D.C., and Jessica Young of Western State College of Colorado. “PKAL wants to bring the excitement and joy of science to undergraduate students, who will be inspired to look at science careers.”

The three-year grant will enable PKAL to continue organizing Summer Leadership Institutes, which mentor college faculty who are new in their career. With the NSF grant, PKAL will spend the fall choosing and training mentors for the 2008 Summer Leadership Institute.

“The goal is to train faculty to become ‘change agents,’ so they can learn to incorporate new methods of teaching and learning about science in their colleges or a national level,” said Cunningham, who has been a member of PKAL since the mid-1990s. The Summer Leadership Institutes are held in the San Cristo Mountains in Colorado, where faculty are mentored by leaders from colleges and national professional societies. Topics covered can include anything from proposing a change in curriculum to interacting with department chairs, deans and provosts.

PKAL inductees, nicknamed F21 for “Faculty of the 21st Century,” are encouraged to incorporate innovative techniques in the classroom and build networks with other STEM

professions outside the classroom.

Illinois Wesleyan Assistant Provost and Registrar Jeff Frick is one of those F21 faculty. Attending the Summer Leadership Institute in 2002, Frick believes the institutes are a strong way of developing leaders. “The institute gave me confidence and a support network of others engaged in leadership efforts and working to better STEM education,” he said.

“As professionals progress in their career, PKAL is helping to create connections, a sharing of information on a national level,” said Cunningham, whose fellow PKAL members are taking leadership roles on campuses and in national organizations, such as the American Chemical Society and the American Physical Society. “Together we are creating networks of those who are passionate about science. And science education will be stronger for it,” she said.

Illinois Wesleyan, founded in 1850, is a private co-educational university in Bloomington, Illinois, with an enrollment of 2,100 and a student/faculty ratio of 12 to 1. The University consists of the College of Liberal Arts, with 17 academic departments; the College of Fine Arts, comprising professional Schools of Art, Music, and Theatre Arts; and the School of Nursing.

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