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## Thresholds of Learning

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## Thresholds of Learning

by Randy Gleason

There is a "classic" cartoon on Professor Nancy Sultan's door. But for those who know nothing of classic Greek literature or history, the humor will be lost.

The cartoon depicts a wide-mouthed housewife holding a large model of an insect, which readers familiar with *The Iliad's* Trojan horse just know is hollow and teeming with intruders inside. "All the bugs on the back porch are gone," the woman happily announces, "and they left this charming wooden cockroach as a gift."

**To get to know Illinois Wesleyan professors, a good place to start is often right outside their doors.**

Like many of her Illinois Wesleyan colleagues, Sultan, an associate professor of humanities and classical studies, considers her office door an important teaching tool that, with a hearty dose of humor, helps express ideas and make connections that aren't always fully appreciated in the context of a classroom lecture.

"I use anything in popular culture that's funny and demonstrates the links and the continuity from Greek and Roman ancient culture to contemporary society," she explains. "Sometimes the best way to express the ideas and history of ancient societies is not to intellectualize them, but to show how real and relevant they are through popular movies, comics, and cartoons."

Todd Tucker, associate professor of music, also recognizes that the items he posts on his door often function as an intellectual, sophisticated form of graffiti that has considerable power to agitate and enlighten.

"I like to play devil's advocate, and I can be pretty outrageous," he says. "And I think that's especially critical for first-year students. It's important to shake them up and make them think."

Tucker's door recently featured an editorial cartoon lampooning Cardinal Law, the Boston archbishop who has been criticized for failing to address the problem of priests accused of sexual misconduct in his archdiocese. The cartoon shows an exorcist visiting the bedroom of a possessed little girl, who is being tended to by a priestly Catholic figure representing Cardinal Law. When the exorcist shouts "Demon be gone!" the girl asks "Are you talking to me?" and then gestures to the priest figure, "or him?"

On the same door is a more whimsical, uplifting cartoon. It shows *Peanuts* creator Charles Schulz, who died in 2000, waiting at the gates of heaven with his beagle, Snoopy, who is sadly staring at a sign that reads: "No dogs allowed in heaven." Fortunately, St. Peter informs the beloved cartoonist: "In this case, I think we can make an exception, Mr. Schulz."

Associate professor Brian Hatcher, who chairs IWU's religion department, has several cartoons on his door. One of his favorites features a man who has scaled a mountain to seek the wisdom of a guru sitting outside a mountaintop cave. The guru, however, makes it clear he does not have the answers the man seeks.

"If I knew the meaning of life," the guru asks, "would I be sitting in a cave in my underpants?"

Of course, there is a whole genre of "wise men on the mountaintop" cartoons, and Hatcher considers them almost required reading. "If you teach religion or philosophy and you don't have one of those 'What's the meaning of life?' cartoons on your door, then you're not doing your job," he says with a laugh.

But the various cartoons, stories, witticisms, and other items on professors' doors not only entertain and instruct. They also serve as an effective introduction to the person on the other side.

"I'm a pretty laid-back guy," says James Dougan, an associate professor of psychology whose interests in rats and animal behavior in general are evident from the lighthearted decorations on his office door. "I hope that people who see my door get the sense that I'm a comfortable person to talk with, someone who has a sense of humor."

"The idea is to disarm people a little," adds Gabe Spalding, associate professor of physics and avid aficionado of door décor. "If there is hesitation in coming to the office, I want to defuse that." In addition to the quirky stuff on Spalding's door—including an MRI of his own brain ("Proof at last! Gabe DOES have a brain!! Functionality not shown")—his efforts to put students at ease is also evident from the first day of class. "I tell them they have two choices," he says, chuckling. "They can call me *Herr Professor Doctor Spalding*. Or they can call me Gabe."

Some professors display a strong political bent on their doors. For instance, students who stop by Kathleen O'Gorman's office for a visit will be confronted by a "Friends don't let friends vote Republican" bumper sticker.

Does O'Gorman, an English professor, worry that such a strong statement of her political leanings may turn off some students? She acknowledges the possibility, but she says her experience indicates otherwise.

"Some of the most invigorating discussions I've had with students occurred when we are on opposite sides of an issue," she explains. "I would hope that students feel free to respond to what they see on my door, instead of shutting down communication. If there's a difference of opinion, that should be a point of opening up communication."

While door decorations are allowed throughout the university, there are some subtle guidelines and rules of etiquette that vary among departments and professors. For instance, Presser Hall is frequently filled with visitors from outside the university community who are attending concerts and recitals. Accordingly, professors have been asked to limit the number of cartoons and other postings on their doors and use a small bulletin board on a wall next to their office instead. This practice allows faculty to express themselves, while preserving the neat, professional look of the building.

In contrast, some professors with offices in less-frequented buildings or in more secluded corridors will post material that could offend some observers, but which is generally considered harmless because so few people see it.

For instance, the door of Linda Kunce, associate professor of psychology, features a satiric Psychiatric Hotline. Some of this mythical hotline's instructions include:

- *If you are obsessive compulsive, please press 1 repeatedly.*
- *If you are co-dependent, please ask someone to press 2.*
- *If you have a multiple personality, please press 3,4,5, and 6.*
- *If you are schizophrenic, listen carefully. A little voice will tell you what number to press.*

Kunce admits that some people could find it slightly offensive because it makes light of some very serious mental disorders. "If I were on a main corridor, maybe I'd be a little more cautious," she says. "But the only folks who see my door are students, friends, and colleagues."

Other professors say that, while they enjoy putting humorous items on their doors, over the years they've had to scale back the bawdier jokes—not because their tastes have changed, but because their status in the academic community has risen. When he was a graduate student and teaching assistant, Dougan posted on his office door a photograph of an elephant mating with a rhinoceros. "I just thought it was so hilarious," he says. "Now, as a professor, that's something I wouldn't display. But," he admits, "I still think it's very funny."

It's important to note that professors' doors don't always accurately reflect the personalities of the occupants inside. For instance, a stranger walking by Office 249 in the Center for Liberal Arts might be tempted to assume that its resident is as unexciting as his office door, which forlornly features a rather dreary, green "Mike Kelleher for Lt. Governor" campaign poster.

In fact, this is the office of Tari Renner, one of the most energetic, personable, and popular professors on campus. When asked about his dearth of door decorations, Renner explains that he's just too busy as head of the political-science department to be worrying about it. He'll post information on internships, graduate-school programs, and other academic or professional opportunities, he says, but that's about it.

"When I first started teaching 20 years ago, I was more of a bomb thrower, and I had more stuff," he says. "Especially during the Reagan years, I had a lot of caricatures and political cartoons. But over the years, I think I've just had less time to put stuff up."

Still, he says, he's always coming across amusing things, many of which he shares with his classes. Perhaps he could also share them with the rest of the university community by putting them on his door? "The more I think about it, the more I should post on my door," he says.

Eva Ferguson, on the other hand, may decide to post fewer items on her door. Or at least make it clear that what she tapes up doesn't always reflect what actually happens in her household.

Ferguson, a lecturer in music and an accompanist for student recitals, likes to post items that reflect her feeling that students should learn to slow down and relax, to take a break from the daily stress of college course work and extracurricular activities.

"It's no deep philosophy," she says. "But we're all in such a hurry. So it's nice to see students hurry by my office, then stop, take a step back and read the board for 30 seconds and get a good laugh in the process."

But one of Ferguson's postings generated some unintended surprise—and concern.

A few years ago, she came across an Internet photo she thought perfectly captured—with considerable humor—the frenetic, frazzled pace of modern life and the level of improvisation sometimes necessary to balance household and parental obligations with professional work.

The photo shows a twin-basin sink. On the one side are dirty dishes piled high. On the other side is an adorable baby sitting in a pool of bath water, with a bright yellow rubber ducky floating nearby. The caption reads: "What are you doing to save time?"

Unfortunately, Ferguson's infant daughter, also named Eva, was the same age as the baby in the photo. And the two infants bore a striking resemblance. So much, in fact, that many students assumed the photo was actually one Ferguson took herself of her own kitchen sink and her own child.

"I had quite a few students stop by and offer to help me," says Ferguson, who also has a little boy. "They told me, 'You know, if things are that bad, we can come by your house and help you with those dishes.'" She pauses to laugh. "That photo shows how I feel sometimes. But no, I don't bathe our children in the kitchen sink."