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## Professor Urges Students to Find Their Inner Bookworm at the New Student Convocation

August 18, 2010

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – With laughter and animated conversations marking the beginnings of lifelong friendships, students of the class of 2014 filed into Westbrook Auditorium on Tuesday for the New Student Convocation at Illinois Wesleyan University.

“This is a special place, a place where I know you will feel at home,” said University President Richard F. Wilson of the 620 new students who traveled to Illinois Wesleyan from as far away as Egypt, the Netherlands and China. The Convocation is part of the annual “Turning Titan Week” on campus, orienting new students to Illinois Wesleyan.

President Wilson led students through the annual chant of the University motto, *Scientia et Sapientia*, which translates roughly as ‘knowledge and wisdom.’ “You must learn to do more than acquire facts and figures,” said Wilson. “You need to learn how to use that knowledge wisely for the benefit of others, and if you are successful, you will find that your life will be forever transformed.”

Students were welcomed by Dean of Students Kathy Cavins-Tull, the Student Senate Vice President Erick Henderson, the Young Alumni Committee Chair Justine Robinson, and Associate Dean of the Faculty Irving Epstein, who let students know what makes Illinois Wesleyan stand out. “Our uniqueness lies in our campus mission, devoted to fostering a spirit of inquiry, yet also includes our commitment to diversity, social justice and environmental sustainability,” said Epstein.

The keynote speaker for the Convocation was Illinois Wesleyan University Professor of English Dan Terkla, who was named the 2011 winner of the Kemp Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence at Illinois Wesleyan. In his speech, titled “Booklice, Blackberries and Reading in Slow Time,” Terkla welcomed students to “join a society of bookworms,” and encouraged them to engage in a “multisensory reading that I would like to recommend to you, a kind of reading practiced in the Middle Ages, which is where I spend most of my scholarly and teaching time.” He asked them to reframe how they read. “You are bookworms – book consumers with an appetite for knowledge. You are intelligent readers,” said Terkla, who noted the students are also members of a digital age and prone to tackle more than one task at a time.

With images on a slide show that ranged from Sir Frances Bacon to Martha Stewart and Bill Gates, Terkla urged students to transcend the urge to multitask when it comes to reading. “Studies prove that we as species can only do one thing really well at a time,” he said. “We can have trouble prioritizing when we are bombarded by digital options – think Google, Amazon.com, Pandora, YouTube, e-mail, RSS feeds, blogs, tweets, iTunes, texts, Facebook and friends, cell phone calls and RateMyProfessor.com.”

A professor of medieval literature, and a world-renowned expert on medieval maps, Terkla said he was far from a Luddite, and embraced technology that brings images of aged manuscripts to his fingers that once would have meant flying across the ocean to explore. After showing the painstaking process once used to make parchment paper for books in the Middle Ages, he expressed worry that our modern-day access to immediate information may be eroding the importance of ideas still housed in books. “I am worried that we textual omnivores might come to regard the contents of books less highly because of their easy availability,” he said, “and that we might turn the activity of reading into something more akin to consuming fast food on the run than ruminating fine dining.”

Terkla admitted he was anxious to call on students to read in what Andrew Taylor called “slow time,” because they live in “an age that doesn’t tolerate deliberateness, an age in which time seems to run faster than clocks allow, and age in which so much is of equal priority that nothing is.”

Though technology has made great and important leaps, true fulfillment in reading comes with enjoying and even digesting the ideas in books like bookworms, said Terkla. “Though I am not advising you to turn off, tune out and drop out, I am asking you to minimize distraction and to reframe the ways in which you think about your reading habits,” he said. “I am asking you to re-imagine reading, not as a job or a task to conclude, but as a feast that best unfolds in slow time.”

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