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Finding a Way Through the First Year

April 20, 2011

The first year of college is a time of change, punctuated by triumphs and tribulations, surprises and self-discoveries.

The long journey students take over their first year of college is also a time for questions, said IWU Director of Counseling Services Annorah Moorman. "First-year students ask themselves what they want their path to be. It is a time to develop a new sense of identity," she said. "It can be challenging, and it should be challenging, as all opportunities for personal growth are."



First-year students gather in the fall, (back row, left to right) Arnold Asjes, Melissa Ramirez and Janette Abbasi; (front row, left to right) Morgan Latiolais, Matt LaLonde.

To talk about overcoming the challenges of their first year at college, five Illinois Wesleyan first-year students agreed to gather several times during the 2010-2011 academic year. Getting together on the Quad, in the DugOut, in classrooms and theatres, the students spoke of their experiences with homesickness, classes, stress and the responsibilities that come with leaving home.

Homesickness

The year away from the safety of home can seem like a daunting chasm for 17- and 18-year-olds settling into college life. Melissa Ramirez, an 18-year-old from Los Angeles, admitted she almost succumbed to homesickness her first several months at IWU. "It took a while, but I feel like I'm becoming me again," said the shy first-year student, her dark hair often sweeping over her features. "It's like I've come full circle."

Ramirez, the oldest of her siblings, said she missed helping out and being part of her family routine at home. "I would call and they were doing their homework or getting ready for dinner without me. It was strange to think that life just continues, and I was missing it," she said.

Connecting with friends on campus and becoming involved with groups such as the Spanish and Latino Student Association (SALSA) went a long way to help Ramirez assuage her yearning for home. "Getting texts from friends, or Facebook messages of encouragement helped," she said. "My friends really got me through."



First-year student Morgan Latiolais (right) rehearses for a production of Almost Maine with fellow first year Adam Wallesar.

For all first-year students, the main theme of their first year is starting over, said Moorman. "There are fears that come into play – will people like me? Will they know how easily I got along with people in high school? Will they see me the same way?" she said. "Developing a new set of close friends can be challenging, especially if you don't know yourself. If you don't know who you are, it can be difficult to develop close relationships with others."

First-year student Arnold Asjes also combated homesickness, knowing home was thousands of miles away in The Netherlands. The international student from Zwolle, Holland, about an hour from Amsterdam, arrived at his residence hall a week before his fellow floormates, and found the silence intimidating. "It felt like the entire campus was empty. There was no one here," said the 18-year-old.

Asjes's tall, thin frame slumped slightly in the chair as he brushed his hand through his blond hair. "I was alone on my floor. My first night, I thought, 'Why did I come here?'"

Things began to look up when his fellow students arrived. Asjes, a member of the tennis team, soon found his days filled with practice and classes. He also decided to rush a fraternity to make new connections. When a longing for home gripped him, he reached out to his triplet siblings – a sister in the Netherlands, and a brother attending school near Boston. "Hurrah for unlimited texting," he said with a smile.

First-year student Matt LaLonde thought he would have a stronger connection with friends from his hometown in Downers Grove, Ill. "That was one of the benefits of coming to a school close to home – to be able to go home now and again and see people." That idea was quickly swept away with soccer practice and classes. "I had to break away from friends a lot sooner than I expected," said the 19-year-old soccer center-mid fielder.

Classes

Moorman noted many first-year students can be disheartened when classes begin. "These are students who have done well in high school. If they don't do well in the first round of tests in college, they feel like they are not measuring up," she said. "It can take a bit to adjust to a new way of teaching, a new way of learning."

Janette Abbasi, an 18-year-old from Chicago, admitted her first encounter with Introduction to Biology came as a shock. "I always did well in high school, and it has been rough," said the dynamic first-year, whose hair color transformed with the seasons from violet to orange to pink. "I've always loved challenge, but this has been pretty overwhelming." Abbasi lamented the all-consuming nature of the year-long class, which has kept her from other activities. "I love being involved, but I feel like my first year here was spent in the lab," she said. Abbasi, who met Ramirez at orientation, did her best to join her friend at SALSA events throughout the year. "I really want to get more involved next year," she said.

Pursuing her degree in acting, 19-year-old Morgan Latiolais admitted she "practically lives" in McPherson Theatre and loved her classes and her professors. The effervescent blonde from the small town of Wauconda, Ill., took quickly to her classes, and to life at Illinois Wesleyan. "I had Acting 101 with Tom Quinn," she said. "Tom just takes your heart out of your chest, squeezes it until you want to die, and then puts it back in and says, 'Okay, now do our monologue.' It's fantastic. He breaks down your walls."

Ramirez said she found new life in her writing with her writing-intensive Gateway class, required of all first-year students. "I never enjoyed writing, and knew I was not happy with the way I wrote," she said. "My Gateway really challenged me to be a better writer. Now I feel like I can contribute something to my other classes, that I can write on a college level."

Responsibilities

Being on their own means first-years are confronted with more than a new style of classes and making new friends. Many also deal with having new responsibilities.

Shortly after she arrived on campus, Latiolais found juggling finances a challenge. "I just wondered where my money went," she said with a laugh. "I think I ate out too much."

Asjes agreed. "At home, I never really thought that much about money. If I went shopping with my mom, I would just throw things I wanted into the cart. Now I KNOW how much everything costs," he said. In an effort to relieve his parents of some of the financial burden of school, Asjes took a job with Sodexho catering. "Yeah, I'm a bit famous for the day I accidentally grabbed jalapenos for a professor's sandwich instead of green peppers," he said, shaking his head. "It was my first week." Aside from the occasional spicy misstep, Asjes said he enjoyed the chance to grow. "I learned how to do laundry," he said, waiting for a reaction. "Laundry! *That* is a pretty big deal."

LaLonde also took a job on campus, helping man the front desk of Dolan Hall. Yet it was more than finances that drew him to work. An illness left him red-shirted from soccer for the season. "I went from having no time to suddenly having too much of it," he said quietly.

Stress and illness

LaLonde's bout with mononucleosis left him with more than free time. It left him with a lingering doubt about his choices. "I really thought about transferring," he admitted, but made a deal with himself to stay spring semester. He decided to join the IWU Student Athletic Advising Committee (SAAC), as well as volunteered at PreShrunk, a student-run recycled clothing store. He continued to perform winter workouts with the soccer team, and eventually found his health and confidence returning. "Oh yeah, I'll be back next year," he said.

Many students do question staying on campus, especially if they deal with challenges their first year, said Moorman. "It's part of the speculation process," said Moorman. Every university works toward helping students through that first difficult year, and guiding them back for their sophomore year. Private universities have a retention rate of around 71 percent, according to the ACT. Illinois Wesleyan holds the distinction of having one of the highest retention rates among its peers with more than 90 percent of its first-year students returning.

Stress can take a toll on students in different ways. Ramirez, sitting in the DugOut on a cloudy day in January, spoke quietly about losing a beloved grandmother who lived in Mexico. "It's too far away for me to say goodbye, and that is hard," she said.

By April, Ramirez found her smile again. She had decided to change her major from pre-med to psychology, uncovering a love of the field through classes. She also rediscovered a former love — running. "Janette and I are signed up to run a marathon," she said.



First-year student Matt LaLonde stretches before an early-morning workout at the Shirk Center.

"I used to run them when I was at home. This will be my fourth." Abbasi, sitting nearby, nodded at her friend. "Yup, she's my coach," said Abbasi, pointing at Ramirez with a smile.

"Students have to remember that they come to college because they want to grow and change," said Moorman. "They don't want to be the same person they were when they came here. It's not always a comfortable process, but I think there are times that it needs to be uncomfortable."



The first-year students talk on the Quad in the spring.

Latiolais also faced the challenge of juggling classes and sorority life with the demands of a theater major. After finishing up her job as assistant stage manager on the faculty-choreographed dance *The Monkey Trail*, Latiolais recalled giving herself small pep talks. "If someone missed a lighting cue, or complained too much, I would just say to myself, 'You know what? You are here. You are at one of the best theater schools in the country. You have all your limbs and your senses. You have friends, and this is a good time of your life.' "

Sense of Self

Along with the lessons learned inside the classroom, first-year students have an equal challenge in learning about themselves, said Moorman. "The first year can be a lot, but I see many students who come through it all with new, personal insight, and the ability to continue to surprise themselves," she said.

LaLonde, whose relaxed demeanor resurfaced in the spring, said he found himself comparing his experience to those of his high school friends "They seemed to be liking it better than I am, and I kept wondering, 'Why am I not happy?'" He said that he spoke with his family often, and as he recovered from the mono, found himself feeling stronger both mentally and physically. "Now I feel like I have more energy and more optimism about where I am. Next year will be great."

Abbasi also looks to next year to gain momentum. "This year was all about surviving a class. Next year I will have more psychology classes, and I am going to take more time to get involved on campus," she said.

No matter where their first-year journey took them, through battling homesickness or illness, forging new friendships and finding new paths, all first-year students tend to come away with something more — a sense of themselves. "Part of the meaning of college is understanding that in life you are always moving, and learning the lesson of finding who you are in that constant movement," said Moorman.

The once-quiet Ramirez, who found her voice and a new direction, said simply. "This is just the beginning. And it has been a really big beginning."

Rachel Hatch