



Spring 4-8-2015

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### **Recommended Citation**

University Communications, Illinois Wesleyan University, "French Named Kemp Teaching Award Winner" (2015). *News and Events*. 2674.  
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/2674>

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## French Named Kemp Teaching Award Winner

April 8, 2015

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Illinois Wesleyan University Chair and Professor of Physics Linda French has been named the 2016 recipient of the Kemp Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence. The award recipient, named at the annual Honors Convocation on April 8, was selected by the faculty Promotion and Tenure Committee from nominations by the faculty and announced by Provost and Dean of the Faculty Jonathan Green.

A native of Hagerstown, Indiana, French earned a bachelor's degree in astronomy from Indiana University and a master's and Ph.D. from Cornell University. She also did post-doctoral work at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her scientific research, funded by the National Science Foundation, concerns the study of the shapes and surfaces of asteroids and comets. She is a frequent guest observer at Lowell Observatory in Arizona and at Cerro Tololo Interamerican Observatory in Chile, and is often accompanied by students on these observing trips. A main-belt asteroid, 3506 French, is named for her.



Linda French (left) and Kathleen Montgomery

Twice French has led the IWU London Program, most recently in fall 2014. In addition, she has published widely and presented lectures and papers on the life and work of 18<sup>th</sup>-century astronomer John Goodricke of York, England. She joined the faculty at IWU in 2002.

The 2015 Kemp Award winner, Associate Professor of Political Science Kathleen Montgomery, was the featured speaker for the Convocation. René Shaffer attended the ceremony representing the Kemp family, whose family foundation provides funding for the award and has a long history of supporting Illinois Wesleyan.

In Montgomery's presentation entitled "Reflections of an Accidental Political Scientist," she told the seniors that the well-intentioned questions they were already receiving ("what are you planning to do with that major?") can be interpreted to mean the graduates should know what they are going to do with the rest of their lives.

"I'm here today to assure you otherwise," said Montgomery, who told the audience about her rather unconventional upbringing as the daughter of ardent environmentalists raising chickens, rabbits, dairy goats and even some horses in the middle of a southern California subdivision.

"I didn't know at the time how different we were or how much the neighbors despised what we were doing," said Montgomery, citing their front-porch stand selling yogurt made from raw goat's milk and homegrown produce, a rooster and a compost pile as particularly vexing to their neighbors.

Eventually the family moved to Mendocino County in northern California. Her family never made it all the way off the grid, but at the height of their homesteading years they produced most of what they consumed and managed to live without things that most Americans take for granted, Montgomery added. It would be natural to conclude such a counter-cultural upbringing drew Montgomery to politics, but she said her family's actions were anti-political or at least anti-political establishment. Instead, political science snuck up on her, she said, providing the example that she applied to graduate school in three different fields and went to the program that gave her the most money, which happened to be political science. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 – the same year Montgomery entered graduate school – provided another twist: her field changed from comparative communism to comparative democratization.

Her original interest in Eastern Europe was born of a happy accident. Studying in Vienna, Austria, her junior year, Montgomery found she couldn't afford the beautiful cakes and pastries displayed in shop windows. "Then, I discovered communist Hungary," she said. "Budapest, which was basically Vienna's down-in-the-heels imperial sibling, had all the same cakes but at a fraction of the price.

"I have returned to Hungary many times over the years for language study and field research," she added. "I have travelled throughout the former Eastern Bloc and discovered many compelling interests that continue to tie me to the region. But, it did really and truly all begin with cake."

Montgomery discussed several of her research interests, including post-communist Eastern Europe and gender politics. Her most recent research focuses on European far right parties, in particular a Hungarian exclusionary populist party called Jobbik.



Kathleen Montgomery gave the address, "Reflections of an Accidental Political Scientist"

"When Jobbik says 'Power to the people!' it has a very specific idea of who 'the people' are and more importantly, who they are not," she said. "It's a long list that includes: Roma, Jews, foreigners, feminists, homosexuals, former communists, members of the ruling party, Eurocrats, and pretty much any elites that Jobbik deems insufficiently nationalist."

Montgomery acknowledged her research must seem to the students the furthest from what she called "Northern California lefty-hippie-homesteading."

"But if you think about it, exclusion is the parasitic twin of inclusion," she added. "Jobbik now claims to be the second largest party in Hungary, and similar parties have been making gains all across Europe."

With their exclusion of women and promotion of various chauvinisms, many of these parties are frankly nasty, Montgomery admitted, and it's tempting to look away.

"It's ugly, but I think that's exactly why it is essential to scrutinize and interrogate the electoral appeal of these parties," said Montgomery.

She also discussed the stereotypical view of all of politics as an ugly business. From politicians typecast as either idiotic, incompetent bureaucrats or power-obsessed sociopaths, to programs such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* pointing out the absurdity of political rhetoric and behavior, media images perpetuate the stance that politics and decency must be fundamentally at odds.

"We tend to reduce all of politics to rational calculations about self-interest and treat with cynicism notions like public service, public-mindedness, public goods, and the public interest," said Montgomery, adding that the popular TV show *Parks and Recreation* derives its humor from turning audience cynicism on its head.

Montgomery acknowledged not all of politics is selfless service. If it were, the character of Leslie Knope wouldn't be funny, she said. "Politics is responsible for much of what is worst in human history. But, politics is also about making decisions on behalf of the public; and it is within our power to ask whether a particular legislative act or judicial ruling is *good* or *just* or *fair*, whether it will make society or the world a better place."

She quoted French economist Thomas Piketty, author of the book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, who wrote: "Where there is socio-economic inequality, politics is never far behind." Montgomery said she would argue the same is true about political exclusion and injustice.

"How can you demand justice without asking about politics—about authority and legitimacy? Without asking who gets treated as a part of the body politic? Who gets to sit at the decision-making table and who does not? Those are all fundamentally and inextricably political questions."

Montgomery said she came to political science at least partly by accident, but the questions she raised in her speech keep pulling her back to the field of study.

"The core concerns of politics keep finding me," she said. "Maybe some of you will discover the same, not with politics perhaps but with some other field: medicine or education, music or psychology, or something you haven't even begun to imagine."

“If you just take a step forward after graduation, and then another, and then another, before you know it you will have answers to all those well-meaning questions about your future.”

Montgomery said her experience holds that there is no single juncture in life on which everything hinges. “You don’t have to have a plan that maps out the rest of your days,” she said. “Your education at Illinois Wesleyan has given you the judgment to let your interests guide you; to stay open to change and discovery; and to move forward with confidence. All the rest will follow, I promise.”