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New Students Learn Value of Not Having Answers

Aug. 19, 2015

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— The Class of 2019 and new transfer students were welcomed to Illinois Wesleyan University during New Student Convocation Aug. 18 in Westbrook Auditorium.

The new Titans number 500 students who traveled to Bloomington from 20 states and 13 countries. Nearly 26 percent of the class represents a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, said Karla Carney-Hall, vice president of student affairs and dean of students.

She told the students their classmates included: 62 students who had a close relative attend Illinois Wesleyan; 59 students who are the first in their families to attend college; one new student who has traveled to 15 countries and 42 states; a fourth-generation beekeeper; and one who is a sailing instructor and races sailboats.

Another student dyes her hair a new color every month. “We’re hoping for Titan green this week,” Carney-Hall joked.

Keynote speaker Linda French, the recipient of the 2016 Kemp Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence, the University’s highest teaching honor, used the recent New Horizons mission to Pluto to illustrate her message of recognizing our lives will change as time passes, but that we can’t possibly know how those changes will occur.

As a professor of physics, French teaches an introductory course in astronomy for non-science majors nearly every semester. She said at least one student each semester makes a comment that goes something like this: “I really enjoyed this class, but I don’t see how I’ll ever use this in my everyday life.”



Professor of Physics Linda French told students that not knowing all the answers opens us up to new ideas, new experiences and new horizons.



Nearly 500 new students are joining the Titan family.

French said such a comment makes her sad because the student is assuming he or she knows “exactly what ‘everyday life’ will be five years, 10 years, 20 years from now. None of us in fact know what our lives will be like, but what we do know is that life changes.”

She reminded those assembled that as students at a liberal arts university, they would be taking classes in the humanities, in language, in the arts, in physical education, and in science and formal reasoning. Within any of these disciplines, students may be asked to confront new ideas, new concepts and new ways of looking at the world.

“When this happens, you are being offered a new horizon, an invitation to explore somewhere you’ve never been,” she said. “This sort of challenge occurs throughout our lives, both at work and in our personal experiences.”

To illustrate, she spoke of NASA’s New Horizons probe and its recent exploration of Pluto. A professional astronomer, French reminded the students the mission

involved 10 years of planning and another 10 years of travel for the probe to reach its goal. Scientists, including herself, anticipated Pluto’s surface would be very similar to the Earth’s moon.

Early in the life of the solar system, French said, thousands of objects moving around and smashing into each other

eventually formed today's planets. On large bodies such as the Earth, the atmosphere, weather and water have eroded most of the original impact craters. Earth's interior is hot, and this heat drives major motions of the Earth's crust, building volcanoes and mountain ranges and also erasing the original craters, she said.

"The Moon doesn't have an atmosphere or water, and it's so much smaller than the Earth that it lost its internal heat long ago," she said. "Basically, the moon froze solid. So, when we got to Pluto, we expected to see no mountains, and lots of impact craters, because Pluto was expected to be cold and 'dead,' just like the moon. As a matter of fact, a lot colder and very dead."

As New Horizons sent photos of Pluto back to Earth, mountains as tall as the Rockies made of water ice could be viewed, French said. At first, there were no impact craters to be seen, but looking closer, glaciers appear to be seen.

On Earth, glaciers of slow-moving masses of ice move and shape the surface, French said. On Pluto, the ice isn't water, she said. It's nitrogen and carbon monoxide.

"We thought Pluto was too small to have the kind of internal heat that erases the craters and makes mountains on the Earth," she said. "And yet, some process has created mountains the size of the Rockies and erased the craters. So tiny Pluto is not as cold and dead as we once thought."

"This is something we don't understand, yet, and we're loving it, because it means we're on the way to learning something new about our solar system," she added. "The scientists of the New Horizon mission didn't anticipate being quite *this* baffled. Their 'everyday' work, like everyday life, trying to make sense of the wonderful data they've gotten, is quite different from what they expected."

The value of not knowing all the answers, French said, is when we realize we don't know everything – and that no one does – we open up to new ideas, new experiences and new horizons.

"Think beyond today's expectations of what your everyday life will be like," she said. "You'll be glad you did."

Provost and Dean of the Faculty Jonathan Green announced the winners of the inaugural First-Year Summer Reading Essay Contest, open to all members of the Class of 2019. Students were invited to write an essay on a prompt based on their reading of *The Unlikely Disciple: A Sinner's Semester at America's Holiest University* by Kevin Roose. Benjamin Alan Zentner '19 (Austin, Texas) won first prize for his essay "Still a Jerk." Honorable mentions went to Emma Marie Haan '19 (Glen Ellyn, Illinois) and to Kathryn Anne Halford '19 (Springfield, Illinois). All student winners receive gift cards to the IWU Bookstore and invitations to meet and dine with Roose during his visit to campus to deliver the President's Convocation address on Sept. 9.

Presiding over his final New Student Convocation before his retirement, President Richard F. Wilson told the students he is responsible for two traditions at the event. One is to formally matriculate the new Titans as members of the Illinois Wesleyan student body. The second is to acquaint the students through a shout-out of the pronunciation of the University's motto, "Scientia et Sapientia" (which roughly translates to "knowledge and wisdom."

"While you are students on this campus, frankly we hope you will accumulate the former and convey the latter as a result of your experiences," said Wilson. "You should do more with your time here than simply accumulate facts and information."

"Engage the opportunities," he added. "It is our responsibility as a university to present these opportunities for you. It is your responsibility to engage them and push yourself. We will assist you, but it is your responsibility to try new things, to become better than you could ever imagine you could be."



President Richard F. Wilson greets the Class of 2019 at his final New Student Convocation before his retirement.