



Spring 5-1-2016

Illinois Wesleyan Celebrates Class of 2016

University Communications
Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news>

Recommended Citation

University Communications, "Illinois Wesleyan Celebrates Class of 2016" (2016). *News and Events*. 2796.

<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/2796>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Illinois Wesleyan Celebrates Class of 2016

May 1, 2016

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Illinois Wesleyan University celebrated the Class of 2016 during [Commencement ceremonies](#) on May 1.

Board of Trustees President George Vinyard '71 congratulated the graduates, numbering more than 420 graduates. He said Illinois Wesleyan strives to help students develop the intellectual and moral capacity to think deeply about the important things in life and to live in a manner consistent with the best values as reflected in the University's motto – *Scientia et Sapientia*, generally translated as "knowledge and wisdom."

"For a concrete example of what this means, consider the life and works of Oliver Sacks, the famous neurologist and author who died this past year," said Vinyard. "Sacks' path to wisdom was based on his intensely detailed observations of his patients and his boundless curiosity about other people and things."

If every individual is unique as Sacks says, there is wisdom to be derived from each of the innumerable people, living and dead, whose stories are accessible to us, according to Vinyard. "In your time here on campus, we trust that you not only developed your intellects but also cultivated the kind of curiosity, perceptiveness and expressiveness that will serve you well as you seek wisdom in the stories of others and choose the paths to your singular narratives."

For his remarks, 2016 Student Senate Professor of the Year Scott Sheridan also drew on the University's motto and a thank-you card he received from a graduate a few years ago. The front of the card read, "Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad," read Sheridan, associate professor of French and Italian. Challenging the graduates to put their critical thinking skills to use in reflecting on something as mundane as a greeting card, Sheridan considered the card from disciplines ranging from history to economics to psychology to environmental science, and noted when considered from his field of literary and cultural studies, he found graduation cards to be fascinating.

"Given my mania for genre theory, I've discerned that no fewer than 10 categories of graduation cards exist...the frequency of certain words and themes really strikes me as significant, however," said Sheridan. "I would argue ... these six words are all you need to remember today, since everything anyone will ever say at any graduation can be summed up with these six words: *future, accomplishment, enjoy, proud, special, and dreams.*"

You are all what we call lifelong learners, said Sheridan, and Illinois Wesleyan will always be with you. "Along with the good memories and permanent friendships, you'll take both the knowledge and wisdom with you wherever you go."



Watch the [ceremony video](#), [read remarks](#), or check out the [joy on social media](#).



Class president Jazmyne Kellogg told classmates to remember "TGOE."

a bit more difficult. No matter the situation, trust in your journey...We have been equipped with the necessary tools to be the best versions of ourselves."

Vinyard, President Eric Jensen, and Provost and Dean of the Faculty Jonathan Green conferred an honorary doctor of humane letters upon Bill Damaschke, a 1985 graduate of Illinois Wesleyan with a major in musical theatre. An independent theatrical producer and former chief creative officer at DreamWorks Animation, Damaschke presented the commencement address "Unlocking Your Story."

Class President Jazmyne Kellogg '16 cited student body accomplishments during her four years at Illinois Wesleyan, including the transformation of a formerly Christian space into a multifaith area, strides to make the campus more sustainable, and holding race rallies and establishing a tradition called "Here at IWU." At that tradition, "we discuss our weaknesses and use our strengths to create a more inclusive community," she said.

"We should be proud of the impact we've made in just four short years, but more importantly, to acknowledge that these success stories did not happen overnight, and they did not happen without the support of our friends, our families, our faculty and our staff, and course, our beloved alumni," she said.

In acknowledging there is still work to do, Kellogg used the acronym TGOE (Titan Green Over Everything) in urging her classmates to -- Take Risks, Go the Extra Mile and build cross-cultural connections, Be Open to help, and Embrace the Future.

"By this time, seniors, we've all been asked a hundred times what we plan to do post-grad," she said. "For some, this question is easy because you have it all figured out. For others...this question can be

In a humorous message that drew on his decades as a storyteller, Damaschke admitted he'd been asked to present the address at previous Illinois Wesleyan commencements and that his work or travel schedule never permitted it. "I had every reason to avoid it," he said. "Deep down, I had no idea what I would say."

When asked this year, Damaschke agreed to present the address, because, he said, "I, too, am finding myself at an inflection point – a graduation of sorts – in writing my own next chapter. I thought, if I had something to offer a graduating class on writing their story from a blank page, this would be the best year to do so."

Every great story is comprised of six essential ingredients: characters, plot, setting, conflict, resolution and an overarching theme that weaves it together, Damaschke said. In preparing for his address, he discovered Illinois Wesleyan counts senators, governors, Oscar nominees, Grammy Award-winners, scientists, activities, and NBA and NFL players among its distinguished graduates. This made "me feel even more pressure among these giants," Damaschke quipped.

"But then I realized, their stories were not dissimilar to mine," he added. "There were some common and critical character traits that we all shared. I like to refer to these traits as the keys to the character...they are the keys that have helped me to unlock my story."

The plot of Damaschke's story involves a reorganization at DreamWorks Animation over a year ago when his specific job was eliminated as the company prepared for its next chapter. "In the world of one chapter ending, I would no longer be a part of the only thing I knew for the past 20 years and the place where I was most comfortable," Damaschke said. "Just like writing this speech, I found myself facing a blank page."

"So I did what I have always done and I called my mom," he said. "She said, 'you will figure it out, just get on with it and try to be great at the next thing you do.' And so I am."

Moving back to New York and producing two Broadway-bound musicals, Damaschke said he's trying to follow his mother's advice by returning to the keys of character – working hard, being honest, just getting on with it, being curious, and always striving to do a great job.

"If I have weathered the journey so far that you are about to embark upon," he told the graduates, "it's largely due to my humble roots, steeped in these character keys, all of which I learned from my parents. These keys have served me well over the last 31 years. And they don't seem to dull even after using them over and over again. And they come in especially handy during times of change, challenge and conflict."

Damaschke said he was often asked how he got from musical theatre major at IWU to chief creative officer at DreamWorks Animation. Speaking frequently of the support of his parents, who were in the audience, Damaschke said he is the oldest of seven children from Chicago's South Side. His father was a truck driver and his mother worked as an executive assistant, and Damaschke was the first in his family to attend college, he said. "While my parents did not have the means to pay for it, they said we would figure it out," Damaschke said. "Their 'just get on with it' approach propelled me to a school far out of my reach."

After graduation from IWU he moved to New York with high hopes of becoming a stage actor. His mother's message was simple and clear -- 'I don't care what you do. I don't care if you are the garbage man. Just be the best garbage man you can be.'

He never worked as a garbage collector, Damaschke said, but he did support himself as a waiter, telemarketer, record store sales clerk and at a number of other odd jobs while acting in New York.

Whether waiting tables in Los Angeles or as chief creative officer at DreamWorks, "I would go to work every day and ask, 'how can I be of value and most importantly, how could I be great at the task at hand?'" Damaschke said.

He said he was able to get a job as a production assistant at DreamWorks in part because of the odd jobs he'd held along the way. Experience in customer service, in retail and as a temporary worker helped him, he said, because at that time, DreamWorks Animation was a start-up. "I did everything from scheduling, budgeting, hiring, to buying the lamps and office supplies for the artists," he said.

"I was able to quickly advance, because the things I brought to the table were valued. The keys I have been talking about – these guiding principles...made me a trusted voice in both the creation of DreamWorks Films and in building the company's culture."

Damaschke spoke of building that culture, in part, by focusing on "yes vs no thinking."

The word "no is a major buzzkill," said Damaschke. It's easy to come up with all the problems of something, reasons why things won't work, according to Damaschke. "I had a simple motto when we would be in story discussions or when talking about strategic goals for the company."

He said he wanted to hear 10 reasons why an idea could work before hearing all the reasons why it wouldn't work. This kind of thinking led to some of DreamWorks' greatest stories and breakthroughs, he said.

"For me personally, this has been something that I have tried to integrate into my own life," he said. "The list of 'you should and you shouldn't's' and 'that's a crazy idea' will bog you down."

In closing, Damaschke reminded the audience that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at Illinois Wesleyan twice during the 1960s. "It was a critical time of change," Damaschke said of that era, adding that King ignited the idea of new opportunities for Americans across the country. "Like then, 2016 is a time of great volatility and change, as well as opportunities." He spoke of frequent media reports of "us and them" divisions – black and white, male and female, gay and straight, those who were born here and elsewhere, and other descriptors of divisiveness.

"With all of these divisions among us, I challenge you to think about your role," he said to the graduates. "What value can you add in your lifetime? What will your story be?"

He said he took a stab at drafting the first paragraph of the stories of the Class of 2016. Those stories start, he said, at a commencement ceremony surrounded by families and loved ones, with an amazing foundation from brilliant and passionate professors from an incredible school.

"The graduates went into a world, though filled with divisions, change, and unpredictability, was also a world that offered great opportunity, where they made huge contributions and a difference," said Damaschke. "They followed their own paths, no matter how windy and twisty they were. They understood that there were no shortcuts, that compassion and hard work were critical, and they were curious about the world and people around them.

"Greatness existed in each of them," he added. "They were loved for who they were, and each of them became the hero of their own story."

President Eric Jensen noted the Class of 2016 is the first in which he's had the pleasure as president of awarding diplomas. "You're a spectacular group... who will always have a prominent place in my memories," he said.

"My parting words to you are simple: Remember who you are, remember how you got there, and remember Illinois Wesleyan."



Bill Damaschke '85 offered graduates the keys to unlocking their story.