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# New Titans Welcomed at Convocation

Aug. 24, 2016

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Illinois Wesleyan University welcomed the Class of 2020 during New Student Convocation on Aug. 23.

The new Titans traveled to Bloomington from 21 states and 13 countries. More than 26 percent of the class self-identifies as a student of color or an international student, said Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students Karla Carney-Hall.

She told the students their new classmates include: 70 students who have had a close family member attend Illinois Wesleyan; 56 students who are among the first in their families to go to college; a former summer intern at the U.S. Embassy in Belgium; and an individual who has self-published a book on Amazon. The Class of 2020 also includes someone who performs with a Japanese drumming group; an individual who has invented his or her own alphabet, and “our newest member of the IT staff, who fixed a computer that the Geek Squad said could not be fixed,” Carney-Hall quipped.

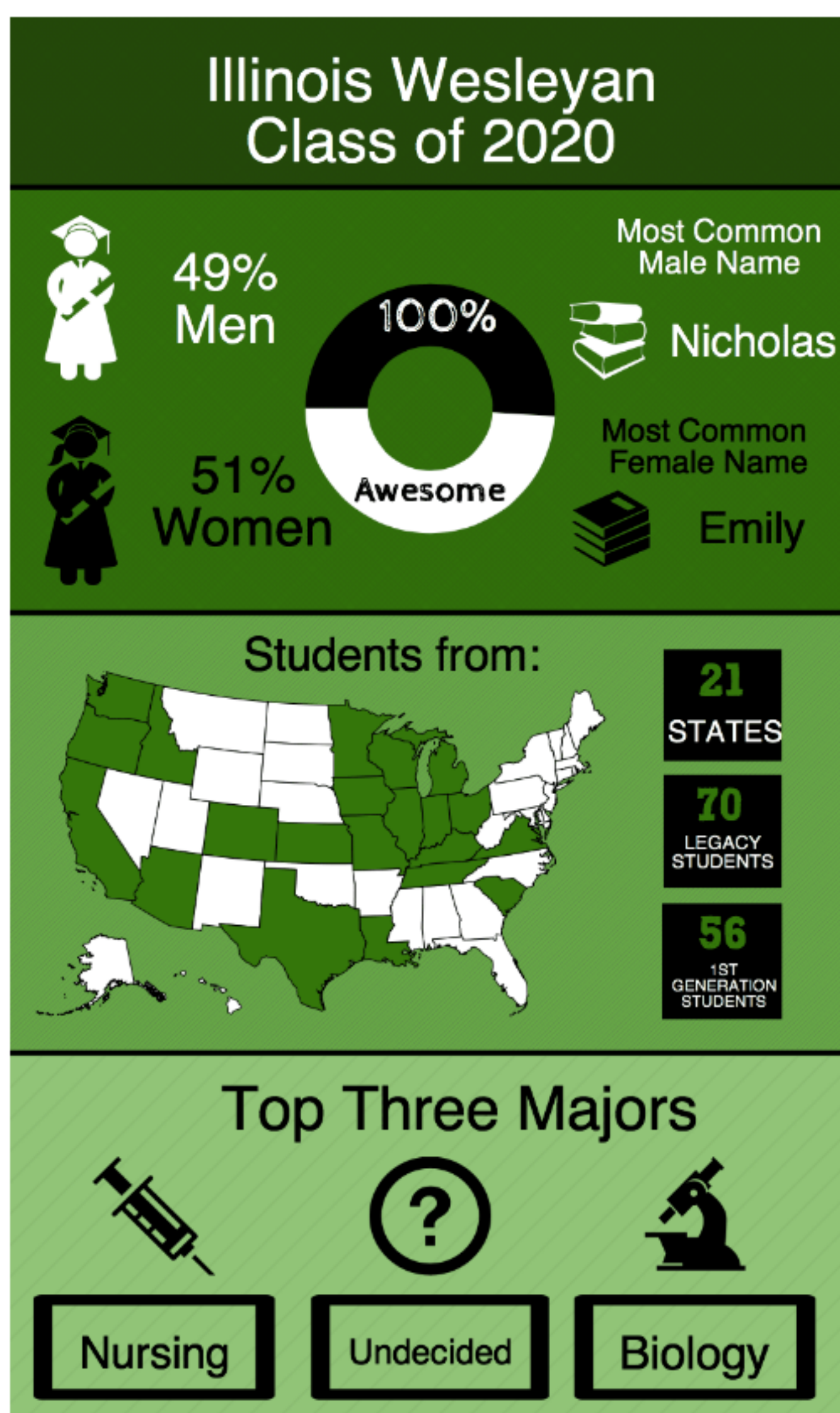
President Eric Jensen told the students he was presiding over his first New Student Convocation so “like you, I’m new here myself.” He noted the new Titans have been planning for the moment they would be college students for years. “Now it’s here, it’s exciting, maybe a little bit scary and the opening of whole new chapters of your lives,” he said.

Noting the hallmark of a liberal arts education is a focus on critical thinking and problem solving, Jensen told the new students “in your time here, you will be challenged. It’s our obligation as faculty and staff to ensure that each of you is asked not just to work hard, but to think, to challenge your own assumptions, and to be able to argue your conclusion persuasively.”

Jensen also led the Titan tradition of acquainting the new students in the pronunciation of the University’s motto, “Scientia et Sapientia” (roughly translated as “knowledge and wisdom.”)



Orientation leaders and Residence Life staff greeted new Titans with high-fives at the conclusion of New Student Convocation.



Provost and Dean of the Faculty Jonathan Green announced the winners of the Summer Reading Essay contest. Members of the Class of 2020 were invited to write an essay based on their reading of *The Underground Girls of Kabul* by Jenny Nordberg. Mary Amanda Breedon '20 (Normal, Ill.) won first place, with Alexa Letourneau '20 (Pickerington, Ohio) and Naing Lin Tun '20 (Dagon Township, Myanmar) receiving honorable mentions. All essay winners receive gift cards to the IWU Bookstore and invitations to dine with Nordberg during her visit to campus to speak at the President’s Convocation on Sept. 14.

Keynote speaker Rebecca Gearhart Mafazy, the recipient of the 2017 Kemp Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence, the University’s highest teaching honor, recalled her own first days in college. After riding more than 19 hours in the family station wagon, she said she arrived on her campus with many of the same feelings many of the new Titans were experiencing.

“I missed my dog, my mom’s cooking, my family support system, and especially my high school friends, who I didn’t think I could live without,” recalled Gearhart Mafazy, a professor of anthropology. “I was very worried that I wouldn’t fit in, and that somebody in the admissions office would figure out that I didn’t really belong there.”

Her new roommate, Loyce, was from Ghana, West Africa. “I remember thinking to myself: I know absolutely nothing about Africa, and we will have absolutely nothing in common,” Gearhart Mafazy said. “As it turned out, she knew very little about me or my background either, and was just as nervous about having someone so different as her roommate.”



Within a few weeks, Gearhart Mafazy learned Loyce was a member of a royal family among the Asante ethnic group – “a real princess” — and Loyce learned her new roommate was adopted. “She shared stories about growing up in Accra, the busy capital city of Ghana, and I shared stories about growing up on the Mississippi River in a small town in Minnesota,” said Gearhart Mafazy. “At first, it seemed we couldn’t be more different, but in just a matter of weeks, we became good friends.”

To learn more about Loyce’s continent, Gearhart Mafazy enrolled in an African history course her first semester. Loyce’s story became the first of dozens of African stories Gearhart Mafazy learned in college. “That background led me to study African history and then anthropology in graduate school, travel to Africa for my studies, and eventually marry an African and make a second home there.

“Befriending Loyce completely changed my perspective on my studies, on my understanding of the world, and on my life’s path,” she added. “Our ability to reach across what seemed to be a great divide of difference between us, and to get to know and understand one another was one of the best things that ever happened to me. It totally rocked my world!”

Gearhart Mafazy told the new Titans that students in her “Introduction to Cultural Anthropology” course are required to select a group on campus to study anthropologically. The group can be a social club, a sports team, a religious organization, a music group or one of the many registered student organizations. After receiving appropriate permissions, the anthropology students observe and participate in group activities, interview a member of the group, and work collaboratively with group members to discover what it is that makes the group tick, the professor said.

“Some students find the ethnographic research project to be very challenging,” she said. “It requires them to reach across seemingly great divides of difference that separate them from members of the group under study.” When they are asked to explain their interest in their chosen group, the anthropology students cannot simply state they are interested because they need to complete a class assignment.

“That wouldn’t go over very well,” said Gearhart Mafazy. “So each student has to decide upon a group she or he is genuinely interested in learning more about: a group of people who are truly mysterious in a good way, in an intriguing way, in a way that will motivate them to become an outsider for awhile.”

Making ourselves vulnerable as outsiders in this way helps us better recognize our mutual vulnerability, she explained. Having an awareness of mutual vulnerability is an important aspect of what philosopher Maureen Linker refers to as “intellectual empathy,” a powerful tool that can facilitate critical yet empathetic examination of beliefs and feelings about self and others in order to recognize social biases, ethnocentricities, and structural inequalities that perpetuate social justice and divide us from each other, she said.

“My challenge to you this semester is go out of your way to meet students you might not naturally be included to befriend, join organizations, take classes, and attend campus events focused on people you don’t know much about, and on experiences that seem foreign and perhaps even a little strange,” she said. “You never know which of these activities will rock your world.”

Gearhart Mafazy said earlier in the week she’d observed a quote from author Jacqueline Woodson on the back of some students’ t-shirts. “Diversity is about all of us, and about us having to figure out how to walk through this world together,” the quote read. Gearhart Mafazy said the quote is worth repeating, noting being together at IWU does not mean we have to be the same.

“It means we have to learn how and why we differ, what our differences mean, and why they matter. Intentionally seeking opportunities for enhancing our understanding of one another will help us create a campus where we all feel comfortable sharing our thoughts and experiences, and where we all feel at home.”

Being open to making a friend out of a stranger or becoming a member of a group you couldn’t imagine yourself belonging to, could set you on a path that you never expected to be on, but one that could possibly change your life for the better, she said.

“So let the adventure begin,” she said. “Let’s rock our world together at IWU!”



Prior to New Student Convocation, the incoming students were encouraged to chalk their goals and dreams on the sidewalk surrounding the "Aspiration" sculpture.