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First-Year Students Find Inspiration in Not Knowing

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First-Year Students
Find Inspiration in
Not Knowing

August 22, 2007

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.

– The 2011 class of Illinois Wesleyan University gathered together and took their first steps as college students Tuesday (Aug. 21) at the annual New Student Convocation in Westbrook Auditorium of Presser Hall (1210 Park St., Bloomington).



Marina Balina told first-year students of her youth in Russia, where asking questions could be dangerous.

According to Illinois Wesleyan President Richard F. Wilson, students in the class of 2011 come from 22 states and 17 countries around the world. As the 575 students stood, Wilson welcomed them, officially pronouncing them IWU students. "Your diversity, your backgrounds, your interests and your talents add to the power of the campus community," he said.

Marina Balina, Isaac Funk Professor of German and Russian at Illinois Wesleyan, offered the students their first language lesson by having them join together to pronounce the most important word of their college career: "Round your lips and put all your energy into pronouncing this word...Wh...wh...why?" said Balina, as the students enthusiastically responded. "Promise me your favorite word on this campus will be *why*."

The keynote speaker and winner of the 2008 *Pantagraph* Award for Teaching Excellence at Illinois Wesleyan, Balina encouraged students to take chances. "Don't play it safe in your classes the next four years. Ask questions. Don't be practical. Explore," she said.

Balina shared with the audience that, when creating her speech, she had turned to a student favorite, the Internet's Google search engine, in order to research the idea of knowledge. "Google! One mouse click away from my happiness!" she said with a smile. All her searches on the topic of knowledge, however, resulted in references to the lack of knowledge. "You know, like Socrates who said 'True knowledge exists in knowing that we know nothing,'" she quoted.

Instead of becoming discouraged, Balina said she found the idea of *not knowing* freeing for students. "Does the term 'not knowing' mean ignorance?" Balina asked. "Does it mean indifference? Or does it mean something else like courage – more than that, intellectual courage."



New University Chaplain Hope Luckie gave her first Illinois Wesleyan invocation during the convocation.

The idea of not knowing gives first-year students a strong advantage, even over upperclassmen, said Balina. "You are the most powerful people on campus because you don't know. Seniors have to play it cool and

claim they understand, but you have the ability to ask questions."

A native of Russia, Balina grew up under the Soviet Union, where questions could be considered dangerous. "I was born and raised in a country that exists now only in your history books. It is strange to be speaking about the USSR, which has not existed since you were two years old," she said. "There, asking questions could be bad. If people questioned, it could cost them their jobs, sometimes their freedoms or even their lives." It takes bravery to wonder and give voice to those wonders, she said. "You must have the courage to overcome the greatest fear of university life and ask questions."

The New Student Convocation is part of the weeklong Turning Titan program, which helps first-year, international and transfer students become acclimated to their new home at Illinois Wesleyan. It was also a welcome for new University Chaplain Hope Luckie, who gave her first invocation after joining IWU this summer from Andover-Newton Theological School in Newton Centre, Mass. "Now as we begin a new journey, we make new friends and greet new challenges, and we know we are being and becoming in the world," she said.