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## Michael C. Seeborg Top Teaching Award Earmarked for Economist

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Michael C. Seeborg

## Top Teaching Award Earmarked for Economist

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.—Illinois Wesleyan University's top teaching honor for 1999 will be awarded to an economist with a keen interest in labor, income, race and poverty issues, who strongly believes that effective teaching begins with a "passion . . . about learning through a dialogue with students."

Michael C. Seeborg, Robert S. Eckley Distinguished Professor of Economics, will receive the DuPont Award for Teaching Excellence at an April 14 (Wednesday) Honors Convocation, which will convene at 11 a.m. in Westbrook Auditorium, Presser Hall (IWU's School of Music), 303 E. University St., Bloomington. The Convocation is open to the public, free-of-charge.

Several hundred IWU students—members of the class of 1999 and others who have earned scholastic and activity honors—will be recognized at the Honors Day Convocation. The year 2000 recipient of the teaching award will be announced at the Honors Day Convocation.

Seeborg, who has been an IWU faculty member for a decade and is a former economics department chair, will receive the \$1,000 teacher-scholar award, sponsored by DuPont Agricultural Products, Inc., of El Paso, Ill., a subsidiary of the Delaware-based chemical industry leader, E.I. du Pont de Nemours and Co.

IWU's Promotion and Tenure Committee selects award recipients based on their contributions to teaching, scholarship, and service.

After Seeborg's award was announced last April at the 1998 Honors Convocation, he said: "I feel a lot of my colleagues are more worthy. I am extremely honored and extraordinarily surprised."

### Outstanding Teaching

Reflecting on what it takes to be an outstanding teacher, Seeborg said: "It

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varies from individual-to-individual. There is no single formula. All teachers have strengths and weaknesses. However, effective teachers have to have a passion about their discipline and a passion about learning through dialogue with students."

Seeborg's interest in teaching has grown as a result of contact with students. He has said his greatest pleasure is "working one-on-one with students. I really enjoy working with students on research projects and to see students' critical thinking skills improve and mature—that brings a lot of satisfaction."

### **Lure of Economics**

Seeborg was attracted to economics, he explains, "because it is a way of thinking, a decision-making science that can be applied to a large number of important social issues.

"As a society and as individuals," he adds, "we have to think about the choices that we make in terms of costs and benefits, monetary and otherwise. I'm intrigued by the economics way of thinking."

However, Seeborg's first academic experience in economics was rocky. He took a principles of economics course as a college sophomore. The lecturer was on leave and much of the course involved watching black and white videotaped lectures and a "talking head."

"But," Seeborg recalled, "on Fridays we had small group discussions with a teaching assistant who was excited about the field—and his excitement was contagious. I tried another economics course, liked it, and changed my major [from pre-medicine]."

### **Teaching Style**

What excited Seeborg about the teaching assistant's classroom approach was that "he showed us the relevance of economics by discussing important social issues—inflation, income, and tradeoffs like guns vs. butter, since this was the time of the Vietnam War."

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Consequently, Seeborg has made relevance a trademark of his teaching style.

"A lot of learning takes place outside the classroom," Seeborg said. "An effective teacher must generate some excitement to make this happen, in part, by giving assignments that ask questions and make students want to learn more on their own about social issues."

Another trademark of Seeborg's teaching style is a humanistic approach to economics. He frequently takes students out of the classroom and transports them to laboratories of economics—cities like Chicago—where they can see first hand the emotion and economics of race, poverty, gender, and other social issues.

"We visit inner-city neighborhoods and places like the Board of Trade," Seeborg said. "This shows students that humans are involved in decision-making.

"These field trips," Seeborg added, "make abstract concepts more real, rather than just drawing supply and demand curves on a blackboard."

What Seeborg wants students to learn from these experiences is how markets work—how they succeed and fail.

"When we go to Cook County Hospital," Seeborg explained, "you see markets failing to work. We see victims of violence and victims of concentrated poverty, where you have a lot of unemployment and social problems.

"It's not comfortable for students to see people suffering because of economic problems," Seeborg continued, "but as citizens it should help them to think about solutions. I want students to care enough to do something about these problems."

A special interest of Seeborg's is working with upper-level students on research projects. His teaching philosophy doesn't draw a line in the sand

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between teaching and research. Dividing teaching and research, he believes, is a "false dichotomy."

### Teaching and Research

"The two go together," Seeborg said, referring to teaching and research. "If you're excited about learning, you'll be excited about research."

To prove his point about the interwoven nature of teaching and research, Seeborg points to ways he has applied his research to students' classroom experiences.

For example, when he was on sabbatical years ago, Seeborg found himself in Warsaw, discussing labor-economics issues with Polish colleagues. However, through a sequence of events, he became enmeshed in agricultural-policy issues linked to food shortages then common in Poland despite the fact that private farms—thought to be more productive—were prevalent in that communist society.

Seeborg collaborated with Polish agricultural economists on a research project, visiting collective and privately owned farms, comparing their performance.

"We found," Seeborg said, "that even with government price controls that farmers were very responsive to price changes—when prices went up, so did production," even in a communist society.

Their data were presented at conferences—slipping the material by Polish censors—and it was published in journals in the United States and Poland.

"This experience," Seeborg explained, "took me outside my own area of comfort—labor economics—to a new area, and a new part of the world, and provided me with good material to share with my students.

"What was of interest to students," he added, "was not supply and demand [theories]. It was a real story about real people who were hungry. It was about a social problem focusing on people who were suffering. The key

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ingredient was my personal involvement and how research can lead to an adventure that can excite students.”

Seeborg has had similar experiences with his travels to the People's Republic of China (PRC), where he examined rural and urban populations and their migration patterns.

### **Focus of Speech**

Seeborg's Honors Convocation address will focus on themes that are an outgrowth of his experience teaching Gateway colloquiums to illustrate the importance of teaching and learning. Gateway courses, a freshman requirement, are designed to promote learning in small groups. They also introduce students to academic life at the university. Seeborg teaches a Gateway course with 16 students, probing race and poverty issues.

“In Gateway courses,” Seeborg said, “we teach critical thinking and seminar skills—how to dialogue civilly about issues and we use writing as a tool to develop these skills.

“Gateway courses deal with topics that matter to students,” he added. “They also are set up to facilitate interaction among students. Students can learn a lot from each other. My role in class is to ask questions that promote analytic thinking.”

### **Seeborg's Background**

Seeborg grew up along the Oregon coast, near Astoria. He received a bachelor's degree in economics (1969) from the University of Oregon in Eugene and a doctorate (1976) in the field from the University of Utah in Salt Lake City.

Before joining the IWU faculty in 1989, he taught for 13 years at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind.

Among previous DuPont award winners are: W. Michael Weis, associate

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professor of history (1998); Jared Brown, professor and director of the School of Theatre Arts (1997); Kathleen O'Gorman, associate professor of English (1996); and James Matthews, associate professor of French and now dean of students (1995).

### **About IWU**

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, and a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts.