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Sept. 14, 1999

Contact: Sherry Wallace, 309/556-3181*First-Year Experience***IWU Explores a New Approach With the Class of 2003**

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--At Illinois Wesleyan University the freshman class of 2003 will have a unique opportunity this year to participate in a new program called the First-Year-Experience (FYE).

Under the auspices of the Division of Student Affairs, FYE is designed to assist first-year students in making a smooth transition from high school to college through a semester-long calendar of proactive programming.

Although it is mandatory that all first-year students live in Munsell, Ferguson, Dolan and Gulick residence halls, the seminars are not mandatory for IWU's 545 first-year students. However, the students are encouraged, especially during the first six weeks of school, to become involved and connected with the campus community.

"We hope," said Jim Matthews, IWU dean of students, "that FYE will help open communication between students and members of the IWU faculty and staff. It is our hope that shared living units combined with leadership and programming from the professional staff of Residence Hall Directors and the student staff of First-Year Advisors (Resident Assistants for first-year students), as well as IWU faculty and staff, will lead to a shared and positive initial identity--and ultimately a class with spirit and unity."

Research indicates that the first six weeks of a student's college career are very crucial to his or her success in college. While some colleges and universities are still exploring whether or not to adopt such programs, many are redefining their view of this transition period, and are finding ways in which to promote the success and retention of their students.

Assistant Dean of Students/Residential Life Julie Thornton and her professional staff anticipate that as first-year students acclimate themselves to college life, they will have such shared anxieties as homesickness, roommate

conflicts, transition to the college classroom, time management and expectation conflicts with their professors.

"The idea," said Thornton, "is to approach and address these issues early on. We have designed programs that will provide opportunities for them to learn and grow together. The goal is to have a strong, solid community of first-year students who have worked through common challenges and shared successes." Residential Life's professional staff, as well as IWU faculty and staff, will lead weekly FYE Seminars on such topics as transitioning into IWU, academic skills, personal safety, career explorations, diversity, information technology, money management, the IWU Wellness program and campus support for students.

Other FYE initiatives will include: "Holmes Away From Holmes," a resource room in the Munsell Hall residence unit bringing student-services staff members into the residence halls for the convenience of the students; "Professors Do Duty," a program inviting faculty and staff into the residence halls to interact with students outside of the classroom; and "You've Been Caught Studying," an ongoing program awarding students for studying.

In addition to the programs that the Office of Residential Life has put together, a brochure was distributed to first-year students' parents that not only outlines the events for students, but also acts as a talking points guide for parents. Parents are encouraged to ask their children such questions as: How is it going with their roommate? Is the roommate contract still reasonable? Does the student know where to go in case of illness? What do they do when they are feeling stressed?

Also, members of the class of 2003 just wrapped up a whirlwind of activities as part of the Fall Festival '99 Program introduced at IWU.

As part of the orientation process for incoming students, a week-long schedule of events included academic and recreational workshops for students, residence hall community building, course advising and registration. The students also took part in an introduction to campus services, discussions on campus safety, alcohol education, diversity and other pertinent issues to student life at IWU.

"Last year, we ran two different orientation programs," said Matthews, "the traditional summer orientation we've had for many years and a fall orientation. We found that many families who could not attend the summer orientation because of various commitments received a very different orientation than families who were able to attend a summer session."

According to Matthews, due to the success of last year's fall orientation, an experimental Freshman Festival was organized to see if, in four days IWU could provide a better on-campus orientation for students to learn the school's culture.

"We surveyed students who told us that the Freshman Festival last year was a success. This summer we decided to do away with the traditional summer orientation we had in the past, and move to a fall orientation.

"Also this year, three orientation sessions were planned for parents," said Matthews. "Preparing for the Journey: Parents and Professionals," was the first session held in July, where approximately 300 parents attended. This session provided parents with an overview of IWU's First-Year Experience Program, an introduction to IWU administration and a look at the policies and procedures at IWU.

"Setting the Compass: Academics at IWU" was held in August. This session dealt with academics at IWU and focused on the general education program, the course selection process, career planning and the academic support system at IWU.

On Sept. 24-26, the same weekend as Family Weekend at IWU, will be the last parent session, "First Portage: Assessing the Initial Explorations," which will cover student issues like the social life at IWU and other issues and concerns that a first-year student might face their first year away from home.

"We want parents to go away from the sessions feeling comfortable about the way courses are selected, the kind of choices the students will be making, and the support and guidance we provide students at IWU," said Matthews.