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President's Welcome

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Good afternoon! And **welcome to Illinois Wesleyan University's 170th commencement--and 1st virtual ceremony**: our celebration of the Class of 2020! We wish that you were all here with us on Commencement Plaza today, but we are so happy to be with one another, at least in this virtual mode. At this point I want to introduce the Chair of our Board of Trustees, Tim Szerlong, to bring you greetings from the Trustees.

Members of the Class of 2020, you are no ordinary Class! Certainly, nothing about your Senior year has been ordinary. And throughout your four years at IWU, you have had distinctive experiences. Shortly after you arrived, our nation made a presidential choice that surprised many. During your four years on this campus, you experienced three different presidents! (And the choice, this year, of the university's first female president may have surprised many as well.)

You've also brought changes to IWU. Your first year saw the formation of the Campus Activities Board. And the first Unity Gala.

In your sophomore year, the first Posse Retreat was held.

Your junior year, E-sports came to IWU. And it has proven to be a bigger success than we could have imagined. Next year, we will have almost 50 members on the team!

And then you returned to your Senior year. We might have had an inkling that this year would prove unusual, when our President's Convocation speaker proved to be controversial, and we quickly changed the program--

to actually have the president deliver the president's convocation. As it turned out, this would be the first of many quick changes. Bringing us to the biggest change of all: the Spring Break that never ended.

None of us could have imagined how the pandemic would change our lives. None of us was prepared. And yet...within a week, Titans showed their resilience. This university is founded on the close, face-to-face relationships of students with faculty and with one another. And yet, when we had to change, we did. It wasn't perfect. Of course, it wasn't perfect.

But we did what we needed to; we made it work. I was really struck by the fact that, when we surveyed students about their experiences, almost 90% said they were "very satisfied" with the quality of advising. To me, that says that, whatever glitches Moodle or cyberspace threw our way, the fundamental relationships were still strong. It's those relationships that I want to talk about today, as you transition from students to alumni.

A good friend of mine, Richard Light, is a professor in the School of Education at Harvard University. Over the course of his career, 5 presidents of that university and 90 other universities have turned to him, to help them improve undergraduate education. Professor Light carries out his research mainly by listening to and learning from students, lots of students. Over a 10-year period, Light (and his student research colleagues) interviewed thousands of Harvard seniors, to learn more about their college experience. He distilled those insights in a best-selling book called, "How to Get the Most Out of College." There are lots of good ideas in the book, but that's not why I'm telling you the story. After all, it's a little late for you to

“get the most out of college.” You’re here, today, to officially “get out of college.”

No; I’m telling you this story because of one of the things Professor Light heard as he carried out his interviews, Often--too often--Harvard seniors would say something I’ve never been able to forget. Asked to reflect on their college years, they would say, “Harvard has been just amazing. I’ve grown so much in my years here. But there’s nobody who knows it.” Aside from me, there’s nobody who knows it. Every time I think of this, it breaks my heart.

And when I think about Illinois Wesleyan, I am so proud. That’s NOT what happens here. Here, we have seen how you’ve grown. Faculty members and coaches and deans and staff members have cared about you, have mentored you. And one way I know that has to do with the Commencement-in-a-box that you received. We invited faculty and others to contribute a personalized note of congratulations on your graduation. We had special note cards for the purpose in my office. And every day, over about ten days, faculty members and staff beat a path to the office, eager to pick up cards so they could send you a personal message, so they could praise your accomplishments, so they could tell you how much they learned from you. And this outreach didn’t stop with your on-campus well-wishers. In addition, the Class of 1970, celebrating the 50th anniversary of their graduation, chose to reach out to you as well, to welcome you as new members of the alumni body--and, importantly, welcoming you to the Titan Alumni Network.

Graduating from Illinois Wesleyan doesn't mean leaving Illinois Wesleyan behind. All your life, you will be a member of the proud fellowship of Titan alumni. Our alumni retain strong ties--to the university and to one another. Some of you may have already benefited from a scholarship given by an IWU alum. Some of you may have had internships sponsored by an alum. You may even be taking a job offered by another IWU alum (either now or later in your life).

Alumni watch out for one another. And they're watching out for you. Just this week, with the Hart Career Center, we've launched a special initiative for the Class of 2020. The pandemic, we know, has affected all of us. But it may present especially tough economic challenges, just as the Class of 2020 is entering the workforce. All spring, we've been emphasizing the importance of Titans supporting Titans. And alumni have stepped up. One way they showed their support was on our annual day of giving this spring, All In for Wesleyan. We surpassed any previous year, receiving over \$1million in a single day. But that's not the only way that alumni give back. This year, we're asking the alumni network to be especially supportive of your Class, letting us know if their company or organization has internship or employment opportunities that could benefit you, our newest alumni.

There are many ways in which your Illinois Wesleyan experience will carry you forward in life. I mentioned earlier the mentoring that faculty and coaches and others here offer students. And many times those relationships last far past graduation. A few years ago, the Gallup polling organization set out to discover what experiences in college contribute most to overall well-being, after college. They discovered that graduates

who said they had a professor who cared about them as a person, made them excited about learning, and encouraged them to pursue their dreams, were more than twice as likely than others to be thriving in all aspects of their lives.

We call this ceremony Commencement, because you are commencing, on a new part of your life. We have tried to prepare you well, and generations of Illinois Wesleyan graduates give us confidence that you will succeed, as you commence. And your alma mater will always be there, caring about you and watching you pursue your dreams. Good luck and godspeed.