**University Scholars Day Keynote Address 2009:
Choosing Success**

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Bio:

Wendy K. Wilkins is currently the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at the University of North Texas. Her major previous administrative appointments have included Dean of the College of Arts and Letters at Michigan State University, Director of Graduate Studies in Linguistics at MSU, Associate Dean for Academic Personnel in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Arizona State University. She has held numerous faculty positions in the United States and in Mexico, including the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and at the University of Washington. In Mexico City, she was a professor of Linguistics at Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Ixtapalapa; Centro de Estudios Lingüísticos y Literarios, El Colegio de México; and Departamento de Lingüística, Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia. She also held a research position at Instituto de Investigaciones en Matemáticas Aplicadas y en Sistemas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Her academic preparation in linguistics includes a Ph.D. from the University of California at Los Angeles, two post-doctoral appointments in Cognitive Science at the University of California at Irvine, and a pre-doctoral appointment in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at MIT. Her primary research training was in syntactic theory; more recently she has focused on the evolutionary neurobiology of language and comparative linguistic and musical cognition. Her most recent book is a co-edition, published by John Benjamins in 2007. Her most recent publications include two journal articles in *The Linguistic Review* (2005, 2007) and two book chapters in press with Oxford University Press. These most recent works all address language and evolution.

She was recently elected delegate-at-large for Section Z (Linguistics and Language Science) of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and has accepted

numerous service assignments for the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), including the coordination and chairing of the first workshops for graduate students at the annual meeting and organizing and chairing the first LSA Summer Meeting for graduate students.

Abstract:

In this address, Dr. Wilkins discusses her academic career path, tracing the twists and turns from her first serious aspirations to be a ballet dancer to her current position as the chief academic officer at the University of North Texas. Along the way, serendipitous events in her personal life altered her plans in ways she could not have anticipated when she first entered college. Her story is an inspirational one for young scholars, demonstrating that obstacles and challenges, successfully negotiated, can lead to unexpected and positive outcomes.

Thank you, Dean Cox, for your kind introduction. And congratulations to all of you who presented papers and posters today. I'm so happy that so many of you chose to participate in this event—a celebration of your participation in important and successful research endeavors. I hope you all find ways to continue to engage in this stimulating and exciting life of the mind. My remarks today will, I hope, provide you some insight into how at least one person (me!) has achieved a career in higher education—a path some of you, I know, will hope to go down.

First, a bit of background: Close to the end of my first semester here at UNT, I was asked by Dean Sandra Terrell, at that time dean of the Graduate School, to give remarks at the Hooding Ceremony for our doctoral degree recipients. That was my first opportunity to give a speech to the UNT academic community. In preparing my remarks, I wanted to really impress everyone with my erudition and intellectual depth. So I was going to focus on a topic that I know more about than anybody else in the audience: the evolutionary neurobiology of language. Luckily for everyone that evening, my son talked me out of that plan—he convinced me that about the last thing anybody wanted to hear was a heavy lecture on a rather obscure topic.

So, my second idea was to base my scholarly remarks on our university's motto: Discover the power of ideas. I figured I would pick out a handful of powerful—and even dangerous ideas—like the concept of zero in mathematics, the idea that the Earth is not the center of the universe, the evolution of species. Then I would finish up by congratulating everyone on having discovered their own dangerous ideas, on having followed through on those ideas in the writing of their dissertations, and then I was going to encourage them all to continue to discover the power of ideas. Luckily, again, the dean suggested that that was just too heavy for the occasion. She suggested that, instead, I just talk about myself. Since that is another topic on which I happen to be the world's expert, I agreed.

You are probably wondering why I'm telling you all this about my speech at the Hooding Ceremony. Well, you get pretty much that same speech today. My thanks to Associate Dean Susan Eve, who suggested that I might use that material again in talking with you. So I'm thrilled to get to talk about myself yet again—to an academic audience. That doesn't happen very often for university administrators! More seriously, I hope that my sharing of my own experiences may prove not only interesting for you, but perhaps even useful.

As a youngster, I wanted to grow up to be either a ballerina or a cowgirl. This led, actually, to a rather unusual childhood. There is no way I wanted to let my horseback riding friends, or the cowboys and rodeo riders, know that I took ballet lessons. And you'd better believe that Mrs. Sussman, the Russian ballet teacher, would have had a thing or two to say about one of her girls doing barrel racing.

During high school, my idea was to join a ballet company. My wise mother, thank goodness, had other ideas—she insisted that I get a college degree. So I went to college and majored in dance. Well, sort of. What actually happened is that after applying to only one college and being accepted on early admission, I injured my knee.

Not letting a small thing like a knee get in my way, I stuck to the “major in dance” plan, went off to Bennington College, and stuck it out for a year and a half until my knee became so bad that the faculty would no longer allow me to take studio classes. End of the dream and the plans, beginning of trauma and disappointment: I dropped out of school.

After a couple of boring years, I woke up, realized that I belonged back in school, and began a major in Latin American Studies. After just one year at UCLA, the only courses I was really enjoying in my major were Spanish and Portuguese. So I switched majors to linguistics,

not realizing that linguistics was not about learning to speak a bunch of languages. But after I took my first actual linguistics course, I was hooked.

So: I got out of dance because of an accident and I got into linguistics by accident.

Close to the end of my undergraduate major, I was offered a four-year fellowship for graduate school. I don't recall really deciding to go to graduate school. And I certainly never yearned to be a professor. But I liked being at UCLA, living in southern California, needed to have money to live on, and so I accepted the fellowship. I never even took the GREs.

Well, I did my graduate work at UCLA in linguistics and because the fellowship was for four years, I finished in four years. But not without some further turns in the road and twists in the story.

Near the beginning of my third year as a graduate student, and while driving in the left lane on the San Diego freeway in Santa Monica, I suffered a life altering anxiety attack. After many therapeutic sessions with the insightful Dr. Kardner, I learned that I was afraid of success. My major professor and other committee members were becoming very excited about my dissertation, and I was the only one who knew that I absolutely did not belong in the fast lane!

Thanks to successful therapy, however, I made it through that grueling third year, and then learned that during my fourth year of graduate study, my major professor was going to spend the year in France on sabbatical. But he had a surprise in store: he arranged for me to spend a year as a "visiting scientist" at MIT, working on my dissertation with Noam Chomsky—the most famous linguist in the world. Wow! Good thing I had supposedly gotten over the not belonging in the fast lane thing—because I was definitely driving in the fast lane with that little arrangement.

And that arrangement then led to a lucky break: finishing my degree, I got the hot job of the year, at the University of Massachusetts, home of the number two ranked linguistics department. I got that job, I learned, because the department was in trouble with the dean for only hiring MIT PhDs (MIT being the number one ranked department). I was the safe hire all around: my degree said UCLA (dean was happy), but I knew how to do MIT linguistics (faculty were happy). I, however, began developing a serious case of Imposter Syndrome.

I was doing okay as a new faculty member in Massachusetts, when I was faced with another distraction—or maybe I should say career opportunity. I met a visiting professor from Mexico (a guy!), suddenly developed an abiding interest in Nahuatl and other Aztec languages, wrote a successful grant proposal, and got funding to do research at the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.

That led to seven years in faculty positions in Mexico, followed by a desperate desire to return to the United States. I accepted an appointment as a visiting faculty member in linguistics at the University of Washington, and then a tenure-track position at Arizona State University in the Department of English. My idea was to stay at ASU for a year or two until I found a “real” job in a linguistics department, where I belonged.

In my second year at ASU, a new chair of English was hired. As it so happens, that was Gretchen Bataille, now your UNT president. She offered me the position of assistant chair. Not really fully understanding what that would entail, I accepted.

Thus began my career in university administration, and the series of appointments (chair, associate dean, dean, and now provost) that brought me to UNT. I didn’t actually get that job in an American linguistics department, where I thought I was supposed to be, until I moved to Michigan State as the Dean of the College of Arts and Letters.

Now, when I reflect on my career, I am reminded of a passage written by the poet, Sylvia Plath. This comes from her novel, *The Bell Jar*, originally published in 1971. In it, the first-person narrator (often thought to be Plath herself) imagines her life branching out before her like a green fig tree. She says,

From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor...and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs....

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (Harper Perennial Modern Classics Edition, p. 77)

I first read this passage after learning that Plath, a talented and accomplished poet, had committed suicide while still a young woman. Perhaps what I find so striking, even haunting and frightening, about this passage is that the writer could not bring herself to just start gathering in all the figs. She was paralyzed by the need to choose. I am grateful that somewhere along the way, I seem to have learned to gather the figs.

While not wanting to turn overly dramatic or somber during what should just be a lunch-time celebration of your research accomplishments, I urge each of you to gather in the figs on the branches of your future. There is a burden associated with choosing among the opportunities that present themselves, but there is a heavier burden in failing to choose.

In closing, I'll make a final reference to Dr. Kardner, my psychiatrist of long ago. On one visit to his office, I remarked on a vase of beautiful roses. I asked him if he had grown the roses. He had the perfect response, "No," he said, "I helped them to grow themselves."

It is my hope that we, your teachers, mentors, and the many others that serve the academic enterprise at UNT, are successfully helping you to grow yourselves. My best wishes to you all.

References

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics Edition. New York: HarperCollins, 1999. Print.