

The thrill of discovery—from the classroom to Cassini

When the snow flies in Norton, a lot of people on campus are going to envy Geoffrey Collins. There will be no snow shoveling or overcoat donning for our professor of physics this winter. He will be on sabbatical in sunny Arizona. And his thoughts will be far, far from New England—by one billion kilometers, in fact.

Collins will be working with a group of scientists on NASA's Cassini mission, which in January will visually explore the surface of Saturn, one of the solar system's most recognizable yet mysterious planets. Collaborating with the imaging team, he will look for faults and fractures on the surface and hopes to learn what caused them. "It's going to be quite a good time, I think," says the geophysicist, who has been discussing the project with colleagues and students with increasing excitement for months. It's the same excitement he felt as a student himself, particularly in graduate school at Brown University, where his mentor was James Head, a giant in geological exploration in space.

His Wheaton students will share that excitement, which is why I bring up Collins and Cassini. He wants to give his students the kinds of opportunities he had. He wants to be the kind of mentor he enjoyed. Through him, they will have exceptionally good access to images and data. Through him, they will see and, to some degree, experience the thrill of scientific discovery.

That's not unusual at Wheaton. Given the chance,

alumnae/i almost invariably praise one or two former professors who affected them in some transformative way. They consistently rank faculty as among the most influential, most positive aspects of their Wheaton experience.

"Wheaton students travel farther, faster, learn more, grow more, and change more than do their peers at comparable liberal arts colleges because of excellent teaching and close student-faculty interaction."

The type of mentoring done by Wheaton faculty is important to me. My own mentors had enormous influence on the course of my education and career from the beginning. As an adolescent in Ohio, I first encountered a music professor at Miami University. Every Saturday for several years I took the bus 35 miles or so from Cincinnati to Oxford, where she tutored me in the cello, without charge and without any reward other than the satisfaction of teaching. Partly because of her example, I am now mentoring eight young men who are part of the Class of 2008. I think they are enjoying it; I know I am.

Wheaton's greatest strength lies in *who* its teachers are and *how* they teach. They want to teach, and they want to be powerful and personal teachers. By all accounts, they succeed to a remarkable degree. Indeed, it was concrete evidence of that very quality that initially piqued my interest in the Wheaton presidency. The 1999 NEASC accreditation committee reported: "Wheaton students travel farther, faster, learn more, grow

more, and change more than do their peers at comparable liberal arts colleges because of excellent teaching and close student-faculty interaction." Penned by former Middlebury President John McCardle, that statement succinctly describes one of the

truly distinctive outcomes of a Wheaton College education.

High quality, personalized teaching is a strength that we will not lose at Wheaton College. We know, however, that these are challenging times for higher education, especially for smaller and more intimate liberal arts colleges like Wheaton. We must use our limited resources wisely. We will have to make choices.

I have begun a comprehensive strategic planning process that will consider how best to capitalize on the college's distinctive

strengths and its successes over the past decade. My goal is for Wheaton to be recognized as one of the nation's preeminent liberal arts colleges. I've convened a committee of alumnae/i, faculty, staff, students and trustees to assist me in conducting a broad-based discussion of the core values of this college and our aspirations for the future. We expect to produce a draft plan by June, including a campus master plan, and to present a final draft to the Board of Trustees in October.

I invite and encourage you to join in the discussion. Through a special Web site (www.wheatoncollege.edu/planning), we will share ideas and information and solicit feedback. I will see many members of the Wheaton community during my travels in coming months, but our online discussion is the surest way to have your say.

Thank you for your interest in Wheaton. As the semester rushes to close, I wish you and yours happy holidays and a wonderful new year. □



President Crutcher greets students before Convocation.