Distinguished Professor Larson (Chair of the Department), Professors Bieder, Díaz-Campos, Rodríguez-Mondoñedo, all faculty in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, students, and other attendees: Good Afternoon! I consider it a great honor to have been invited to deliver the Merle E. Simmons Distinguished Alumni Lecture at my alma mater. It is particularly gratifying to have had the opportunity to reconnect with a number of former faculty mentors. In a manner that is very Macedonio Fernández-esque (this is the writer on whom I wrote my doctoral dissertation), I’d like to begin by acknowledging a former faculty member who is deceased, and yet at the same time very much present today. Macedonio once wrote about the attendance at one of his lectures: “Faltaban tantos que, si faltaba uno más, no cabía en el salón.” This quotation is about the notion of absence and the ways in which our presence can be felt even when we are “gone.” The former IU faculty member I’d like to acknowledge, and who is today both absent and present, is Dr. Russell Salmon. Russ was a very, very special guy. While years after I graduated from Indiana University he and I became friends, I knew him first and foremost as my favorite IU faculty member. He was both demanding in the classroom, yet fun-loving. Largely because of him, I began a lifelong interest in the arts and politics of the Latin American countries. Ironically, some years ago, Russ nominated me to deliver this Alumni Lecture. He was disappointed that I was not selected at the time he put my name forward. I was back in Bloomington last fall at the invitation of his widow to deliver the eulogy at Russ’ funeral. So, Russ, here it is, ironically. What you sought for me while you were alive comes to fruition after your passing.

Thanks for all you did for me; this lecture is dedicated to you.

As I said, I consider it a great honor to come back to Bloomington as the Distinguished Simmons Lecturer. I owe much of my career success to the preparation I received at Indiana University. Many of my former faculty have long since retired or moved to other institutions, yet a few remain. Early in my undergraduate career at IU, which began in the fall of 1971 (ancient history, perhaps, to the students who are here today), faculty such as the late Russ Salmon instilled in me a love of Latin American literature—and a broader passion and affinity for the countries, society, and cultures of Spanish America.

Spanish majors, do you recall your first-ever advanced literature class? My first, all-too-intimidating 400-level literature course was with Professor (now professor emeritus) John Dyson: He arrived to class in rancher’s boots covered in mud and, frankly, caquita from the farm. His direct manner and expectations for us were daunting. That first day of class we were assigned Vargas Llosa’s *Conversación en la Catedral*, (all three tomes!). The second class meeting Dr. Dyson came into the classroom and asked the class point blank what we thought of the book. When, after a few awkward minutes that seemed like an eternity no one responded (all of us looking downward, everyone here knows that drill), he told us that if we weren’t going to do our part he was not going to waste his time with us. And so, five minutes into the second class of the semester, he simply walked out of the
classroom, leaving all of us stunned. We were better prepared for the next class meeting!

I also fondly remember seeing a young Professor Luis Dávila walking the halls of the eighth floor of Ballantine Hall; Professor Dávila, with his ready smile, shock of thick, black hair, and Mexican Spanish that I would come to speak myself one day.

One of life’s ironies is that today novelist Gustavo Sainz is on the faculty here at Indiana University. Later in my remarks I will describe how it is that I came to do my graduate studies at El Colegio de México in Mexico City. It was at the Colegio where I came to know Gustavo, who taught a doctoral course in Mexican literature. Students, imagine how awe-struck I was to have as my faculty member a renowned writer, a man whose novel *Gazapo* marked the beginning of an entire literary movement in Mexico (known as “la Onda”).

But as much as the faculty who left their mark inspired me to want to become a faculty member of Spanish American literature, it was my study abroad experiences that truly changed me. It would be more accurate to say that the experience of “the other” is what transformed me. Language, study, and travel were the vehicles that led me to a broad worldview, greater understanding of life in general, wisdom, and, yes, success in both my career and personal life.

Lest I get too far ahead of myself here, I’d like to take you back in time with me. Born in 1953, I was raised in Maryland and Delaware.

(An aside: I remember that on my very first trip to Mexico I had a stopover in Texas, where a cab driver told me he had never heard of Delaware, except that he knew there was a soft drink—soda pop—by that name—Delaware! This in itself was a prime example of how so many people spend most of their lives unaware that there is a world beyond that which is local. And would you believe that while a student at IU I had a conversation with a Bloomington local who did not even realize that the United States shared a border with Mexico? While today the news is full of stories about illegal immigrants and border issues, and virtually all Americans should now be aware of our international borders, parochialism in our nation remains a problem, one that can have disastrous consequences. This is one of the reasons an important goal of our educational systems needs to be teaching awareness of other nations and cultures.)

Back to my story: My parents were both college educated (in fact, my maternal grandmother graduated from college in 1903, in an era when few women received education beyond high school). We were, by all measures, what I’d call a traditional, middle-class, rather conservative, Anglo-Saxon family. My childhood was unremarkable, except perhaps that I was fortunate to have attended some of what were at that time some of the nation’s best public schools. I was an adolescent during the ’60s, when we Baby Boomers were enthralled with the Beatles and Bob Dylan, and, later, many of us became politically active, protesting the war in Vietnam. And there was the “Women’s Lib” movement. I was never a radical feminist, and I am probably more concerned with women’s issues today than I was back then. In any case, the ’60s and ’70s were an exciting time to come of age.

But how did I come to begin what would become a lifetime study of Spanish? In 1965, at the start of junior high school, at the age of 12, a number of high-achieving students were offered the opportunity to begin the study of a foreign language in seventh grade. There was to be one 30-seat class in French and one 30-seat class in Spanish. Because my family had recently moved to Delaware from Maryland, and my previous year’s grades had not transferred, I was not one of the students initially offered the possibility of beginning a new language the first year of junior high (or middle) school. But my parents and I went to the junior high school counselor and principal, and we made the case.

Late in the summer, just a few days before the
start of my seventh grade year, I received a letter in the mail. It said that while there were no seats left in French, there was one seat left in Spanish, should I wish to avail myself of that. Now, students, so that you know: Back in 1965, French was seen as the language of “cultured folks,” of diplomacy. In 1965, few foresaw any practical use of Spanish. Few predicted that one day Spanish would become the second language of the United States. Spanish was, in fact, considered by many to be a “lesser” language. And, add to this the fact that my mother had been a teacher of French. Well, needless to say, there was some disappointment that the French section was full. Still, I was intrigued with the very notion that people could speak in different tongues… and still understand each other. So I eagerly signed up for Spanish and, as they say, the rest is history. A simple twist of fate and years later I would not only become fluent, but would receive my doctorate from El Colegio de México in Hispanic literature.

Which leads me to the following, one of my favorite sayings—I don’t know to whom to attribute this, but it is as follows: Sometimes not getting what you want is a wonderful stroke of luck. It’s worth repeating: Sometimes not getting what you want is a wonderful stroke of luck, even when we might not be able to realize this until many years later.

Though while at IU and afterward I did come to study and achieve a degree of fluency in both French and Portuguese, I am very grateful for that first opportunity to begin Spanish study at a relatively young age. The teachers of Spanish with whom I studied from the seventh through the twelfth grades were excellent—demanding and inspiring. In particular, I am grateful for my high school Spanish teacher, Mr. Pat McClary, for setting high standards and making the rigorous study of Spanish language and culture seem fascinating. I remain in touch with Pat McClary to this day, and I have confessed to him that in part I worked as hard as I did in his classes because back when I was in high school Señor McClary was a young, dynamic, single man. (Today students would use the term “hot” to describe Pat!) When I took the College Board’s Achievement Test in Spanish during my senior year in high school, I scored a perfect 800. There were two native Spanish speakers in my high school senior class who took the same test and achieved a lower score! This, in turn, put me ahead of the curve when I matriculated as a freshman at IU. If memory serves, I was accorded something like 15 credits toward my undergraduate degree, and my first courses at IU in Spanish composition were a breeze. Arriving at IU, I already had a strong foundation to undertake the reading of literature.

It was not my initial intent, however, to major in Spanish. I chose Indiana University in part because of the extensive curriculum in Hispanic language and literatures, but above all because I wanted to continue my study of classical guitar, which I had begun while in high school. There were few universities in the nation where I could study classical guitar, and the fact that IU was a good 12-hour drive from my parents’ home in Wilmington, Delaware, was, in my 18-year old rebellious eyes, an added plus. And, on visiting Bloomington, I had absolutely fallen in love with the beautiful campus. In passing, I’ll mention that I did not continue with classical guitar beyond my first year, though I confess that I did learn quite a bit of Spanish from my then-instructor Javier Calderón, who was Bolivian. I also toyed with the idea of majoring in Geology (I guess you’d say my academic interests have always been eclectic!)…but, in the end, my love for the Spanish language won out.

So, here I was, in 1971, an East Coast girl, relocating to Bloomington, Indiana. Coming to the Midwest was, in a way, like going to a foreign country. Whereas in high school I had been viewed as one of the more conservative girls, here in the Midwest I was almost immediately perceived as a liberal, a fun-loving, fast-talking, politically left-of-
center young woman. And the ’70s were great years
free-wheeling type of culture on the IU campus in
those days. Yes, there were conservative Greek
sororities and fraternities on campus, but there were
also Frisbee-throwing hippies on the lawn in front of
the IU Memorial Union—and I confess I was more
like those free spirits as compared to the sorority
girls. At times we were silly—I distinctly remember
some fraternity brothers (we called them “frat rats”) swalloing goldfish on a dare outside of Ballantine
Hall one afternoon. And yet, during those years,
many of us were developing the political
consciousness that is still with us today. We protested
the war in Vietnam, we protested the U.S.
government’s involvement in overthrowing the
freely-elected socialist regime of Salvador Allende in
Chile. We were, in our way, involved and politically
committed. The young people with whom I hung
out in the Spanish house (located then in the recently
demolished Aydelotte Hall) did not participate in
activities that we deemed frivolous; I must admit,
during my three years at IU I did not attend a single
football or basketball game…and these were the
years when Coach Bobby Knight was at the peak of
his career! My father would phone on occasion and comment: “How about that Hoosier basketball team, Janet?!” And I’d respond, “Yep, Dad, they are truly
remarkable,” not admitting that I wasn’t interested in
seeing the IU team in action.

My high school preparation, as I said, had been
excellent, and despite greatly enjoying time with my
friends and the social aspects of college, I did work
hard while a student at Indiana University…and
graduated from IU with a 4.0, summa cum laude, a fact
for which I used to feel apologetic and now realize is
something of which to be proud.

But as much as I learned in the classrooms of
Indiana University, I must say I learned more on
foreign study. The summer between my first and
second years at IU (again, I graduated in three
years), I went to Mexico for the first time. Cocky, I
thought I had completely mastered the Spanish
language, only to learn (while living with a Mexican
family that spoke no English) that I had a very long
way to go before becoming truly fluent. That
summer of 1972, thanks in large part to my non-
English speaking novio from Tuxpan, Veracruz, I did
become much more fluent. And I picked up many of
the Mexican modismos and accent. But it wasn’t until
my return trip to Mexico, for the spring semester of
1973, that I knew I had really begun to think in
Spanish. I knew this in part because my
roommate told me that I had been talking in my
sleep in Spanish!

I’ve often reflected upon my time living in
Mexico, and I realize that the experiences there and
in other countries have largely made me the person
I am today. A month or so ago, as part of my light
summer reading, I picked up the novel by Laura
Fraser titled All Over the Map. In it, the author
describes the transformative power of her travels and
her learning a new language: “I first understood that
being able to speak another language, even the few
phrases one can manage at [age] ten, isn’t just a
matter of translating familiar words; it’s a way of
expanding your internal territory and venturing
outside the borders of your culture and family. The
fresh new sentences change the very nature of your
thoughts, your usual reactions, and your sense of
who you are.” The author writes of her own first
visit to Mexico: “I learned, that summer, that I
couldn’t speak a little Spanish without becoming a
little Mexican.”

In essence, during that summer and then a full
semester living in Mexico City and traveling
throughout different parts of the country, I “wore”
Mexico as if a garment of clothing, and it fit me like
a glove. I absorbed Mexico, I lived it, and I did
come to at least a little bit Mexican. Years later, when
I was living in Mexico for a period of about five
years, the locals would sometimes say to me: “Janette,
tú eres más mexicana que las mexicanas.” They said this not just because of the way I spoke Spanish, but because of the way I viewed the world, because of my passionate nature (and sometimes hot-headedness), and my joie de vivre.

I graduated from IU in May 1974, the day after I married (at age 21, in hindsight, very foolish of me). My first husband was a Cuban who had been one of my faculty members during my foreign study at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. My marriage to Manuel, which lasted seven years, was a veritable roller coaster ride, and while he decided he wanted to stay in Mexico to look after his mother, I had held on to the dream that one day I’d be a faculty member of Spanish and Spanish American literature at a college or university back in the United States. Although I had been granted a scholarship to pursue my doctorate at the University of Pittsburgh, a university at the time well known for the strength of its Latin American Studies program, in the end I decided to stick with my marriage…at least for the time being. Thus, I remained in Mexico City, teaching English to Mexican businessmen for a year and then pursuing my doctorate at El Colegio de México.

My experiences as a graduate student at El Colegio were both jarring and transformational. While I had been a stand-out student at IU, at El Colegio and elsewhere throughout Mexico there was, in the mid-’70s, a strong anti-U.S., anti-gringo sentiment. I was one of only two gringas in the program in Hispanic linguistics and literatures, and one of only three non-native speakers of Spanish. The program was challenging, in many ways. The faculty saw themselves more as mentors than instructors, and we were expected to figure most things out on our own. I just didn’t have the confidence in those early years to go head-to-head with well known authors and distinguished researchers. But I got up to speed quickly. I know that I used some brain cells during those challenging years that I’d not used before!

But, at El Colegio, as I attempted to excel in my graduate work, this was the first real anti-American sentiment I had ever encountered, and I had to come to understand it and overcome it. I recall one professor, an avowed socialist, who, after a heated literary discussion that had become political, in front of the entire seminar group, called me a “positivist,” a word he uttered in a tone that suggested that being a positivist was far worse than being a child abusing, senseless, maniacal serial killer. Since I had no idea what the term meant, I went running after class to the library to do some reading on Positivism!

In another course, I was given the assignment of translating a text by Julia Kristeva from French into Spanish… Whaaaat?!! This assignment was nothing short of insane—My French wasn’t that good, and the text itself was way above my head—in any language! Translating that work I literally developed a migraine with symptoms that landed me in the hospital.

And then there was the time that, at the request of a literary agent, I did a translation of a brief document from Spanish into English. Only afterward did I learn that the text was written by the prominent Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes. In hindsight, this seemed particularly absurd, as Fuentes himself spoke excellent English.

Though there were many, many moments when I really had to stretch my ability to understand language and concepts, there were also a few cases in which I felt very much up to the level of the work expected from us. There was a course in “morfosintaxis” (basically, the grammatical structure of the Spanish language) that was taught by a Spaniard, Juan Lope Blanche. He was extremely formal, in his Castilian accent and entire manner. His was intimidating, and his course was known to be a real bear. All of the native speakers struggled to pass. And yet, for me, having done sentence diagramming throughout high school, and having studied parts of
speech when I first learned Spanish, the course was right up my alley. On the grading scale used at El Colegio, of one to ten (ten being the equivalent of an A+), I scored tens on all of Lope Blanche’s exams. At the end of the course, Lope Blanche cleared his throat and, in front of the class, explained that one person in the class had earned a “10”; however, because a ten indicated perfection and because no one is perfect, he was going to have to record my grade on the official grade report as a 9.9.

The process of writing my dissertation and successfully defending it was beyond stressful. It was traumatic. The full story is too long to tell here; suffice it to say that I had, before all was said and done, four thesis advisors (one of whom was unequivocally neurotic, if not certifiably insane!). In the end, I met—for the very first time—the thesis advisor of record the day of my dissertation defense. Gonzalo Celorio was his name, and the first and last time I ever saw him was the day of the defense in front of the three-person jurado. I’ve thought many times that if I had known what I’d go through in order to get that doctoral diploma from El Colegio de México, I’d never had attempted it in the first place. Most times in life it’s best not to know in advance what we’re in for.

But that degree was a ticket, my union card in the world of academia. At a time when few universities were hiring new faculty in Spanish and Latin American Studies (this was now 1978), from Mexico I applied for four university teaching jobs…and had three offers. The hiring departments to which I’d applied knew of the reputation of El Colegio, and they could be fairly certain that they’d be hiring a new professor who had a sound mastery of the Spanish language. Looking back, a major decision on my career path was to have turned down the job offer from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, (at the incredible starting salary of $13,000) to instead accept an offer from a small, liberal arts college, Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania (at a lower salary of $11,800). At UNC I would have taught beginning Spanish for a number of years until I had earned my stripes. It was a large Spanish Department…with a lot of in-fighting among factions. At Allegheny College I was the Latin Americanist, and from my first semester of teaching I taught not only advanced language courses, but also senior-level literature. I might have been one of many untenured faculty at Chapel Hill, but I was a “big fish” at Allegheny.

It was at my second teaching job at Goucher College, a small liberal arts college in Towson, Maryland, where, after six years of full-time teaching, I was offered my first administrative post, a three-year stint as director of the first-year program, or dean of freshmen. In all honesty, I took the job because with it came a $5,000 stipend above my regular salary ($5,000 was, back then, a sizeable amount of money). So while I accepted that administrative post motivated initially by the salary supplement, as I undertook my new responsibilities I found I really liked making a difference beyond my academic department. I felt energized to be involved with institution-wide decisions. Working alongside deans, vice presidents, and the president of the college, I came to see that they were no smarter than me, no harder working…So why were they earning more than the faculty? This judgment was, admittedly, a bit naïve on my part.

After nine years at Goucher, I moved to the public sector, taking a job as chair of the Department of Modern Languages at the State University of New York (Potsdam campus). Serving as chair, I got to enjoy both teaching and being involved university-wide. But the new president of the university had other plans for me and, after two years as chair, I became associate vice president for academic affairs. Two years in that post and then I became dean of the college of arts and sciences and, subsequently, provost of the university. So I climbed the administrative career ladder very, very quickly. And
when the president of the university was away from campus, I served as acting president. It was heady stuff for me; at the time I was in my late 30s. I took my first presidency (at Fairmont State University in West Virginia) at the age of 42. I assumed my second presidency (at Salisbury University in Maryland) in 2000, and I am now where I always wanted to be, back in Maryland, and a 45-minute drive from the place I call heaven, Fenwick Island, Delaware. It is where my family vacationed when I was a child, and I’ve always been happiest with sand between my toes. My second husband and I built a house in Fenwick after I got my first presidency, and it is the place I go to read, write, and decompress.

One of life’s takeaway lessons is that sometimes you have to go where you don’t necessarily want to go in order to get to where you want to be. At the time I made the decision to move to Potsdam, New York, for the department chair’s job, I was leaving members of my extended family behind (in Delaware and Maryland). I couldn’t even find Potsdam, New York, on a map! But, in hindsight, had I not made that move, had I stayed as a tenured faculty member at Goucher, I never would have ended up in the university presidency that I have today, a job which has brought me great satisfaction.

In the end, I do believe I am a sort of “accidental administrator.” My first love is Spanish and teaching. As a faculty member, I was rebellious, independent thinking, and I used to think of administrators as “sell-outs.” A faculty member at Goucher jokingly warned me that once a person moved to full-time administration it took about a year for her (or him) to become brain dead. But the presidency has many rewards. At a place the size of Salisbury University, with an enrollment of just over 8,000, I get to work directly with faculty and students. While I sometimes find seemingly endless meetings and schmoozing with legislators and other government officials tiresome, I truly enjoy fundraising and am good at it. I especially groove on cutting the ribbon on a new, $60 million+ building, with the satisfaction of knowing that the institution is getting that new facility because I fought hard for it. Since I became president over a decade ago now, Salisbury University has earned high recognition in The Princeton Review and other national publications. Salisbury University’s reputation is growing. It’s satisfying working each and every day with bright, dynamic faculty and students, and knowing that my work is making a positive difference.

I do miss teaching and hope to return to the classroom one day in the not-too-distant future. On average, a person becomes a first-time president at the age of 62; I’m now 57, and am beginning my 15th year as a university president. My goal for when I turn 62 is to return to teaching and research.

In giving talks of this type over the years, I’ve learned that some listeners wonder about the toll that a highly intense, stressful, demanding job such as mine takes on one’s personal life. I’ve been extremely fortunate. My husband, Joe, has been a true partner in my achieving my dreams. Together we have raised our son and daughter. At the time I took the department chair’s position at the State University of New York, Joe changed careers and, in his mid-40s, became a registered nurse. The hours he worked could be flexible, and the job was portable, meaning that he could find employment wherever my career would take me. When the children were young, he worked nights so that he’d be home with them when I was at work. Without his tireless support on the home front, I don’t believe I would have had in my life both the joys of raising children and the satisfaction that a career as a university president can bring.

When I received the letter from Dr. Bieder asking that I deliver the Simmons Distinguished Alumni Lecture, I was simply delighted. In it, she suggested that I talk about my decision to earn my Ph.D. at El Colegio de México, my career, and its links to the field of Hispanism. I had a great deal of pleasure
preparing these remarks from my beach house in Fenwick Island (though writing about oneself always feels a bit self-indulgent). The toughest part of the “assignment,” as it were, is the question of how my presidency relates to my field of Hispanism.

In a real, Zen Buddhist sense, everything relates to everything. Overcoming the challenges I experienced at El Colegio, and having had the experience of being an outsider in another culture, I matured not only in my world view, but also in the practical ability to get along with many different kinds of people and to solve problems in innovative ways. As president of Salisbury University, I have aggressively and passionately promoted the internationalization of the campus, bringing students and faculty from other nations to the University, and extending to Salisbury students and faculty opportunities to go abroad. The University, under my leadership, has become known for the emphasis on diversity, globalism, and inclusiveness. This is truly remarkable, given the fact that Salisbury, located on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, had been fairly insular and inward-looking for most of its history. And, while Maryland has three historically Black universities, my future vision is focused on the growing Hispanic population in my state. Salisbury University is on its way to becoming Maryland’s first Hispanic-serving institution.

From a more personal perspective, my affinity for Mexico, and the rest of the Spanish-speaking Americas, is very, very strong. I truly feel at home when I’m in Mexico, and perhaps, (remembering what used to be said of me: “Janette, tú eres más mexicana que las mexicanas”) I am part mexicana. One morning a month or so ago, as I slowly came out of a sound night’s sleep, I was in the middle of a vivid dream. The setting of the dream was a convent in colonial Mexico, during the latter part of the 17th century. I awoke with a convincing feeling that reincarnation is for real. Given the time and place context of the dream, at first I thought, “well, maybe I once was a contemporary of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz” (the self-taught nun, scholar, and poet), who I consider to be the very first feminist in all the Americas. But then I thought, given my facility for Spanish, and my affinity for Mexico, for Hispanic literature, for writing, maybe I myself was, in fact, in an earlier life, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz herself! Sound bizarre? Perhaps. But it will certainly make for an excellent short story, one that I hope to write soon.

In closing, as you can see, I am a university president who is, first and foremost, even in her dreams, a Hispanist. When, back in 1971, here at Indiana University, I first was assigned a work of literature written by Alejo Carpentier or Mario Vargas Llosa or Jorge Luis Borges, having to look up in the dictionary what seemed like every other word, I often thought, with my characteristic impatience: “What in the world can this assignment have to do with my life? How can the time spent trying to decipher the meaning of this literary work help me get a job one day?”

I now know.

Janet Dudley-Eshbach, Ph.D.
Indiana University, B.A. 1974
El Colegio de México, Ph.D. 1986