

**Illinois Wesleyan University
2019-2020 Intellectual Theme**

Fact or Fiction

In 2016, the *Oxford Dictionaries* selected “post-truth” as their Word of the Year and the White House coined the term “alternative facts.” Enabled by social media platforms, the rapid spread of fake news has deepened political polarization and undermined basic democratic processes. The cornerstones of democracy rest on the principle of education that creates an informed citizenry. In this day and age, it is essential that an informed citizenry be equipped to discern between fact and fiction. This often requires us to think about the very nature of truth. How do we know what we know? What is knowledge? Moreover, how should we deal with the massive gray areas that often exist between the dichotomies of fact or fiction? The Fact or Fiction intellectual theme asks us to think deeply and seriously about these issues.

Illinois Wesleyan University’s Mission Statement tells us that “A liberal education at Illinois Wesleyan fosters creativity, critical thinking, effective communication, strength of character and a spirit of inquiry.” Critical thinking and a spirit of inquiry are at the very heart of the Fact or Fiction intellectual theme. Cultivating curiosity and a spirit of inquiry can do a great deal to stem the tide of misinformation.

Learning to discern fact from fiction is a truly interdisciplinary challenge that requires the full array of skills developed through a liberal education. Mathematics and economics teach us quantitative literacy so we are not so easily misled by biased data. The sciences teach a tried and true method for evaluating scientific facts. Psychology helps us to understand the underlying cognitive processes that make it so hard to see through fake news with which we agree. Philosophy pushes us to consider epistemological questions about the nature of all knowledge. When studying actual works of fiction, we often learn something about how to be our best selves in the real world, while history shows us that fake news and propaganda are nothing new and have been contended with before.