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UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING

E-Week 2012 Keynote Speaker: Pete Ludovice

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The room had reached capacity. The doors were shut. No one else was allowed into Othmer 106. Rows of students and adults waited in anticipation. The noise level was increasing by the minute. When additional guests could not find a seat, make-shift seats were found against walls and on the floor. The room fell silent. Pete Ludovice took his place at the front of the crowded lecture hall. He was ready to tell the audience about engineers and why engineers are more than just funny looking.



Ludovice likes making people laugh. He is a comedian as well as an associate professor in the School of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

When he was invited to UNL as the keynote speaker at the College of Engineering, Ludovice wanted to inspire the audience on why engineering was a good career choice and inform them of the problems in the marketing of this profession. He mixed information with humor to create an engaging presentation.

The room was filled with laughter at moments when Ludovice would hit his stride. The audience consisted of middle school, high school and college students, as well as adults and several College of Engineering alumni.

Ludovice spoke on several different topics. He said he wanted to embrace the nerdiness, look at the core challenges, talk about the bad marketing, examine the diversity in engineering and look at the humor and technical innovation.

“We are simple people,” he said. “If something is broken, we fix it and if it is not broken, we still fix it.” He asked audience members if they were geeks and supplied test questions to determine if one was considered a geek. “If you ever referred to any act of physical intimacy as doing the old Fourier Transform, then you might be a geek.”

Ludovice transitioned between topics with the use of comedy. His jokes maintained the flow of the presentation. At one point he warned his audience that “it’s not a dirty joke if a guy with a PH.D said it, it’s educational!”

Ludovice reiterated to the audience throughout the program that his jokes were in fact educational. On the topic of why students are not flocking to engineering, Ludovice said, “because they never portray engineers good in the movies. If you think of James Bond, he doesn’t order his martini with the chemical formula for his drink.”

Ludovice went on to say that people don’t see the characters of Family Guy discussing engineering concepts. The laughs continued to fill the room. Ludovice then shared a simple engineering example: the differences between Oreo cookies purchased at the store and those from vending machines. Based on this question, his daughter did an experiment to discover what the differences were. Ludovice was tasked with eating the cookies while his daughter documented her findings. He shares this story because there is a simplicity in the experiment but the questioning attitude of an engineer comes out.

Ludovice emphasized the issues with how engineering is marketed to people. The slogan is “Engineering- stay with it.” He joked that it sounds more like a diet plan than a career option. To remedy this, he developed five improved marketing campaigns for engineering:

5. Jobs, Jobs, Jobs. “When you graduate, you will get a job.”
4. One word – computers
3. Pocket Protectors
2. Helps in understanding Saturday Night Live sketches
1. Advanced Materials

Ludovice also emphasized some examples of how engineering works in the everyday world, including shrink wrapped turkeys and Tupperware.

“You need to embrace the nerdiness,” Ludovice said. “Normal people love their geeks.” He said Geek Squad is his hero because it is marketing brilliance. However, they could be confusing when they arrive at your house. “Do you answer the door because you need something fixed or are they Mormon missionaries coming to save you?” His voice altered from James Bond to Stewie Griffin to Santa Claus.

He advised prospective engineering students to talk to college students because if they talk to professors, they won’t be able to relate: “Students don’t listen to professors.”

Ludovice said there is plenty of innovation to be found in engineering. He also touched on the diversity of engineering, noting, “It is more diverse than your parents’ engineering field.” Women have grown in the number of positions they account for.

He said engineering is cool and it is all around us, every day. Despite his talents as a comedian, he would never go full-time because “engineering is such a great gig.”

Matt Wilcher, a junior from Lincoln Southeast High School, said he really enjoyed the speech and that it was really funny. “It makes you think that you don’t have to be super boring,” Wilcher said.

Michael Onoshko, a junior from Lincoln Southeast High School, said it was simple and fun. It made him more interested in engineering plus it was nice to see someone who can be both successful and funny.

Both high school students enjoyed the lecture and found it not only informative but entertaining. Wilcher said he wants to study architecture when he is finished with high school but that engineering is also an option. He said there is a positive outlook in the future for engineering.

