

The Call to Think, the Courage to Evolve, and the Conviction to Act

Jim Troha

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Jim Troha is Juniata College's Twelfth President.

Thank you for that warm welcome. I think this is the moment where I have been advised to breathe. With that, Mr. Chairman, members of our Board of Trustees, platform party, distinguished faculty, staff, students, alumni, friends and parents, delegates from the academy, representatives from the community and the Commonwealth, and families of past and present Juniata presidents, I am so grateful and, yes, happy to be here with all of you as the twelfth president of Juniata College.

My wife and presidential partner, Jennifer, our kids, Madison, Nicholas, and Natalie, thank you for supporting me in what I do. This journey has been made possible through your encouragement, patience, and understanding, but most of all, your acceptance of this lifestyle that is the college presidency. I fully acknowledge that at times Dad's schedule can be a bit irritating, but please know and understand how much each of you means to me.

And if you will permit me a moment of broader thinking, I want to welcome our collective and individual histories into the room. None of us has arrived here without the support of others. We carry on what has come before us and we remember those who have changed our lives for the better.

My own example is right in front of me. I asked that as we planned this event, a seat be left open for where my mother, Cynthia Troha, would have sat. I vividly remember the day I called her to share the exciting news of my appointment at Juniata. As you might imagine, it was an enjoyable moment between a son and his mother. A few weeks later, however, she unexpectedly passed away, leaving us much too soon.

My mom would have liked this party, to be sure, but I'm confident she is here with me even if I cannot see her. And in her honor and in memory of Jennifer's father, Jack Wright, who died eighteen years ago of cancer at too early an age as well, Jennifer and I have committed to endow a Juniata scholarship. Both of them truly understood the value of education and its impact on our world.

But they are not the only presence. This room has held generations of students, parents, faculty, and other guests. This is where freshman classes have been welcomed for decades. This is where the choir has sung, where alumni have gathered, where visiting artists have expanded our understanding of the

world. They all look on today. Even Juniata's first teacher, Jacob Zuck, is out there somewhere, probably frowning at what some of his fellow Brethren would have found outrageously extravagant by the standards of their day.

But here we are, mingling with the voices and ideas of the past as we eagerly prepare for what lies ahead. I think of that to remind all of us here that what we celebrate today is not so much a change in leadership as a continuity of community.

Too often, unfortunately, new executives arrive to fractured campuses, financial difficulty, or an ousted or an absent president. When I arrived this summer, we thankfully had none of that. The Board of Trustees and the college community had prepared for this moment in many significant ways.

Last spring, for example, I was able to watch the Bailey Oratoricals via a live stream in my kitchen in Tiffin, Ohio, and hear advice on this transition from students themselves. One young man, senior Seth Ruggerio, gave me a memorable piece of advice: "Dr. Troha, do not try to change Juniata. Rather, let Juniata change you." Wise counsel, to be sure. Thank you, Seth.

I also attended board meetings and took part in the Liberal Arts Symposium, which is an extraordinary display of student research and presentations over the course of nearly a week. Many of those works will be displayed again over this next week. Finally, I had the honor of overlapping with Dr. Tom Kepple for two weeks before he officially retired, an act rarely seen in presidential transitions. Dr. Kepple and his wife, Pat, who are with us today, led Juniata with distinction for fifteen transformational years. In many ways, our two weeks together was the "Here is where all the bodies are buried, Troha" conversation. Thank you, Tom.

Although fraught with expected anxiety, this transition has given space for all of us, including me, to reflect on where we are as an institution of higher learning in 2013. Without a doubt, we exist in one of the most competitive higher education markets in the United States.

We have a very strong state flagship university, a competitive state system, and oh, let's not forget, Pennsylvania is home to more than 100 accredited private colleges and universities—many of which are ranked, with us, in the top 100 in the nation.

With rising concern over price and student loan debt and over the value of higher education in general, with changing technology and challenging demographics, there is a real sense of urgency not just to maintain our quality, but to get better. There are complex challenges to resolve in our world today and it will require shared expertise that crosses disciplines.

To that end, the theme this week is The Call to Think, the Courage to Evolve, and the Conviction to Act. The theme resonates for a few reasons. For one, it links the attributes we must possess today—a calling, courage, and conviction—with what has been, for nearly two decades, a palpable ethos that helps

articulate the curricular and co-curricular work on this campus, the three simple words: think, evolve, act. It is not a tagline. It is our culture and we live it out every day.

I have already described, a bit, the call to think. We must understand and acknowledge our position in the current marketplace of higher education, and as one of the forty *Colleges That Change Lives*, we must preserve and strengthen that which is distinctive about Juniata.

You may have noticed in your invitations a fact I learned in reading Professor Earl Kaylor's history of Juniata: at the time of their founding, the Brethren colleges had a tendency to name their campuses for the towns in which they stood. Juniata's founders elected to do something a bit different and named the college for the river that flowed nearby.

For me, this is a compelling characteristic of our beginning: our founders had in sight a farther horizon. We named ourselves for a feature that brings the world to us and sends us back out. Our engagement as a community with the world must do the same, and we have been recognized for our strength in doing so. Just last year, in fact, we were one of five schools nationally recognized for the international character of our campus through the Senator Paul Simon Internationalization Award. There was Juniata—right next to the University of Michigan. Just this summer, we also had students interning in twenty-seven states, and that was a pretty typical summer.

We have achieved a student body of which more than twelve percent are from nations other than the United States. I welcomed 178 international students during orientation week. Overall, our student body is much more diverse in many measures than it was just a decade ago and it has strengthened our community in ways hard to describe.

However, we are not yet done. We must continue to develop a student body, a faculty and staff, and a board of trustees that reflect the way our world looks.

We also must continue to be good stewards of our environment, something Juniata has done exceedingly well over the years. Take Founders Hall, originally constructed in 1879 but now a LEED Gold facility. Like Juniata, this building is more than just what meets the eye. Under the ground in front of and beside the von Liebig Center is a well field that provides efficient heating and cooling and a 10,000 gallon tank that collects the rain water from the building to be used for irrigation. There is cork flooring, bamboo furniture, and recycled fiber carpets. And remarkably, the roof looks like slate, but it is actually made from recycled tires.

As we look at other facilities in our future, new and renovated, we must consider similar sustainability measures.

As we think, and as we probe next steps to manage what we find, we will require the Courage to Evolve. Kaylor notes in his history a still popular saying about the conservatism of colleges: it is easier to

move a cemetery than to change a curriculum. And I know from my days in advancement and working with alumni that if most alumni had their way, colleges would have well-preserved hitching posts and inkwells on all the desks.

I understand that impulse. When a college is strong, like Juniata, and has the life-changing effect on individuals that has come to typify people's experiences here, it is reasonable to want to preserve what is good, to keep unchanged something that is so successful.

However, just as we no longer have curfews for women or required chapel, and as indicated by having a Program of Emphasis in digital media today, we know well that change is before us.

In fact, if nothing else, a liberal arts education, better than any other academic preparation, urges us to change, to become comfortable with ambiguity. At a time when our culture appears to value vocational training over broad education, we must remember that advancements in industry, science, art, medicine, and law happen when we confront what we do not know and find ways to proceed toward answers, knowing what we find may be uncomfortable, complicated, and ambiguous.

The capacity for critical thinking, clear and persuasive expression, contextual understanding, and empathy comes from thoughtful work in multiple disciplines, in teams and groups of committed people, and in varied settings.

The liberal arts approach—whether adapted by a student toward emerging professional fields or steeped in the traditions of its bedrock disciplines—produces leaders because of its centuries-old orientation toward educating citizens for lives of purpose and contribution. While the aim of a liberal arts education has long remained the same, its particulars have changed over time. As we look toward Juniata's future, we must honor our own traditions, but possess the Courage to Evolve.

Very shortly, this community will begin work on its next strategic plan, a process that will help launch us on an even greater trajectory and help us achieve the clarity we need to be more nimble, entrepreneurial, and purposeful in what we do and how we do it.

President Kepple, in his inaugural address back in March of 1999, remarked that an institution can only accomplish what it is willing to dream. Ladies and gentlemen, now is our time to dream. A new era is emerging, a new strategic plan is in its very beginnings, and now is the time to define our future before it defines us.

We are finalizing the search for a new vice president for enrollment and are in the midst of a search for a new provost. We will invite new people, new ideas, and challenging new perspectives to join us, and I expect them to ask us to do at least a few things differently.

Make no mistake: as we vigorously confront our future, we need visible and authentic leadership at all ranks. The collaborative spirit and depth of transparency this community has enjoyed in the past will

be required for our success. And genuine communication and personal accountability will nurture strong institutional decisions.

While I am ultimately accountable for this culture, I am asking that we collectively own these principles and live them daily.

As our academic community evolves, we will become more global in our outlook, more technologically sophisticated and varied in how we interrelate, perhaps even more physically distant at times than we are now. We will work together in spaces that differ greatly from the libraries and study lounges we know, or the “classrooms and the halls” invoked in our alma mater.

I joked about hitching posts and inkwells earlier, but they represent (albeit archaically) the pressures of technology, and we face similar pressures today. Students arrive from high schools where they studied and collaborated in virtual, team, and classroom environments, and they will leave Juniata to then work in such environments. They expect their college experience to occur across a similar variety of learning spaces.

For that reason, we will be challenged to conceive of our campus differently—a fact which has yet unknown ramifications for this space, this campus, and the global reach Juniata increasingly enjoys. In some ways, our founders, intentionally or not, were prophetic in naming us not for a single town, but for a body of water that reminds us that we are never static.

Speaking of never static, I have spoken a great deal in the last several months about a collective effort toward personal wellness. When you consider that wellness has dimensions beyond the physical, that it touches the emotional, intellectual, spiritual, social, and occupational dimensions, our sense of campus also expands.

When we talk about wellness, it is to engage and nurture that which is the best within us, and that puts us at our best for the benefit of our communities. For what we share here—however it may evolve over years and decades—is the common thread that makes us Juniata College. With that in mind, and knowing the challenges we face together, we will together find the Courage to Evolve.

Having faced challenges together, and having watched our circumstances evolve within and around us, we should arrive at our conclusions with conviction. That is the third and final piece to this journey: the Conviction to Act.

I have said a few times that no one arrives at Juniata by accident. We find that those who arrive here—as students, as faculty, as staff— they seek us out. They are looking for something specific that we offer, whether it’s the POE, the unique beauty of central PA, or the extraordinary working environment heralded each year in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*’s “Great Colleges to Work For.” The result is a community of people focused on action. Focused on results.

Think of our forebears: they acted with conviction that education was important enough to defy the mainstream of their faith. They established and later brought to this place a conviction that an education founded in peacemaking, service, and community would instill values as well as practical knowledge.

In 1970, a group of faculty decided to act with conviction to establish the POE, or program of emphasis, with the idea that students would work with faculty to articulate and defend a vision for their own education and potential. In recent years, we decided that the research and creativity of our students was important enough to cancel classes for a day and collectively witness and discuss their works. These actions live with us and the results are exceptional.

We have before us now a new set of challenges and conventional wisdoms. It is now fashionable to say that college may not be worth the investment and that a credential is all that matters and you can get it anywhere. It is also fashionable to think that future earnings are more important than intellectual curiosity, than the ability to think, or question, or deal with ambiguity. We often hear rhetoric that we as a sector are failing to deliver.

I unequivocally reject the notion that higher education is declining in value and efficacy and I especially reject that notion for Juniata. Our faculty has thought carefully about how to preserve the rigor and intensity of our academic programs and we have worked diligently to insure these same programs evolve over time to meet the demands of an ever-changing world.

I challenge you to walk this campus and look for the lists of honors our students earn. The posters from our Liberal Arts Symposium are in several public spaces for the rest of this week. Read the most recent copy of our *President's Report*. Our students tell the story for us.

We have made experiential learning—action, if you will—a central concern with what we do here, whether through internships, faculty/student research, study abroad, student teaching, service learning, or other forms of service. As a result, nine in ten Juniata graduates earn their diplomas having had significant work through such experiences. We must act to not only preserve that but build on it. Strengthen it.

We will, of course, be planning for the resources it will require to continue this experiential learning, the development of our campus spaces, new international partnerships, and yes, financial resiliency. Those resources will come, in part, from the conviction of our alumni and friends to act on our behalf and invest in the efforts to strengthen Juniata and its students, as they are indeed why we exist.

As I mentioned earlier, overall personal wellness will and should demand our collective attention. Consequently, we must act to intensify our efforts with career and academic support, counseling services, spiritual awareness, recreational activity, and a strong and competitive athletics program.

The recently retired provost, Jim Lakso, was fond of mentioning that Juniata was—according to results from the National Survey of Student Engagement—among the most academically challenging and academically supportive environments in the nation. Very few other colleges can claim both, and it takes conviction to create that environment anew every year, for every class, for every student.

And that conviction starts with our faculty and we have one of the best in the nation. Creative, student-centered, relationship-oriented, and passionate, the Juniata faculty are the rock upon which all else is built. Their actions—their contributions to our community, their work in the classrooms and other learning environments—determine who we are and who we come to be. We must create a place where they have the resources to do what they have been called to do. And that is to change lives for the better. Case in point: Class of 1970 Juniata graduate Bill Phillips, who won the Nobel Prize in Physics. Learning of his award, Bill was quoted in the *Altoona Mirror* as saying of his Juniata education, “I learned a lot of intangibles there. I learned about growing up and becoming a complete individual. Juniata produces good scientists but it also produces good people.” Faculty, thank you for your uncommon commitment to support those students who choose us. You deserve our collective thanks and appreciation.

So my final call is this: We need to think, yes. Evolve, of course. And when the time comes, we need to act with conviction, with uncommon strength, compassion, and boldness. And we will do this together, in an environment built on trust, respect, and collegiality. These enduring and transcendent values still matter at Juniata. It is why I am here. It is why we are all here.

On this beautiful October fall day, 2013, I am inspired by your presence and want to thank you for sharing in this extraordinary moment of community that is Juniata College.