

Juniata College: Totally Unusual (for a German Student)

Christoph Schwemmlein

137th Juniata College Commencement, May 16, 2015

Christoph Schwemmlein, Class of 1984, is the Managing Director of Klöcker Brothers in Weseke, Germany.

Standing here in front of you makes me feel good, just like it is my special day—but actually it is not. Anyway, I do have a great view, Juniata looks gorgeous. An excellent job has been done, as usual. Special thanks to those who were called the “Blue Army” during my days. This day, graduates, is yours, though. You worked hard, grumbled, cheered achievements, dealt with setbacks. Kept up.

In 1984, I was sitting down there, a brutally hot day, the 27th of May. Mr. Frank Hodsoll had been the commencement speaker. Unfortunately, I forgot what he said and I am afraid my words will be buried in oblivion, too. Mr. Hodsoll talked for a long time, it was hot, and too hot for Professor Tom Nolan, who ended up in a heat stroke.

The truth is, all of us students were beginning to get uneasy and started popping the champagne corks that had been thoroughly smuggled under our robes. The brand “André” I will never forget—very sweet—but I usually ended up in a dreadful hangover. I was surprised to notice the trustees were not quite wondering about the situation behind them, but kind of smiling. Showing comprehension. Obviously, everybody was suffering from the heat.

I remember the day was quite stressful for me. My finals were done—I was through by Tuesday—and I was heading for the days and nights well known as senior parties. Great parties. We had a tremendous time. Too bad I had to drive to New York City with a rented car in the very early morning after one of those parties to pick up my Mum from JFK airport. She looked into a hangdog face and supposed hard academic work was behind it. I quickly assured my Mum that hard college work was the reason.

The next day, I received my degree and I was so proud. Maybe too proud, as Professor Jim Lakso showed up afterwards declaring quite straightforward in the presence of my Mum, “Christoph, don’t take yourself too seriously.” In his one-of-a-kind way, Professor Lakso looked at us, joyfully and a little out for blood. Needless to say I was shocked. My mother gazed, full of expectation. Fortunately, my Mum does not speak any English and I was absolutely cool when I just translated “don’t take yourself too seriously” into German: “Christoph worked very seriously.” And again I was lucky: Jim Lakso did not speak any German back then. I guess nowadays my white lie would not work anymore. Jim, I believe the time has come to

confess.

I made it to Juniata College through an exchange program with the University at Münster. Just like today, the United States had been attacked from every direction. When I made my decision for the USA, I was called a right-wing extremist. But I remembered the words of my father who had passed away in 1978: “Whenever folks are running that direction [points to the right], over there is the money [points to the left].” The realization is stressful, but the slogan is so true.

My experience at Juniata was just great, after having managed a quite difficult adjustment phase: the heat, the food, the stress in the classroom, and the limited resources in downtown Huntingdon. After the adjustment phase, I had the time of my life. Professors Klaus Jaeger and Bob Reilly, as well as their families, helped me a lot. They positively took me by the hand. Totally unusual for a German student. The two of them always took the time, which gave me a completely new sense of studying. Whatever Juniata is promoting in their fantastic brochures today I experienced thirty years ago. It is just like being carried through those high gloss pictures now.

I came to Huntingdon as a student from the university town of Münster, with 60,000 students. And for the first time, I realized a university could have a president you can actually talk to. President Fred Binder was in charge, and after a telephone call I was granted a meeting. A good-looking man. Suspenders. I was really nervous. Today, I know there wasn’t any reason to be nervous. “Get self-employed,” he advised, straightforward. Actually, he would not know anything about self-employment, but judged my character this way. As a matter of fact, he did know something about my person. He must have gathered information. Hard to believe, the president himself doing this. After a great discussion I was released with the sentence, “And whatever you do, don’t leave money on the table.” Apart from “don’t take yourself too seriously,” this next-best advice is something that I have been trying to follow until today.

Back in Germany, though, I faced some issues with my US degree. At that time, foreign academic achievements would not have been easily accredited; I was even asked whether I could speak German and was offered a translator. Fortunately, today’s situation has changed due to outstanding international relations efforts at Juniata. I offer my appreciation to the staff in charge and to all of you graduates who took this step and went abroad. Today, after all, I may only be speaking to you because of exactly this kind of international orientation at Juniata.

Later on in business, the degree immediately turned to account. Around 350 bucks extra per month, which was quite a lot of money back then, especially if you’re married to a wife like Rita. Two years later, I had already made it to assistant managing director. The reason was quite simple. I had something others were lacking: two degrees. For the second time, I drew some direct benefit from Juniata.

In 1990, I got self-employed together with Mr. Matthias Klöcker, Juniata Class of

1989. The truth is, back then you still could get money from the banks. I needed around 1.2 million US dollars (which used to be 2 million deutschmarks), which I got, not least due to my international education and experience. And Rita and I of course needed to encumber everything we had built up so far. Full risk. What do the Americans say? No risk, no fun.

Well, the risk had been quite high, and then something happened which probably occurs only at Juniata. Professor Jaeger got back to me, reassured me, and pushed for my self-employment. And he promised to arrange for a survival check from the USA just in case I would fail. No family commitments, just a former student and a professor of German. Cross-border trust. All this made me feel brave and proud. And it still does today. Thank you, Klaus. And somehow it seems to have worked out in the end. That's Juniata. That's the college you are about to leave proudly. In the meantime, I know the complete faculty of Juniata always shares your happiness on awards and professional achievements.

And even today, Professors Jaeger, Lakso, and Reilly, and former President Dr. Kepple, even former President Neff are still looking after my boys. Just like John Mumford, who joins me for soccer games throughout Germany on a regular basis, and Rob Yelnosky, who learns about soccer from me. Step by step.

Talking about taking care, I would also like to address the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies. None of the Schwemmlains ever studied there, however, there is some kind of interesting relation. My Mum, at the age of 86, was invited by Juniata to present the Bliss-Karns-Schwemmlain Award in 2008. Supported by Professor Lakso, who translated her German into English, she said, and I quote:

I am honored to be at Juniata College today. I am eighty-six years old. More than sixty years ago, in the middle of World War II when Germany and the U.S. were at war, I would never ever have dreamed that such day as today would have been possible. I end up here today, and I am so proud to be here today. My husband Arnold was a prisoner of war in the United States at Camp Indianola in Nebraska. When he returned from the war he expressed admiration for the United States, telling people that he was treated better by the guards at Indianola than he was by the German military.

My Mum's words also mark some international success for Juniata, which I can only compliment. It invited a former enemy to Huntingdon and granted her all honors.

Some of you know about my commitment to the University of Applied Sciences in Bocholt, where I lecture International Management classes together with Professor Raymond Figura. We support the academic pursuit of Bachelors and Masters degrees, including the final thesis papers. We often disagree; he thinks I am too Americanized, too strict, and too impatient. I think he is too German. Me, impatient? I would say I am the most patient guy in the world. Don't you think? In any case, together we are being rated positively by German students and I am more than glad to pass on the internationality I once was trained for by Juniata.

I have been visiting the USA on a regular basis for thirty years now, both occupationally and as a

trustee. Study hard – party hard. This used to be our slogan and I can't imagine any significant changes have occurred in the meantime.

Dear graduates, I hope you will enjoy some more fantastic parties; you surely deserve it. Be proud, but don't forget about the people who guided you on your way. Congratulations to all of you.

As usual, I received good advice from Professor Lakso prior to my speech: "Keep it short." I hope to have fulfilled the requirements. Graduates, trustees, President Troha, I am thankful to be today's commencement speaker. I feel honored.