

## *Complaining, Worrying, and Some Advice About Fleas*

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**I**t's hard to know what you're going to say in a speech to a freshman class other than "Go get 'em guys!" and I am fully aware of the fact that I should be a) brief and b) incredibly peppy. I will try to be both, though I do have a message that I would like to get across to you today.

Not too long ago I was looking for something and I happened across this quote. In it, a faculty member is complaining about students. We faculty do that a lot; it's part of the job description, but listen to what this particular professor has to say:

Sometimes [students] wish to be above their masters...

They attend classes but make no effort to learn anything...

They frequently learn what they would better ignore...

They have among themselves evil and disgraceful societies, associating together for ill... (This makes me think of — what? Student Government?)

They are disobedient to the masters... of the universities and sometimes transgress the statutes that they have sworn to observe...

The expense money that they have from their parents ... they spend

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in taverns, conviviality, games and other superfluities, and so they return home empty, without knowledge, conscience or money.<sup>1</sup> Pretty harsh. But would you believe that this particular professor was complaining about the students at his university in Europe in the fourteenth century? I'll grant you it sounds very familiar. He suggested that: "They should be subjected to blows of rods."<sup>2</sup>

Don't panic; we don't do that here, however much some of us might like to. How about this one? Here's an Italian writing to his two sons, who were attending the University of Toulouse in France about 1315:

[W]hen you see other students wearing their caps, do you likewise... And when you go to bed at night, have a white nightcap on your head and beneath your cheeks, and another colored one over it, for at night the head should be kept warmer than during the day... Also, look after your stockings and don't permit your feet to become dirty... And comb your hair daily.<sup>3</sup>

I'm sure this worried dad would have added an injunction to carry an umbrella, if they had had umbrellas in the fourteenth century. He does have a wonderful bit about how to get fleas out of your bed, though I hope this won't be a problem here at Juniata. (The way you get rid of fleas is to avoid mopping the floor. People in the middle ages believed that fleas were spontaneously generated from a combination of dust and water. I am not making this up. Imagine saying, "Sorry mom and dad, can't clean up the room, might get fleas.")

There's a point I want to make here beyond the usual "the more things change, the more they stay the same," which is a phrase historians LOVE to use because it makes us sound smart. If you wanted to know that things change slowly, all you have to do is look at us in these robes and hats. Professors used to shave the tops of their heads, too, but thankfully that went out of style.

Instead, I want you to realize — if you haven't yet — that your professors are going to criticize and your parents are going to worry. This is normal. You will do your share of complaining and worrying right along with us. Students in the middle ages complained a lot about the dress codes, which made them wear robes that reached below the knee and forbade them to carry weapons. They worried about money, and they wished for news from home, which could take weeks or months to arrive. In today's age of the miniskirt and the cell

phone, your concerns will be quite different (though I would ask that you still refrain from carrying weapons!). Trust me, you'll be fine.

But because I'm older than you, and because I have heard all the complaints and worries from your adults, I have a few short pieces of advice to offer about how to make your college career a success.

1. *Get to know your professors.* If I had my way, this would be stamped on the front of every notebook sold in the Juniata College bookstore. If you don't get to know us, then what is the point of coming to a college this size? Think about this: if you get to know only one professor per year, by the time you graduate you'll have four people who know you well enough to write recommendations. Medieval scholars believed that "one does not ascend from ignorance into the light of science, unless the writings of the ancients are pored over zealously."<sup>4</sup> Well, we've got plenty of ancients, and we'll give you plenty to pore over.

2. *Be a joiner.* Find out what the club or honor society is for your particular discipline and *join it*. This is where you can find friends with similar interests; the older students will know the scoop on how things work, or will be able to tell you who to ask.

3. *Find your vocation and your avocation.* I had a wonderful professor in college who told us that our job in college was not only to find our vocation — that is, what we were going to make money at later — but our avocation too: what will you use to keep your mind active when you're thirty, forty, fifty, sixty? Don't give up the flute, or acting, or singing, or writing, or whatever makes you happy; and don't miss out on the opportunities that are available to you for free on campus: arts, movies, seminars, internship fairs, etc.

4. If you do one thing for every class you take at Juniata, let it *be preparing for and participating in discussion*. I know that students have a tendency to focus on quizzes and exams in classes, and I'm not denying they're important, but a test is not where learning takes place. Learning takes place in the

exchange of ideas; if you don't exchange, you miss out. There is also a practical point to this. Face it: when you graduate, whether you're in a chemistry lab or a newsroom, you're going to have to go to meetings and talk to people. There is no way to get good at this unless you do it.

5. Lastly, try to be flexible and open to the ideas you're about to hear, and try not to resist when we tell you to take classes outside your POE. Listen to this list of subjects from a twelfth-century teacher: "the point, the line, the surface, the quantity of the soul, fate, the inclination of nature, chance and free will, matter and motion, the principles of bodies, the progress of multitude and section of magnitude, what time is, what empty space... of the divisible and individual... of the tides of the ocean, of the source of the Nile... of the first beginnings of things, and many other matters which require a foundation of fuller science and more eminent intellects."<sup>5</sup> Compared to this, Juniata's core requirements don't seem too bad.

You are about to begin a period in your life when learning and growing happen so fast that you can't keep track. In part, that's what a liberal arts college is all about. The medieval university used the term "liberal arts" which is related to the Latin words *liber* and *libertas*, meaning "book" and "freedom." Education is freeing in a very special kind of way. So no matter how much complaining and worrying is involved, you will find that your years in college will shape your lives. Just watch out for the fleas.



#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quote from Alvarus Pelagius (d. 1352), in Lynn Thorndike, ed., *University Records and Life in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1975), 173-174.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Peter Fagarola, "Letter to his Sons," in Thorndike, ed., 158.

<sup>4</sup> Peter of Blois, ca. 1160, in Thorndike, ed., 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.