

# Not as Nice as the Quad but Better Than the Gym: The Class of 2020 Graduates over Zoom during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**C**lass of 2020, faculty, administration, family, and friends, it's good to see your faces and see all my friends smiling bright and early today because this is the earliest I've woken up in a couple months.

Back in the early days of 2020, a simpler time when we all lived on campus at Juniata with hardly a care in the world, I sat in a bunch of meetings about Commencement and senior activities and thought about how my speech should look. At one of these meetings, someone said to me that graduations really serve the families of the seniors. It is for the moms who take shaky videos of their child walking across the stage and for the dads hooting and hollering their graduate's name. Commencement is for the grandparents who are tasked with keeping the younger siblings relatively well behaved during the ceremony.

Those observations are more than true, but I am here as president of the Class of 2020 to talk to you graduates! My class. The friends with whom I spent some of my most formative years. There is no doubt that graduation holds a special value to the parents and families who have not only watched but played an active and important role in their kid's growth and success in college and in reaching this point, but I think that, especially in this COVID-19 pandemic year, commencement is quite different. Let us spend some minutes acknowledging what we have lost and how things have concluded very differently than we expected yet honoring the incredible growth, fun, and challenges across the four years we have shared, and then consider a simple but powerful lesson we learned from the last few months.

The most obvious difference is that we are coming together on Zoom, rather than on the quad, to celebrate our 2020 graduates. A smaller difference, by virtue of being virtual: no one has heard my mom yell my name yet (although she assures me that she is doing so through tears at home in Dubai). There are less explicit differences, ones that we may not all hear about. Not only does it feel like we lost the last months of our senior year, some of our number have lost family members and friends, jobs and internships, and we fight daily to maintain our mental health in the face of a life-changing pandemic. For

these reasons, we should take greater pause today to be grateful that, in spite of facing serious and unanticipated challenges thrown into our everyday lives, the Class of 2020 has made it to graduate.

For four years, we grew together, watched each other succeed and fail, struggle and overcome obstacles. We watched Pablo, Harry Biddle, and Logan Ulsh and, of course, Kirwin kill it at Mr. Juniata. We saw Azia and Evan leave Landmark runners in their dust. We witnessed Steph Letourneau, Olivia Drake, Alli Koehle, Austin Montgomery and more present their research at top conferences. We listened to Taylor and Alex and Cat and Vinnie and Madison and Lara as they placed in the Bailey Oratorical competition. We even saw that Karan kid almost get ejected from the stands at most Men's Volleyball games. We observed the fifty-cent beer night regulars build those beautiful plastic cup towers every Thursday. This list could go on all day.

All of these cherished memories that we hold dear are traditionally supposed to culminate in our senior week, when we intended to become overwhelmed with emotions at the thought of having to leave our best friends, favorite faculty, and our home for the past four years. However, sadly, the COVID-19 pandemic denied the Class of 2020 those opportunities this year. We did not get the chance to sit on the booze cruise, four drinks in (sneaking a fifth), looking across the boat to an acquaintance from bio lab doing something silly and thinking: "Wow, I've never really hung out with that kid, but I'm going to miss him." That senior week and our last few months at Juniata were supposed to be our chance to scrape together some semblance of closure as we leave a place where we have crafted some of our fondest memories. Those last few months were supposed to give us time, space, and events to mentally prepare us for taking our last class or pulling our last all-nighter. For the last time, we could lie in a hammock or play Frisbee on the quad or enjoy a last meal at Baker Refectory! No one thought that the last time we ate in Baker before Spring Break would turn out to be our last group meal as undergraduates. Can you remember your last Baker meal? For mine, I probably walked around, gave all the options a once over, and then just got cereal and a sandwich. Kind of anticlimactic. If I had known it was my last meal, I would probably have walked around at least twice before getting my cereal and sandwich!

While the pandemic denied us these special moments, it is important to take a minute and be grateful that we are able to be here today—at this Zoom ceremony—joined by friends and family from across the country and around the globe. Graduation speeches often have an inspiring message. Frequently, the message can be distilled down to "Go get 'em" or to a call to take action in the world. From spending the past four years with me, however, you all know that I am among the least qualified to give life advice.

Instead, I will share a new outlook that I have found. It is not a new idea; in fact, the sudden loss of our eagerly anticipated final senior months taught me to appreciate the value of an old cliché. This phrase, one that reminds us to appreciate the little things in life, is to stop and smell the roses. My

corollary to it is to stop and smell the roses, even the less pretty or less sweet-smelling flowers. At a time like this, I am sure we would all give everything to be back in the middle of finals week, stressed out of our minds but on campus with our fellow Juniata students. Suddenly, those eight a.m. classes and ten-minute lines for Baker during rush hour do not sound too bad. To be back at Baker complaining about the food sounds good right now. Losing the everyday challenges mixed with pleasures and companionship brings out the truth of that reminder to appreciate the good times, and now I know that we need to see the good things in the challenging, boring, stressful times, too.

But, hey, through a last-minute shift to online learning and scary and unsure times, we made it through. Think about all those moments over your collegiate career where you thought that this paper or final project was too much: how can I graduate on time? Yet you made it. For those of you who worry about the state of the world today, I think one day we will look back with a fresh new perspective, remember these times of struggle, and say: “We made it.” So go ahead, Class of 2020, pop your bottles of champagne, sip your glasses of boxed wine, or shotgun your lukewarm Miller Lite, because, hey, we made it. We have more than earned today.