

The Courage to Be a Community

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I had the privilege to welcome the class of 2023 to the Juniata community. Although this article recounts a speech that was focused toward new Juniata students beginning their first semester on campus with COVID-19 precautions of masking and social-distancing, I hope that my message has broader interest and applicability.

It is my privilege to welcome you students to the Juniata community. Whether you are able to be on campus or are joining us remotely this semester, this is a community you chose, and we are so glad that you are joining us. But it is no longer *you* and *us*: together we can say, “We are Juniadians!” What does it mean that you are part of the Juniata community? How do you contribute to this community? And what does it mean to be a part of the Juniata community now, in the middle of a pandemic that has turned our lives upside down, in the midst of a social movement that challenges a long legacy of racism and oppression, and, finally, during a heated election season in the United States?

During these challenging times, I think it is more crucial than ever to build a strong Juniata community. I am going to speak to you about community not because I am an expert but because I am a learner. I am going to share with you some of the things I am learning about community, and I would be delighted to hear from you if you wanted to share some of your own insights and experiences. What I most want us to embrace today is this: community is not for the weak of heart; rather, it takes courage to be a community. This is always true, but it is especially true right now.

Consider Juniata’s mission: “To provide an engaging personalized educational experience empowering our students to develop the skills, knowledge and values that lead to a fulfilling life of service and ethical leadership in the global community.”¹ Our goal is to help you lead—to help you change the world! What change do you want to see in the world? Do you want to see a world where every person has access to the resources that they need to flourish, eliminating inequities of race and social class? Do you want to counteract climate change? Do you want to see a world where we all value each other and seek to eliminate interpersonal violence? Do you want to see a time when the coronavirus pandemic has ended and we can all put away our masks?

No matter what change you want to see in the world, you cannot do it alone. You need other people to work with you. You need a community. You can start with your own learning and reflection and

build a community: first some close friends, then the Juniata community, then bigger. You can start right here to change the world. I am going to share with you three actions that I think are important for a community to grow and develop with the goal of changing the world. These actions may sound easy in the abstract, but they are much harder to live out. You need courage!

THE COURAGE TO CONNECT WITH OTHERS

During student orientation, some of you mentioned to me how much you were looking forward to meeting new people at college. Relationships are the bedrock of a community, and they take time and work to develop. It takes courage to connect with others.

During my first week of college, I was looking for the meeting place of a student organization and showed up at the wrong place at the wrong time. I walked into a dorm meeting of upperclassmen. However, a senior there was a member of the group I was looking for and therefore was able to give me the correct time and place. She even chose to mentor me throughout that year because she was impressed by the risk that I had taken to try to find my intended meeting. That was a huge reward for inserting myself where I did not belong. So, I ask you: Where will you try to connect with others? Will you seek out a student organization and commit to it for the semester, even if the first few meetings are a little disorganized because they had to switch to Zoom? Will you meet with your advisor and start developing a relationship?

I challenge you: take initiative and find a place to participate! You are needed. You have gifts that are uniquely yours. Juniata needs you. Now consider my challenge from the point of view of my upperclassman mentor during college: Would you want to invite an interrupting, clueless student who could not even find the right place at the right time? Would you want to invest time every week and draw that person into your own community? That is hard. It takes time and a genuine openness to other people despite first impressions. Will you introduce yourself to the person next to you in class, even though they are at least six feet away and you cannot see their full face? Will you seek to include people who come from different perspectives so that your understanding is broadened? Maybe you can connect with someone who has different religious beliefs, skin color, nationality, or maybe even a different political party. It takes courage to share yourself, to reach outside your comfort zone and invite others into your community, and to listen even when you might disagree. Relationships that we build are connections that tie our community together.

THE COURAGE TO CARE FOR OTHERS

Although it is great to get to know each other, usually our closest friends are those we have known deeply over time, those with whom we have traveled hard roads, and who have shared our pain

and joy. You could choose to live your life always on the surface, ignoring others' pain and hiding yours, but you would be missing out. It takes courage to care for others.

When you walk down the hall, you can ask everyone, "How are you?" and get the typical "Fine" in response. Or you can stop with a few and really ask: "What has been good today?" or "You look down. Are you OK?" Maybe you make cookies to share with some friends or send a text to say how much you appreciate a classmate's help in class. This year will take extra intentionality to connect with others as we practice social distancing. So, I ask you: Will you take the time to reach out to someone you have not seen in a while, given that we often do not talk to one another as we routinely pass each other in hallways with rapidly moving one-way traffic? Will you risk the discomfort of sharing hard times? Will you work to protect others, disrupting situations where others are being hurt, whether intentionally or unintentionally?

This year we have the special privilege of showing our care for each other by working to protect each other's health. Although a face mask is not my favorite fashion statement, I will choose to wear one to protect you. I will put your health above my preferences and comfort—this is part of being a community.

Perhaps even more difficult than looking out for others is letting other people care for you. When you have a bad day or get bad news from home, with whom do you share? When you have mastered a difficult idea or met someone special, who can you tell? It is hard to be vulnerable in a new community, but I would encourage you to find a few people with whom you can share your ups and downs. Let them show their care for you!

THE COURAGE TO CHANGE

As we care for each other, we start to understand each other's perspectives and our world expands. We see the need to grow and change to become who we want to be. Change is not comfortable, and it takes courage. Even good changes can seem overwhelming. I entered college planning to be a high school math teacher. Nearing the end of my first year of college, a professor asked me to consider going to graduate school in mathematics. You should know that I am a planner, and I had planned on being a high school math teacher since I was five years old (my mom was a high school math teacher), so this was very unsettling. My life plan was being questioned. I broke down crying in my professor's office, and he was probably wondering why on earth I was so upset by a compliment. As this regalia I am wearing shows, I did eventually end up going to graduate school, but I wrestled with whether I wanted this good change.

Many changes are harder. Sometimes we are careless and hurt each other. Even when we work to care for each other, we will make mistakes. We often see aspects of ourselves or our community that are hurtful or unhealthy. Do you have the courage to address the need for change in yourself or in others?

During my senior year, nine of my fellow students and I lived in double and single dorm rooms around a central common area. One night I said some things about my roommate in the common area that she overheard. I said some things that I thought were just friendly jokes, but they were very hurtful to her. She confronted me in her pain, and I was shocked. I had to ask myself not just what my intentions were in what I said but what the impact was on my roommate. I apologized to my roommate, and I listened to her perspective. I poured energy into my relationship with her. I slowly rebuilt trust with her, though it was a very uncomfortable month or two in our room. The relationship was restored, but I learned to be much more careful about what I said about other people and how it would sound from their perspective. That is a change I have tried to take with me, but it is a lesson I learn over and over again.

You are likely to make mistakes within the Juniata community or to bear the brunt of others' mistakes. Part of living in close community is that we are close enough to wound each other. I have two recommendations. First, I would encourage you to question yourself, your assumptions, and your understanding, and to question others, to learn what it is like to walk in their shoes, to question why they did something, and to listen to their perspective with an open mind. This takes time and energy and, most of all, it takes courage. You might also need to challenge others. You need to stand up to protect others or yourself, doing this in a way that you can be heard and so that change can take root.

Second, you need to work to rebuild broken relationships. Part of this process is giving each other grace, recognizing that you also make mistakes and extending undeserved favor. Giving grace and forgiveness to others—and to ourselves—is central to being able to move forward and continue to grow and change.

The courage to build community is particularly important now, as our society is coming to grips with our history of racial and social injustice. We recognize that the United States has not protected all of its citizens equally. We have not granted the same humanity to all. Like all organizations and institutions in this culture, the Juniata community needs to address this issue. We need to question our own perspectives and assumptions and educate ourselves so that we can be allies. We need to stand up with our brothers and sisters of color and promote their wellbeing within the community, both as individuals and as a group. As we change and grow, every individual and group within our community is strengthened.

CONCLUSIONS

So, as we begin this new semester, I would challenge you to be courageous. Have the courage to connect with new friends, especially people who are different from you. Have the courage to care and to take time to ask how others are doing and listen. And have the courage to change, even when it requires discomfort and confrontation. Together, we can build a community full of interesting, inquisitive,

hardworking, and fun individuals, where our individual stories influence and are influenced by our larger collective story.

Take courage to be a community, Juniata!

NOTES

1. The Juniata College mission statement can be found at <https://www.juniata.edu/about/mission.php>.