

# Welcome Home: Your Next Chapter

**Dr. Katie Hildebrand**

*Opening Convocation Speech, August 22, 2024*

Katie Hildebrand is an Assistant Professor of Education at Juniata College.

To the Class of 2028, to all of you, *welcome home!* Class of 2028, you may wonder why I'm welcoming you home. This is a place you've been for merely a few days. First, on behalf of all of us, we are ecstatic that you've chosen to seek new opportunities, engage in our academic community, forge new friendships, and face challenges boldly. Your next four years will be the latest chapter of your life, and those pages are about to be written. Second, let me share some thoughts on the word home itself. While home is often thought of as a physical space, in today's context, consider it an emotional connection where you feel a sense of belonging and comfort—a place where you feel at ease. I share this with you because it depicts how I feel about Juniata.



Figure 1. Katie Hildebrand at Juniata College, 1997. Photo credit: *Alfarata*, Juniata Yearbook, 2001.

This is me, twenty seven years ago (Figure 1). It's certainly okay to chuckle, as I know you're all laughing at this cutting-edge technology from 1997. My children begged me not to share this photo. My

thirteen-year-old daughter said, “Mom, that’s so embarrassing,” (with eye and head roll included), and according to my son, “Mom, you have no rizz.” So, why show this glamorous photo? You see, exactly twenty seven years ago, I was a first-year Juniata College student sitting in this exact space.

I remember feeling conflicted with mixed emotions about this new and unfamiliar space. While this may be surprising to some, rural Huntingdon, PA was a culture shock to someone who grew up in Rutherford, NJ, part of the NYC Metropolitan area. I was instantly homesick, and as my parents can attest, I cried during the entire four-hour ride to campus. They still talk about the tissues they found jammed in the backseat of the car later that day. When they pulled away, with tears in my eyes, I waved goodbye with a forced smile.

With perfect timing, my RA (resident assistant) swung by and reminded me that I was about to be the author of my latest journey. She was right, and I immediately remembered why I chose Juniata. The campus tour had sealed my decision, a tour given by David Meadows who shared that Juniata is a special place, a community like no other. I felt the most at ease when I visited Juniata College, and during that tour, I knew it was a community I wanted to be a part of. When I recalled that memory, a calmness came over me. I walked out of my dorm room in Leshner Hall and literally bumped into my first Juniata friend, Kelly Wynn. She and I became fast friends.

When I recall that first day on campus, I had so many different emotions, and perhaps some of them resonate with you. It’s okay to feel conflicted—sad because you miss your old, familiar community, and excited to embrace this new one. Remember those mixed emotions can co-exist. Now, your Juniata journey begins. Today you attended your first college class, and you survived! Congratulations! Navigating a new space is not easy and can push you outside of your comfort zone.

When I think about my first semester here, the freshman writing course comes to mind. Writing was not something that came naturally to me. As the semester marched on, the professor encouraged us to attend his office hours where he shared tips and strategies on how to be a better writer, even making some grammatical corrections about which I thought, how did I not know that? I am in college.

During one of our many conversations, he asked, “Katie, Why do you have so many drafts of each paper in your portfolio?” I knew the answer and quickly responded, “That is how I will earn an A in your class.” He paused, and in his words of wisdom, Professor Hsiung assured me that this course was about much more than earning an A. I may have only been eighteen, but I knew he was wrong. Of course, it’s about the A. It’s always about the A, isn’t it?

And while I completely disagreed with Professor Hsiung that day, I established a relationship with him that continued throughout my four years at Juniata and beyond. When I reflect on that page of this chapter, I encourage you to take advantage of the time you have with your professors. You might feel a bit uncomfortable going to your first office hour, but I assure you that we want you to come; ultimately

the success of the students is our success, and you are the future of this institution. We want to support, challenge, and encourage you.

The lessons I learned from Professor Hsiung helped set me up for future success by realizing that struggling is okay. I needed a general education course and opted for a class I knew nothing about, taught by a professor I didn't know. But it had a fancy title, and my good friends Adam Titter and Erin Kirby convinced me to take it, so I enrolled in *Erotic and Ascetic Cultures of India*. In the first few sessions, when the professor posed a question, I avoided eye contact so he would not call on me. He knew that trick, and when I heard "Ms. Hildebrand," all I could think was that I did not belong in the course.

Dr. Kipphan forced us to think critically, engage in discussion, and write papers about challenging topics. I dug deep and found some grit to keep going. He invited the class to his home and cooked us dinner, met with us individually about our papers, and captivated us with stories about a culture I learned so much about in those fifteen weeks. By the end of the course, I understood what intrinsic motivation felt like and that's when it hit me: this is what Professor Hsiung meant, and he was right. It's not about the A. It's about broadening my thinking, meaningfully engaging with my peers and the professor, and my growth as a human. I did not earn an A in that course, but I learned so much more; I learned that struggle is a down payment on success. Success is not about the A, and even though I didn't know all the answers in that course, I realized that I belonged at Juniata.

While those memories are related to academics, your Juniata chapter will consist of stories beyond the classroom. During my time here, I sang in the choir and swam on the swim team. When I consider those experiences, the people I met are at the forefront of my mind. They are the people who cheered for me as I dove off the block, clapped as the choir sang their final song, proofread my papers, and provided critical feedback. They are the people who showed up and had my back, like my roommate of three years, Angie Montag. She lifted me up then and continues to do so today. She celebrates my successes and listens presently during challenging times. The emotional connections you build at Juniata don't end when you walk across the stage at commencement. When those four years come to an end, I promise that the Juniata journey will persist. Here's one final example.

After I graduated from Juniata, I set out to make my mark on the world as a special education teacher. I loved to teach. I taught students how to read, solve math problems, and make friends, all skills I learned in Good Academic Hall. I was passionate about my chosen career. On one random day, an email from Dr. Ellen Long, a former education professor at Juniata, popped into my inbox. She wrote, "Katie, this opportunity is for you." I paused. Dr. Long thought I should go to graduate school and become a professor to prepare future teachers. Gosh, at that moment, I felt like she knew me more than I knew myself. That email, that professor, changed the trajectory of my life. I didn't attend Juniata with the

aspiration of becoming a professor, and yet, here I am. So, as your story unfolds be ready for and be open to the edits that come.

I recognize the names I mentioned are likely unknown to you, but I share them for two reasons. Number 1: they helped shape the human I am today, just as members of this community will do for you. And, number 2: these people are part of Juniata's history, and they are the ones who make it a home. While my own voice wrote the chapter that I shared with you today, my story has many contributing authors.

For my final words this afternoon, welcome home! We invite you to be you, your authentic self. We know this is an ever-evolving process and hope this is an encouraging and safe space to grow as you write your story's words. Take advantage of all that Juniata has to offer. Get involved. Get outside of your comfort zone. Get to know people. Navigate spaces that are unfamiliar to you. And, in closing, while we are all here together, today is the day that you, Members of the Class of 2028, get to put pen to paper and start your Juniata story. Thank you.