

Rooted in Juniata, Reaching the World

James M. Metz, MD

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First and foremost, I want to thank President Troha and the Trustees of Juniata College for bestowing this honorary degree. I am genuinely blown away that I was considered to receive this from Juniata. When President Troha gave me an unexpected call, I was stunned at the award. It is hard to make me speechless, but I was at that moment. Even today...I still see myself sitting with all the graduates and not up here on stage.

I want to offer my heartfelt congratulations to the Class of 2025 of Juniata College. You have all worked incredibly hard to get to this day. You have had ups and downs, challenges and triumphs. You have experienced educational, social, and personal growth. Sacrifices go beyond just you...your families and friends have all been invested in your success—financially, emotionally, and importantly, supportive with time to listen and give advice. Many of them are here to share this moment with you, whether in person, watching the live stream, or watching from above, it truly takes a village to get to this point. I promise you this is one of those milestones and dates that you will remember the rest of your life. There are certain years we all remember in life—your birth year, high school graduation, college graduation, children's births, and marriages. This is how us older people can pull the years of events in our lives out of a hat at times. Life revolves around events like this!

I also want to thank my father, Jim, who made the trip up here to Juniata for the first time since my graduation. That being said, he was here for almost every football game I played over the years at Juniata. I also want to thank my daughter Isabela and her boyfriend Joel, who made the trip out. It has been an amazing journey with you the past twenty-five years, Isabela...and thanks for putting up with me and my crazy schedule! I am also going to do a special shout-out to my niece Taylor, who I know is online watching this event. She graduated two years ago from Juniata and received a Fulbright scholarship to teach in the Canary Islands, where she is still today. I am so glad you are following your dreams and taking Juniata to the world, Taylor!

I am so thrilled that Deb Kirchoff-Glazier agreed to introduce me today. Deb was a cornerstone of my education, going through the biology program and heading off to graduate school. However, it was

her role as Head of the Health Professions Program that further impacted me after graduation. While in grad school, I made the decision to apply to medical school. I needed recommendations and transcripts from Juniata College, but I was no longer a student. Through a combination of phone calls, messages, and old-fashioned snail mail, Deb put together a recommendation letter and supporting documents that got me into medical school and set me on a path I never could have predicted. I am forever grateful for her support, and I hope to honor that by playing it forward with the many students and residents that I interact with. I know many of your professors have had important impacts on all of you individually.

ROOTS AT JUNIATA

I am going to weave in a couple of stories and experiences from Juniata that have impacted me over the years, that I hope you will be able to relate to as graduates. To me, it does not seem like that long ago when I was sitting in the same location for my graduation in 1989. You may think, what does this guy with a grey goatee have any relation to me in 2025? Well, some things, I admit, have certainly changed—we did not have laptops, wi-fi, Internet, or Cell phones back then...but we did have electricity....Sheetz Dogs, Mountain Day, Storming of the Arch, Madrigal Dinner (and I assume students still try to get the five Golden Rings Table!), and Spring Fest (which my class celebrated the first year with mud wrestling!).

After these many years, Juniata culture remains strong. It is a place with tremendous support from faculty and staff and from each other. You actually get to personally know your professors here... no one is just a number. It is a place where you will remain connected and memories will emerge unexpectedly throughout your life. You will become an alumnus today and join a new club that includes thousands of individuals and connections across the United States and the world. Even today, I get calls and emails from alumni I went to school with whom I have not spoken in years...within seconds, I am transported back to Juniata in reconnection and conversation. Just knowing we can reach out to each other at any time is a gift. You will look back fondly on how special Juniata really is in the years ahead.

A ROAD UNEXPECTED: EMBRACING THE UPS AND DOWNS

An experience during my medical training has stayed with me for many years and I wanted to relay it to you. During my interview day for my specialty in Radiation Oncology at the University of Pennsylvania, Juniata College came back to the forefront of my experiences. I had a series of interviews with faculty in the department, culminating with an interview with the Chair of the Department. I sat down in his office, and what did he start the interview off with? “So, you went to Juniata College and a state medical school...whatever makes you think you could compete at a place like the University of Pennsylvania?!” I paused for a second, got my old Juniata up to the plate...and then I let it rip...and told

him the confidence I had built from my Juniata College education, my experiences in team sports, and how I was ready to not only excel at Penn myself, but contribute to the institution in ways that others would grow around me. The rest of the interview went well. But I was mad!!

Turns out...he was just testing me to see my response. He had already decided he wanted me to come to Penn based on information from others who had advocated for me, and I matched at Penn for residency. Ultimately, he offered me to join the faculty at Penn and asked me if I wanted to get involved with something called “Proton Therapy,” which set me off on an amazing career. Subsequently, Dr McKenna left to become Chair of a little place called Oxford University in England. He became a good friend over the years. When I was asked to apply for the job of Chair of Radiation Oncology at Penn, Dr McKenna was my greatest mentor in navigating the process.

So just remember, the person who may upset you early in your career and challenge you could ultimately become your biggest asset and champion. Stand up for yourself and never shy away from defending your Juniata education!!

TEAMS AND TEAMWORK

How many of you played intercollegiate sports at Juniata? A show of hands.

How many played intramural sports?

I also did...I played football, and being part of a team is something I always cherished from my days at Juniata. On the field, I learned it took 11 players, all doing their job at the same time, for any play to be successful....there are lots of cliches....” you are only as strong as your weakest link...so don’t be the weak link!”, there is no “I” in team...etc. But it is very true in life. Building and being a part of successful teams is important for almost any field you will go into in the future. Being seen as a good teammate is critical to build consensus and move through any organization.

I encourage you to build upon your experiences at Juniata with teamwork and take it to the next level. When you build effective teams or participate in a team, always give the team the credit. Give others around you the spotlight. Surround yourself with the best and most talented people and never be intimidated by the skills they bring to the table. Remember, a team needs to function well—you can bring the smartest person in the world into any environment, and they can be a bomb in that situation—always consider the personalities around you.

Radiation Oncology is a team sport, which is why I love my job. The patient is at the center of everything we do. However, we have a combination of doctors, nurses, physicists, dosimetrists, therapists, and others who we all rely upon to do their critical jobs. We set goals that are meaningful for that individual patient. It may be to cure the cancer. It may be to get them out of pain and back on the golf course. It may be to get to an important day like a marriage or graduation. But we are only successful as a

team for the individual patients. So please remember your team experiences at Juniata and build upon them.

CHANGING THE WORLD

It is up to your generation to make a difference in the future. Follow your passions and do what you love. I find that people who do this make the biggest impact on whatever you do. I am inspired to improve the outcomes and experience of cancer patients. I am driven by innovation and driving innovative cancer treatments closer to people's homes in the community, where most people get their treatment.

Dr. McKenna asked me to consider proton therapy twenty-five years ago, and it put me on an amazing journey. Protons are a special form of radiation treatment for cancer that can be beneficial to reduce side effects and limit radiation exposure of other tissues. As you heard, I am currently building our fourth proton center at Penn. However, what I did not expect—my aunt, my cousin, and my father have all benefited from treatment with protons since I built our first center. I never envisioned that the facility I worked to create and operate would be so important for my family. That's today.

I am looking to tomorrow. I want to completely transform the Cancer experience. We are now working on something called FLASH radiation. What is FLASH? It is ultra-high dose radiation where we can give an entire treatment course of radiation, typically five to seven weeks of radiation, in less than one second. Turns out, if we can do that, we have the same control of the tumor with fewer side effects. Imagine.... you hear a diagnosis of cancer, it is going to take me less than a second to treat, and you will have fewer side effects than anyone before you. Sound crazy...that is what we are moving towards.

I didn't learn how to do this at Juniata College...but I did learn how to analyze information, build teams, and be relentless in my passions and pursuits. It is going to be amazing to see what is created by this group of graduates in the coming years. The world will change, and you will be in the driver's seat.

THE POWER OF IN-PERSON CONNECTION

In today's post-COVID world, many events are held virtually or hybrid. In certain situations, virtual events or meetings are as good or even better than in-person. This is particularly true when you need to pull people together from long distances or on a short timeline. However, nothing really replaces in-person events. Many times, it is not the event itself that the most important engagement and discussions happen, but the time just before or just after the meeting where side conversations and new ideas happen.

I will give you an example at Penn Medicine. Several years ago, two scientists from different departments at Penn ran into each other at a Copy machine and began discussing their research. They

found they had similar interests and were trying to solve a similar problem with developing vaccines. They decided to partner because of this interaction. This was Drew Weissman and Katalin Kariko who went on to develop mRNA vaccine technology, win the Nobel Prize in Medicine, and save millions of lives across the world during the Covid-19 pandemic... all due to a chance meeting over a copy machine at work.¹ They are now using this technology to develop cures for sickle cell disease, specific cancers, and many other diseases. This is the power of engagement... Always jump at the opportunity to see your colleagues in person... you may actually change the world.

WISDOM FROM PATIENTS: LIVE FULL, NOW

I want each of you to look at the person sitting on your left. Now look at the person on your right...

Why did I have you do that? Just by statistics, one of the three of you will develop a health issue that can change the trajectory of your life. It is never planned. It is always unexpected. It never comes at a good time. My patients have taught me so much beyond the classroom. They have taught me how to live life. So many people tell me that they were planning on doing all kinds of things in retirement. Then they received a devastating diagnosis, and that either went on hold or never happened. Suddenly, people recognize what is really important to them. They have focused on what they love... and many times it is to spend more time with friends and family. Many want to travel. Many are focused on getting to an event, such as a wedding or a graduation, like today. No one has ever told me they want to work a few more days.

So, I want all of you to reflect... maybe not at this moment but later, when you are alone and have some time... what really matters to you. We all need goals and plans. Those are important. At the same time, in parallel, I want you to think about what you would want to do, experience, and who you would want to be around if you had limited time. If you really want to go on a trip you are planning in a couple of years, if you can swing it, do it next year. If you want to visit that friend, you have not seen in a while, schedule it.

My patients have taught me to live my life to the fullest. Do what you love to do now. Don't put it off. Now I am going to pause for a moment. After all, I want to be crystal clear to the graduates, because I know someone is going to take this the wrong way. I am not telling you to go on a perpetual Spring Break and party. That is not what I said, and your parents would be quite unhappy with me if that's how you took this.

But take time to learn what you enjoy in life. Explore hobbies, travel, try new things, and continue learning.

STAY ENGAGED WITH JUNIATA

I am so impressed with the engagement of the Class of 2025! I know you have identified accessibility as an important effort at Juniata College. Your class's commitment to advancing accessibility and creating inclusive environments across campus, including classrooms, residence halls, and gathering spaces, is an important effort at Juniata College. I know you have dedicated significant effort to understanding and serving those with invisible disabilities, such as learning differences, chronic conditions, and even temporary limitations. As a physician, I absolutely appreciate the importance of this work.

In recognition of the Class of 2025's efforts, I am going to contribute funds to create an endowment to support the work of Student Accessibility Services (SAS). This focus on providing access and support aligns with Juniata's mission of fostering learning environments characterized by respect and kindness, where all students have the potential to succeed. These types of efforts continue to make Juniata a special place to learn for everyone.

So, when a Juniata student calls you looking to talk to you about the school and asking for support, spend a few minutes on the phone. Learn their perspective of Juniata and see what is new. If you can spend time, donate in-kind expertise or mentorship. If you can donate funds, even the smallest amount, do it. And importantly, when you meet that high school student that you believe can excel at this special place, talk about Juniata with them. Tell them your story. Encourage them to visit and apply. My challenge to all of you—Keep engaged as you become alumni! Pay it forward any way you can. You will be helping those behind you and serving the future.

With that, I want to again congratulate the Class of 2025, along with your friends and family who have supported you to get to this day. Celebrate. Enjoy... and never forget the honor it is to have a Juniata College degree. I am certainly honored to be a Juniata graduate and fellow alumnus with all of you! Go forth and make the future yours!!

NOTES

1. Drew Weissman, "How a Xerox machine saved lives and won me a Nobel Prize." TEDx Talks, Philadelphia, PA, April 28, 2025. Video, 19 min., 18 sec. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4q-rjWX2SA>