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Marketing

EIU 2022 Spring Commencement Speech

So, this is it. Our last day of school. It is what we have been working towards for so many years, months, and days. Endless hours of studying are over, and the big wide world is now waiting for us. I am not going to lie; I am a little nervous about leaving our EIU bubble.

Nevertheless, I am beyond happy to welcome everyone here today: parents, family, friends, faculty, and staff who are celebrating this milestone with us. For a few moments, the real world can wait.

I first stepped foot on this campus on a very, very cold night on January 4th in 2018. I had just left my family, friends and home country of Germany to start a completely new chapter of my life here in Charleston, Illinois. After over 24 hours of traveling, I was welcomed by the orientation staff, as one of the many other international students on campus that day. From that first moment, until now, I have felt the immense care and love EIU has for its students. At no point in these last 4 and a half years have I felt alone or without guidance. There have been incredible people at all times along the way I knew I could go to and put my trust in. “Your home away from home” is what they promised us.

Throughout my time at Eastern, I have met and befriended people from various cultures with different values and points of view than what I knew growing up. It can be a real challenge to step out of your comfort zone and not just accept but appreciate those different opinions. EIU has taught me to look at topics from various perspectives; through listening and understanding, learning from each other, and respecting each other’s opinions. At the end of the day, it is all about becoming people who respect and support one another.

EIU pushes its community to do so, not only in our student values, but also through the way we interact with each other on a daily basis. The events and organizations we have on campus

that are meant to introduce people to different cultures and new experiences are like nothing else I have ever experienced.

Nevertheless, interaction is nothing without “action”, which means actively doing something and not just letting it happen to you. So, if you missed out on the opportunities EIU has provided you with, I highly recommend making it part of your post-college life. It is never too late to start widening your horizon and becoming more engaged with the people that will make up your new community. But remember, you will always be welcome here. You, We, and all these people around us will forever be a part of EIU.

Another hurdle I, as an international student, had to overcome was the language barrier. I spoke English when I arrived but did I know it? No, absolutely not. Starting to think, dream and live in a different language is a very special and unique experience, and I am extremely grateful to have been given this gift. And to everybody who helped me improve along the way and made that a reality: Danke schön and thank you. From the bottom of my heart.

What also made me grow immensely, both as a person and an athlete, has been our track and field program which I am lucky enough to be a part of. I met incredible people, from teammates, to coaches, to trainers. The trust and respect those people have shown me fill me with honor and pride.

There's been so much learning, big and small. I can never unpack everything that has taken place over the last couple of years, but trivial things like learning how to write a check, file taxes, adulting in a foreign country, or just living on your own change you. These small steps add up over time and I am leaving this place a much different person than when I started this journey. The little, small-town girl from Germany has become a successful and confident young woman who believes in herself and will forever carry EIU and Charleston in her heart.

Despite my doubts and others' disbelief, I am about to walk this stage with my friends and classmates, being able to officially call ourselves college graduates.

EIU has given us the knowledge and the toolbox for succeeding not only in our careers but also in our lives. We made it through all our coursework and college life during a global pandemic. We have developed critical thinking skills and learned how to apply them in numerous assignments. But if we truly think about it, what is it that we will really remember and will stick with us? It's the experiences we make. The good, the bad, and the ugly decisions that have made us grow up and become better at this life thing than we were back when we first showed up here, as a bunch of clueless freshmen. Now, let's put those skills to use in the real world.

One of my favorite professors, Cameron Craig, once said, and I quote: "Knowledge does not necessarily come from books or college courses, but the experiences of everyday life." Quote, end. From time to time, we just tend to get lazy and forget that in order to be knowledgeable, self-determined individuals, we need to interact with our surroundings and use the tools we have been given to figure out how we really feel about something. The time of blindly following has passed.

The moral of the story: Knowledge is power. And to keep this power we cannot stop being curious about the world we live in. Only through interaction will we become more interested, through interest will we become more knowledgeable, and through knowledge will we become more involved in the world we call our home. I am incredibly proud to soon be an EIU alumna and spread panther pride internationally. I have been fortunate enough to have been given the opportunity to contribute to the diverse community that is EIU, where students from all parts of the world create this very special place where everyone can feel at home. They certainly weren't joking when they promised us EIU would become our home away from home.

Thank you all so much and congratulations to every single one of you!