

Julia Sophie Meßner / 2025 Graduation Speech, University of Potsdam

Dear fellow graduates,

dear professors,

dear families, friends, and guests,

We are standing here today – at the end of a journey that has been very different for each and every one of us. Some of us hit the ground running, others took detours, had doubts, started all over again. But we all made it. And that in itself is reason enough to celebrate.

It is a great honor to be able to speak on behalf of the graduates today – and I am aware that this honor is not only for my own achievement, but also for all the people who have accompanied me on this path.

That is why I would like to start by saying thank you. Thank you to our professors, who not only imparted knowledge to us, but also challenged us, supported us and, frankly, had to put up with us sometimes – especially in those moments when we no longer believed in ourselves. Thank you to the university staff who worked in the background to make so many things possible – from organizing exams to the library, which has become a second home for many of us. And a very special thank you to our families and friends. You listened to us when we whined about term papers, motivated us when we wanted to give up, and reminded us why we went down this path in the first place.

I would also like to take this opportunity to personally thank two people who have had a key influence on my love for science: **Prof. Dr. Püschel**, who supervised my bachelor's thesis. It was the first time I had worked on my own scientific project – and I realized how much I enjoyed doing research.

And **Prof. Dr. Kleinridders**, who not only entrusted me with the topic for my master's thesis, but also for my doctoral thesis. His support was – and still is – a crucial anchor in my academic career. Thank you for your trust and support.

When I look back on my time at this university, I don't just think about lectures, exams, or grades. I think of conversations on campus, of nights full of ideas – and sometimes full of despair – and of encounters that have shaped me. I think of the feeling of being part of a community that is more than just a place to learn.

And I also think of Potsdam – this city that accompanied us with its tranquility, its beauty, and its history. From walks through Sanssouci Park to coffee on Bassinplatz and sunsets by the Heiliger See – for many of us, Potsdam was more than just a place to study. It was home for a while. A place where we have grown – professionally, personally, and as humans.

At the same time, we know: We are leaving university at a time that is characterized by uncertainty – politically, socially, globally. Climate crisis, wars, social inequality – the challenges are enormous. But that is precisely why it is so important that we do not give up.

That we use the knowledge we have acquired here to take responsibility. To help shape the future. To work towards a better, fairer and more sustainable future – whatever that may look like.

I know that I was privileged: a supportive family, a stable environment, the opportunity to concentrate on my studies. I know that this is not a matter of course for everyone. All the more reason for me to admire those of us who are standing here despite difficult circumstances – with a degree in their hand and a smile on their face.

What we all have in common is the courage it took for us to take this path. And the desire to make a difference – in science, in society, in our own lives. We might not yet know exactly where we are heading. But we know that we can do it. That we have learned to think, to doubt, to question – and to carry on regardless. I sincerely hope that we can all hold on to this courage. That we remain curious. And that we never forget where we came from – and who walked alongside us on this journey.

Thank you very much – and congratulations to all of us!