

RTFM

Welcome address by Prof. Irwin Collier to the entering cohorts of BA/MA/Erasmus at JFK-I, 9 October 2013

In June of this year the John-F.-Kennedy Institute for North American Studies celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its founding. For many of you that means the Institute is older than, well yes, your parents. Oh my! During the heyday of the 1960s the transatlantic battle cry of youth was “Don’t trust anyone over thirty!” They didn’t, yet through a demographic dynamic **that** generation hit thirty, forty, fifty and the upper “-ty’s” and, with apologies to the spirit of Rudi Dutschke, “Der Krampf geht weiter!” Trust us, your academic elders, we’ve been there, we’ve done it, and we want to spare you some of the tuition payments in the school of hard knocks. But, if you are at all like the generations that came before you, you probably won’t trust us, you’ll land flat on your faces, and then, and only then, understand what those over thirty were trying to tell you.

Welcome to the John-F.-Kennedy Institute for North American Studies of Freie Universität Berlin with its six

academic disciplines housed under a single roof above Europe's finest library of North American books and materials.

You have entered the groves of academe, we even have a trace of autumn tinged ivy on display on the villa next door that houses our Graduate School of North American Studies. You will be privileged to witness the dialectical banter of scholars as we do what scholars do best...we debate meaning, we passionately criticize **other** people's arguments and we bring evidence to bear when mere words (i.e. theory) fails us...this is what scholars do when we are not trying by our well-tried tricks of the trade to implant our theories, methods and interpretations into your innocent, as yet unstuffed, minds. Actually that is not true, you have come here with minds stuffed with nonsense of the ages. As Josh Billings said "The trouble with people is not that they don't **know** but that they know so much that **ain't so**." If we fail to disabuse you of a single conviction you brought into these hallowed halls, you are either a certifiable genius or, more likely, a hopeless pig-head who failed to notice the pearls of wisdom cast before her or him. And lest you think I overestimate the quality of

what I or our entire instructional staff offer you, let me warn you that “fashionable nonsense” plagues all of us who seek the acclaim of our scholarly peers. It is well nigh impossible in North American studies as in any field to always say something that is both new and correct. Our research mission necessarily focuses on the “new”, while our teaching mission needs to focus on the “correct”. Forgive us our fashionable trespasses as we forgive you your fallacious trespasses. You, our students, and we, your teachers, share an ivory tower condominium. What goes in the ivory tower, stays in the ivory tower! At least until the academic survival instinct leads us to publish. You should feel free in this Freie Universität to think with us, to challenge us, indeed to point us the errors of our ways. Outside these walls, the world is far less forgiving of premature conjecture and those with power often require a sugar-coating to the truth you may choose to speak to them. But to repeat, here is a safe place to debate and a quiet place to learn to critically observe and to think about all aspects of historical and contemporary North America.

Part of the genius that the English language has developed on the other side of the Atlantic is the utterly effective use

of acronyms. World War II brought us SNAFU. Compare SNAFU to the poetic “All Quiet on the Western Front” tailored to fit the Great War, which is what they called World War I before they had to come up with a name for the Second World War. SNAFU, I hope you have guessed what the “F” stands for by now, is essentially the same message: “Situation Normal, All [whistle] Up”. Please don’t expect me to talk like a marine or a non-native English speaker who lacks the delicacy of taste to reserve [whistle] for guilty, private moments with our BFF’s, our best-friends-forever, though I am sure I just revealed my hopeless lack of currency in the text-message-lingo of our entering classes.

We live in an age of bean-counters in the service of management consultants hired by top university administrators. For the accreditation of educational programs, the *Regelstudienzeit*, a word best left in its linguistic backwater of *Verwaltungsdeutsch*, has acquired the status of a sacred fetish and serves as the all-“important metric” of educational quality.

I believe I can speak in the name of the entire JFK-Institute instructional staff that while we speak RZ+2 to the powers-that-be, we implicitly have a different acronym that defines our educational mission — **RTFM**.

Someone who is awarded the B.A. in North American Studies should, indeed must, be able to RTFM. Your employability will rest on that invaluable RTFM capacity. This capacity will distinguish you from those who have not through their personal good fortune and/or hard work completed the requirements for the B.A.

Before I reveal what lurks behind the other three letters, again presuming you can fill in the “F” yourself, let me talk about content for a moment. North American Studies at the John-F.-Kennedy Institute offers you a rare opportunity within the German implementation of the Bologna process (which one might argue is to education what “processed cheese” is to cheese) to sample courses not just across a few conventional academic disciplines but indeed across the divide separating the humanities from the social sciences. Understanding the United States and Canada, and I mean a genuine scholarly understanding,

requires a mastery of historical sequence, biographic detail, understanding of social and political structures, as well as systems of shared meaning and, most important of all, how these structures and systems evolve and interact over time. Try, please try, to balance your education here between the humanities and social sciences. For a little less complementary disciplinary depth, you can acquire an entire new dimension of understanding. And perhaps my most important study tip of all, use your required semester (even better if it can be stretched to a year, “beurlaubt” versteht sich) abroad to pile up additional credits beyond your 30-LP in your chosen disciplinary major. Credits from a transcript from a foreign university are recognized when you apply to an MA program in Germany, those same credits cannot, I repeat, cannot be earned above the 30-LP here at your home university...but I digress into those academic games you need to play so that the *Studien- und Prüfungsordnungen* don’t get in the way of your education. Fortunately we have Ms. Carolin Benack, succeeding Ms. Katharina Metz, serving as your “ombudsadvisor”, who together with Profs. Wenzel and Lammert for the BA and

MA programs, respectively, can provide useful and wise advise in such matters.

Returning now to RTFM. Imagine you bought a nice fancy peripheral for that new back-to-school laptop of yours.

More often than not, something does not work correctly the first time. You can go to one of your BFF's initiated into the dark arts of IT and ask for help. What happens? The proverbial disconnect between your friend or a friendly IT-specialist and you, a master of human-speech, occurs.

Like trying to communicate with a foreigner in her or his own country, the IT person first repeats what he or she just said. Then they repeat what they just said...louder.

When they are shooting for canonization as a saint in IT-virtual-heaven, they try yet again and even again. But at some point the curse is cast, yes, they scream at you:

RTFM!... “read the [whistle] manual!”

Dear B.A. students of North American Studies: I wish there were a single manual to make you all experts on Canada and the United States. Actually I wish it were compressed into a beautiful set of power point bullet points for once and for all. Fortunately I believe that human experience

defies simple patterns of declension. You are sitting above a world-class library of manuals, you can now be connected to world-class data bases of manuals. And if you listen carefully to your student tutors, to your graduate teaching assistants, to the adjunct lecturers and guest lecturers we bring in, and to your junior and senior professors, you can actually learn how to read the [whistle] manuals for yourselves. The funny thing is that by studying the literature or the history or the media or the elections or the economy of North America you will acquire a transferable skill of being self-educating in a world where times and circumstances rapidly change in a globally-connected world. RTFM constitutes the difference between passive and active learning.

Dear MA students: We have even higher hopes for you, hopes that can only be uttered with a much less familiar acronym. At the end of your study, the transferable skill should be WTFM...**Write** the [whistle] manual! Knowing, every course you take, every note you make, every book you take, we'll be watching you!

For the random doctoral student who might have wandered into this meeting in a fit of procrastination: You know how to RTFM, you can even WTFM. Now it is up to you to venture into unknown or at least less-explored reaches of human experience as though you had a **BFM** (best [whistle] manual). New knowledge is by its nature rough and unhewn. Before there is mass production with requisite user manuals, the world awaits the creation of a prototype, which is your job to build. The first argument or proof, the first evidence or data mustered in support of a proposition can always be improved upon — scholarship and science are not based upon the trust of authority but upon verification. These skills are picked up along the entire BA/MA/Dr trajectory. But you do have to bend over to pick them up!

We can train you to learn to check yourselves and others, but what doesn't fit so neatly into a manual is the recognition of the difference between a reasonable first attempt to pose or even answer an important question and the trivial pursuit of tidy answers to questions of little import. This is where our relationship takes on a certain sorcerer-apprentice quality.

Dear Students: Good luck over the coming semesters. I can promise you, you will leave your alma mater richer for the academic experience here. We all look forward to working with you. It's a wonderful academic life.