Interview with HCA Alumnus Daniel Blottenberger

Where does a Heidelberg degree take you? In this series, alumni of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies talk about their paths from Heidelberg into their careers in the United States. The interviews were conducted by Elias Tur Castello as part of an alumni career path project during his internship at the Heidelberg University Association (HUA) in New York City in fall 2026.

What is it like to come to a German university as an American and study your own country from abroad? For Daniel Blottenberger, the question was personal. By the time he enrolled at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies (HCA), he had already served his country in Iraq and come back with questions he could not answer. At the end of October, Daniel, who today works as the deputy communications director for the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, sat down with me to talk about what brought him to Heidelberg, why his professors would never give him a straight answer, and why he appreciates that more with each passing year.

Growing up in Annapolis, Maryland, Daniel knew early on that he wanted to become a journalist. At 18, he left his parents' house and joined the Army, where a few journalism classes he had taken during his senior year of high school landed him a role as a public affairs specialist. His service brought him to Germany, where he was stationed with the 18th Military Police Brigade before deploying for a 15-month combat tour in Iraq. Throughout, he wrote about, photographed, and documented his unit's work from a military perspective. "I enjoyed it. I really did," he says. "War's not enjoyable, but the experience was something to definitely learn from and build skills from." Afterward, the military offered him a position with the European edition of Stars and Stripes, where for three years he "got to be an actual journalist."

But the war had also left him with questions. "I was young, and I was just hearing what was preached from the United States perspective," he remembers. "I went there, I experienced it, and I was like, wait a minute, this isn't what I thought it was going to be." He sums it up in four words: "Something is not right." He kept thinking about the war from the other side: "If it was me and my little brother growing up in Iraq and we saw military vehicles coming down the street and we're not wealthy, we're […] poor Iraqi kids. What would we do?" The same went for religion. Raised Christian, he began to question its place in the military: "We have a separation of church and state here. But at the same time, I'm in basic training, and they're singing hymns and stuff […] this isn't the way I think America was supposed to be designed."

By then, he had started a family and begun to see his future outside the military, though still in Germany. A journalist he admired had studied American Studies at Yale, which prompted Daniel to look for a program of his own. He found it at the HCA. What appealed to him from the start was the "uniqueness about studying at a university that is much older than the country that you're studying." Heidelberg University is almost 400 years older than the United States, which makes the U.S. "the little kid in the room," as Daniel puts it.

Going from the military and active combat to life as a graduate student was not always easy. “There’s a lot of defenses I had to break down while I was there,” Daniel remembers. “I was dealing with things from the military, from the war […] and all these emotions that come with it. And all that was happening while I was in graduate school.” His professors in Heidelberg helped. They “were amazing in both treating us as humans and educating the crap out of us,” he recalls with a smile.

What they would not do was give him a straight answer. He would ponder a question for “maybe weeks or days or months trying to figure something out,” then bring it to a professor. “And I would say, ‘Hey, what’s the answer to this question?’ And they’d be like, ‘Well, that’s interesting, Daniel, here’s 12 books you can read about it,’” he says. “They would never give me the answer, but they would show me, ‘This is where you can maybe develop your answer.’” It was a very different kind of learning from the one he had grown up with. American education, as he remembers it, was “more like memorization. Here’s the pros and the cons and that’s the end.” At the HCA, the rest was up to him. “It opened my mind to so many different things, different perspectives,” he says. “I completely changed my political thoughts, theories.” Above all, “it taught me how to think, and it taught me how to learn. And that was the biggest takeaway.”

Some of the books from those years still sit on his shelf. One of them, Michael Kammen’s *Mystical Chords of Memory*, came recommended by Professor Stievermann early in Daniel’s thesis research. It made him rethink the study of history itself. “There’s no history written without some kind of bias or perspective,” he says. “After reading this book, I was like, oh my goodness, I need to restart my entire thesis over because […] I can’t trust anything anymore.” The thesis also left him with a line from the memoirs of a Union chaplain that he still uses in his speeches. As Daniel sums it up: “I suppose I do know more than most men because I know I know nothing. And I go forth to learn as much as I can.”

His classmates unsettled his certainties just as much. Even though he had been to the Middle East himself, conversations with a classmate from Iran challenged many of his assumptions, down to the discovery that Iran has ski resorts. Then a British classmate called him an American exceptionalist. “I’ll never forget the conversation, because I got, not mad at him, but I was just like, who’s he to call me an American exceptionalist […] what is this? And then I was like, wait a minute. That’s what it is,” Daniel says. “And then coming back to the United States after these experiences and [being] like, ‘Dang, they were right.’”

Even when he asked about his own future, he got a question back. After graduating and adding an MBA from Schiller International University in Heidelberg, Daniel was still unsure where to take his career and brought Professor Stievermann an idea for a PhD. “I said, ‘Hey, here’s my dissertation idea for a PhD. What do you think?’ And he said, and I’ll never forget this. He said, ‘Have you ever considered the workforce?’”

Daniel took the hint: “Honestly, it was the best advice I needed to hear at that time.” He edited English texts for a translation agency, then became a contractor for the Department of Defense in Mannheim, work that was “very well paid. However, that’s about it.” Looking for a way back into work he cared about, he returned to the United States just before COVID hit, worked as a freelance journalist, and then joined the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a communications

professional. After the Trump administration took office, he moved to the state level and is now deputy communications director at the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. Events are one of his favorite parts of the job: “We do a lot of events […] way more than you would think.” The day before our interview, that meant a dairy farm, a grant program helping the farm afford a methane biodigester, reporters with their questions, and the secretaries of agriculture and environmental protection speaking to cameras.

What he learned in Heidelberg shapes how he does that job, above all in how he deals with people who see things differently. “In government public relations, there are so many different perspectives in the constituency,” he explains. “Instead of getting angry or upset with those different perspectives, it’s more interesting for me to try to figure out why they have those perspectives now. And that’s a story in itself.” He is certain where that ability comes from: “I can really say that the HCA is where that ability started with me.”

It took him years to see it that way. Right after graduating, he admits, he was mostly glad to be done, convinced he had not learned anything and still annoyed about a bad grade. “I love the HCA, and I love it more now, 10 years later than I did right when I graduated,” he says. His advice for young Americans thinking about studying in Heidelberg follows from that: “Put your guards down, be willing to learn and don’t try to be the smartest.”

People still ask Daniel, especially in job interviews, why he went to Germany to study American culture. His answer: “Well, that’s the reason.” He arrived in Heidelberg with “a dozen pretty strong questions” and left with a hundred more. That, he says, was exactly what he wanted, even if he did not know it at the time.

Daniel Blottenberger spoke with us in a personal capacity. The views he expresses are his own and do not represent the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture or the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.