To the University of Vermont Community,

Since well before my arrival on campus, I have been keenly aware of the wonderful qualities that define this community – an accomplished faculty, a dedicated staff, and a unique student body with untold potential. Our greatest strengths include the deep connection and concern we have for one another, our sense of responsibility for the larger world, and our willingness to work hard in the pursuit of our goals. As I often say, this is indeed a special place, and a special University.

Within this context, however, as I learn more from each of you, I have become increasingly concerned about a very real threat to the health and success of our community – specifically the degree to which some of our students engage in the high risk use of alcohol, marijuana, and misuse of prescription medications. My conversations here and with leaders at other institutions confirm that this is a national issue, affecting virtually every college campus. We as a University are certainly not spared its negative impacts.

High-risk drinking and the misuse of marijuana and other substances represent a very real obstacle to our students’ ability to learn, to their active engagement in the academic and extracurricular life of the University, and to their opportunities to achieve meaningful success here and after graduation. Along with campuses across the nation, we as a community have seen students struggle, leave our university, and in some cases have mourned their deaths.

It is critical that we, as a University community, engage this issue directly and effectively. Together, we must assume a leadership role in identifying and in naming the problem and addressing it systematically as a public health issue. This work is the responsibility of the University community in its broadest form, including administration, faculty, staff, students, parents, alumni, and University partners.

Over the last three years we have engaged in work on our campus and with a national consortium of other institutions of higher education (NCHIP) to address the impact of high risk drinking. We must now broaden this work to include all substances which threaten the wellbeing of all members of our campus and include every segment of the institution in the process. I intend to engage all of us in an active process of exploring and defining how we – both individually and collectively - will take responsibility for finding solutions that will help mitigate the impact of this issue on our community.

It is important to acknowledge that this work addresses undesirable parts of our culture with which institutions of higher education have struggled for many years. They have, unfortunately, become rationalized and normalized as “just part of college life.” We simply cannot accept this; we must take action and ensure that we commit ourselves to long-term success of the health, safety and well being of our campus community.

As an initial step, the Provost and I have charged Vice Provost Annie Stevens and members of our NCHIP team with sharing the trends, impacts, and our current initiatives with University governing groups, student leadership, and other concerned community members. Subsequently, during this
semester, I will appoint a campus-wide task force of students, faculty, staff, parents and alumni to begin to address these issues broadly and effectively.

The work ahead will be challenging. I am confident that our community’s strengths, our commitment to student’s wellbeing, and our dedication to a vibrant, robust environment where everyone is engaged in discovery, learning and improvement will ensure our success.

Thank you for joining me in this important undertaking. By working together and supporting each other, our campus community can continue to be a national model for others in promoting health and wellness.

Tom Sullivan,
President