

2016 CONVOCATION REMARKS  
PROVOST DAVID V. ROSOWSKY

Good evening.

Before I begin my remarks, I want to take this opportunity to introduce the academic leadership of the University of Vermont – the Deans.

Deans at the University of Vermont are responsible for nearly every facet of your educational experience; they are the leaders of our colleges and schools, and they are dedicated to your success. Many of our deans are here with us today.

Deans, as I call your name, please stand. Once I've introduced the full group of deans, I will ask that you join me in thanking them, in advance, for all that they do for our students.

- William Falls, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences
- Luis Garcia, Dean of the College of Engineering and Mathematical Sciences
- Nancy Mathews, Dean of the Rubenstein School of Environment & Natural Resources
- Patricia Prelock, Dean of the College of Nursing and Health Sciences
- Mara Saule, Dean of Libraries and UVM's CIO
- Lisa Schnell, Dean of the Honors College
- Sanjay Sharma, Dean of the Grossman School of Business Administration
- Scott Thomas, Dean of the College of Education and Social Services

Unable to be here today are:

- Cindy Forehand, Dean of the Graduate College
- Doug Lantagne, Dean, UVM Extension
- Beth Taylor-Nolan, Acting Dean of Continuing and Distance Education
- Thomas Vogelmann, Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

These are your academic deans. They are here to ensure your access to a world-class education and your four-year pathway to graduation. They have worked with their faculty to develop the remarkable intellectual journey that begins tomorrow. Please join me in thanking our deans for their leadership.

As provost, I serve as the Chief Academic Officer for the University of Vermont. That means I am responsible for the academic mission of the University and ensuring that we provide a world-class environment for learning and discovery for our students, and for teaching and the pursuit of scholarship and research for our faculty.

But in addition to my formal titles, and my role as Chief Academic Officer, I also serve – unofficially – as UVM's Chief Optimism Officer. If you want to learn more about all that is happening at the University of Vermont, what's new on our campus, how our Division I Athletics teams are doing, or where to go to get the best cup of coffee (or ice cream) on campus – I encourage you to follow me on Twitter.

I want to use my remarks this afternoon/evening to talk about our first-year reading: *The Sixth Extinction* by Elizabeth Kolbert. Ms. Kolbert will deliver a lecture – that you should plan to attend – on our campus on September 14.

I also have just completed an essay, that you can find on my my webpage, that offers more commentary, and offers suggestions for how you can incorporate *The Sixth Extinction* into your own journey of learning and discovery this year, and how we – as faculty at the University – can use the book to guide classroom learning, discussion, and deeper study.

First, I hope that you enjoyed this book as much as I have. And if you have not yet finished the book, or not yet started it, I ask that you make this a priority for your first weeks at UVM. Finishing the book – an amazing and inspiring read – will serve you well, and will allow you to *participate fully* in the classroom and campus-wide activities designed around it. Please don't miss this opportunity.

Like most of you, I read the book this summer, and I found it both compelling and (at times) just a little unsettling. Kolbert writes of the five major extinction events that came before us, and what sciences tells us are the most likely causes of those events. And we learn that we are witnessing the beginning of what very likely is the next in the series of major extinction events – the *sixth extinction* – and that this event is the result of human beings.

The book forces us to confront our own vulnerabilities as pieces in a delicately balanced ecosystem. The book asks us to look back over vast periods of time, and then challenges us to look forward – to what may be far shorter periods of time – at the uncomfortable reality of how humankind has impacted our planet and its very ability to sustain us.

As the times to significant and permanent impacts on our ecosystem become shorter, we become increasingly uncomfortable with the narrative – the story arc – that Kolbert presents. Perhaps this discomfort is the author's intention, the point of the book. She is confident in the case she has laid out, and challenges us to do three things: **acknowledge**, **admit**, and **act**.

She challenges us to **acknowledge** the historical record of scientific fact – the best our science can tell us, which even if imperfect (or not yet complete) is certainly of the right order of magnitude; to **admit** the role humankind has played in altering our ecosystem; and to **act** – armed with this knowledge and this humility – to affect positive (or at least less negative) change.

You are very fortunate to be students at the University of Vermont at this time in history. Your four years at the UVM will prepare you, individually and collectively, to go out and meet these challenges – to **acknowledge**, to **admit**, and to **act**.

At UVM, you are surrounded by nationally recognized faculty and programs in the environment and natural resources, climate studies, energy, water, complex systems, global population health, policy, sustainability, engineering, food and agriculture, political science, and more.

Equally important are the people sitting next to you on these bleachers – the people who will be sitting next to you in your classes, labs, studios, and field stations. Our students are *thinkers* for certain, and they are *doers* for sure. UVM students lead by combining passion, compassion, and action. They are bright and inquisitive, committed and engaged, responsive and responsible. Our students *really do* change the world.

You will be exposed to scientific fact, artistic interpretation, historical context, mathematical analysis, philosophical perspective, political dialogue, and a broader range of people, cultures, backgrounds and beliefs than you may ever see again. You will have access to majors, minors, certificates, courses, lectures, symposia, seminars, service-learning, teach-ins, performances, field trips, internships, games, teams, clubs, dinners, and debates.

Over the next four years you will have unprecedented opportunities to explore, discover, create, and collaborate. There are no limits to what you can achieve while you are here. But *we* only provide you, as students, with *access* to all of this. But the *value* only exists if *you* take full advantage of what we offer, if you make informed and purposeful choices, and if you truly make the very best use of your four years as an undergraduate student.

I challenge you to use Kolbert’s call to **acknowledge**, **admit**, and **act** not only as a mantra for addressing the climate challenge, but also as a touchstone to regularly evaluate how you are spending your four short years here at UVM – how you are progressing, how you are growing, and how you are maximizing the value of all that the University provides.

With purpose and intention, you should **acknowledge** this privilege that is higher education, and **acknowledge** your responsibilities to the many communities you will inhabit while you are here – classroom communities, residence hall communities, professional communities, and the community of Burlington.

And while I’m confident you will have many successes to celebrate, I also hope you will be truthful with yourself, and that you will have the courage to **admit** what you don’t know, **admit** what you’re not doing, **admit** what’s not working. Ask yourself whether you are making the highest and best use of this remarkable four-year opportunity. **Admit** when you need help, or guidance, or direction.

And where you are falling short, or falling behind, or falling down – I hope you will **act**. **Act** with urgency and determination to commit – *truly commit* – to your studies, to yourself, to each other, to your education, and to your future. Graduation will come sooner than you think – in just four short years.

Our climate (indeed our planet) is at an inflection point. *The Sixth Extinction* warns of cataclysmic change but also offers glimpses of cautious optimism, and a tip of the hat to humanity and our capacity for stepping up to meet challenges. Modern humans are really quite remarkable. We are unique in our ability to conceptualize complexity, to compromise, to reason, to seek out the unknown, and to collaborate on complicated tasks.

Our capacity for collaboration is fortunate, indeed, because we are now, without question and regardless of any political leaning, a *global society* – more interconnected and interdependent than ever before. Our population continues to grow but our planet has never been smaller.

You can look at this inflection point our planet faces as either scary or hopeful. I choose the latter, without hesitation. I believe in each one of you. You are bright, you are motivated, you are curious, and you are passionate. And I am confident that your choices, your decisions, your investments, and your commitment will ensure our future – your future, and your future’s future.

So, Class of 2020, you have my best wishes for the academic journey that begins tomorrow. We will follow you with great interest and we will *support you* every step of the way.

Now let’s get started. Your planet is calling.

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