

## UVM and the Student Experience

Given the centrality of student education to institutional objectives, the 1990 goals and strategic operating principles of the Board of Trustees call for a campus environment that enhances learning opportunities for all students, fosters a sense of belonging in a community that challenges students intellectually, and values respect, diversity, and citizenship. For a further discussion of the role these elements have played in campus-wide planning processes, please see the response to Standard Two on Planning and Evaluation in Part I of the Accreditation Self-Study Report.

Even given this longstanding emphasis on students and their needs, our focus on the student experience has intensified over the past decade. This direction results both from the demands of students who increasingly approach their education as informed consumers, and from the emerging understanding among institutions of higher education that change is necessary to respond to the challenging environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By putting the student experience at the heart of our university priorities, we intend to heighten our awareness of and attention to these critical issues.

We currently collect information on students' perceptions of their experience at UVM, though it is less systemic and comprehensive than it might be. Some data are available from the regular satisfaction surveys of graduating seniors, ongoing institutional participation in the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, and the 1995 study of students who chose not to remain at UVM. Crossing all of these data sets are concerns about relationships between students and faculty, the need for a more diverse and academically challenging environment, and the complex issues surrounding student and campus culture including the persistent issue of the use of alcohol. We have begun to act upon these concerns in a variety of ways described below.

Equally compelling is the growing body of anecdotal information emanating from ongoing discussion of the student experience in student government, targeted student groups such as the Vermont Scholars, and recent campus fora and roundtables. Interestingly, these conversations about the student experience and about changes to enhance that experience have developed into discussions that touch many disparate parts of the university system. While the emphasis often begins with the need for a sense of community, the topics of the learning environment and the curriculum quickly arise. The perception appears to be that students are primarily here to learn and therefore creating an even more challenging and engaging curriculum is a critical component — indeed, a veritable basis — for the development of community.

While it is common to assume that a discussion about student experience will address the usual issues of residence halls, food service, sports, activities, and student affairs, current discourse at UVM clearly casts a broader net and constructs a conception of student experience as including living conditions, learning opportunities, expectations about what a college ought to provide, and relationships with both people and the community as a whole. This is consistent with UVM's evolving efforts to integrate students' academic experiences with their extra-curricular experiences. The following themes have emerged over the past year, both as thoughts about the present environment and as areas for attention and change.

We are continuing to learn about these challenges and are making important progress in addressing many of them.

### **The Learning Environment**

Recent campus discussions highlight several important issues. First, we need to ensure that all students have high quality and rigorous educational experiences. Students report they particularly value faculty who engage and challenge them continually; classes where attendance and active participation are the norm are therefore highly regarded. While there are certainly many and various examples of demanding majors and programs, there is also general interest among students in a more rigorous and participatory curriculum, one more oriented to collaborative learning and shared responsibility. Stronger academic advising is also favored.

Secondly, our diverse array of curricular offerings provides students with significant choices in their academic endeavors. However, some students find our programs to be based primarily on organizational constructs such as colleges and departments rather than structures related to their interests; on occasion, they experience these frameworks as barriers when trying to realize their academic goals. Others perceive unwelcome growth in class sizes or report difficulties in putting together meaningful schedules within the current distribution requirement- and credit hour-driven curriculum.

There may be different views among students less active in the campus discourse on the student experience. Some faculty express disappointment in the current classroom culture and in some students' lack of motivation to make the sustained efforts necessary for effective learning. While increasing academic expectations may improve the intellectual environment in some respects, we also need to consider a variety of approaches to improve our ability to reach all students in this changing environment.

As an initial step in reinforcing high academic standards and clear expectations across UVM programs, we have begun exploring the framework upon which these curricular elements and educational goals can be built. The delineation of the qualities and competencies of UVM graduates, indeed the hypothesized ideal characteristics of educated people in the twenty-first century, has begun in several settings. These discussions have yielded the following preliminary list:

- Critical analysis
- Written expression
- Communication skills
- Information competencies
- Intellectual breadth & curiosity
- Ability to succeed in a global environment
- Creativity
- Mathematical/scientific literacy
- Passion for learning
- Depth in a chosen discipline

- Means to contribute to society
- Ability to assume leadership roles
- Sense of responsibility and community
- Multicultural competency
- Engagement in local or global activities

This conversation will be actively pursued as a fulcrum for the reconceptualization and assessment of the UVM student experience. In addition, academic units across the campus are engaged in innovative efforts aimed at increasing rigor and enriching the curriculum, ranging from substantive first-year experiences to honors programs. Many such examples are included in the response to Standard Four, on Programs and Instruction.

Another important element in ensuring a comprehensive undergraduate experience and an effective transition into either a graduate or professional program or into the workplace is effective educational planning. To that end, we have introduced approaches such as the Teacher-Advisor Programs (TAP) in the School of Natural Resources and the College of Arts and Sciences and the portfolio program in the College of Education and Social Services. In addition to covering substantial course content, these programs assist students in defining their educational and career goals, developing a plan for achieving them through selection of coursework, identification of major and minor courses of study, internships, and other community-based learning, and then assessing their progress. In addition to enhancing the quality of students' academic endeavors, this process promises to promote confidence and set up habits of reflection that will permit increasingly sophisticated career exploration over time. For more detail on these initiatives, please again refer to our Standard Four response.

The value of a learner-centered approach to undergraduate education is increasingly a topic under consideration. Students are indisputably changing; they are arriving at UVM accustomed to diverse ways of learning, and the educational environment must respond to these changes. Interest among students in a wide range of approaches to their educational experiences is becoming evident.

In order to highlight the value that UVM places on teaching, the University has recently funded and established the Center for Teaching and Learning, a new effort designed by faculty for faculty, to enhance institutional and collegial support for this critical component of our mission. This new Center encourages a culture of excellence in teaching and will serve as a focal point for the exploration of new modes of teaching, the facilitation and assessment of student learning, and the integration of technology into the classroom. We have many individual examples of courses based on active learning and collaborative models, as well as faculty teaching to diverse learning styles and with information technologies. An important goal of the Center is to bring together faculty committed to developing new approaches to instruction, thereby creating partnerships for exploration of ideas and innovation in teaching and learning.

Experiential learning is becoming an important component of the educational experience for many students. These individualized learning experiences, whether they be internships, research projects, study abroad, or alternative spring break activities, provide important

enrichment to more traditional academic endeavors. In many majors, such activities are an integral part of the program design; see Standard Four for specifics. UVM was recently able to hire a full-time coordinator to support the development of additional service opportunities, including the design of internships in not-for-profit agencies and additional community service activities. The work-study program has also been enhanced and expanded to offer more student service opportunities, better supervisory training, use of best practices and incentives for pre-professional learning/work opportunities.

Finally, consideration of the learning environment at UVM would not be complete without mention of our commitment to the teacher/scholar as the basis of the student educational experience. Faculty recruitment and evaluation, curriculum design and resources are all organized to support the interconnection between scholarship and teaching. The opportunities our students have to work collaboratively with people engaged in the development of knowledge not only provides access to current perspectives and ideas, but teaches respect and passion for learning and the intellectual world. UVM's student experience is at its best and most distinctive when these connections between student and faculty are sustained over the course of a student's life at the University.

### **Diversity and Campus Climate**

The complex issues of diversity continue to play a prominent role in the UVM student experience, as they do in the larger society. While women, ALANA students, and GLBT (gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender) students identified safety, security, and climate as major problems in a 1997 survey, these issues present important concerns for a large portion of the entire community as well. Racism and prejudice have repeatedly surfaced over the past decade in a dismaying number of bias incidents. Calls for social justice have formed the core of several activist movements and external reviews. Many students continue to cite increased tolerance for difference and a more diverse university community as important elements in improving the campus environment.

During the past several years, the University has increased its organizational focus on diversity, as described in the response to Standard Eleven, Integrity. The establishment of the Allen House as a campus center for cultural pluralism, the addition of the ALANA Studies program along with the incorporation of multicultural perspectives in discipline-specific courses across the campus, and the modest increases in faculty and staff diversity are important advances which are noted in the annual report to the Board of Trustees on diversity.

We have also recently formed a partnership with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) to improve the racial climate on campus. This is a new collaborative process developed by OCR to allow local community involvement in identifying effective solutions to high-priority civil rights issues. At the conclusion of the review, the University was commended for the notable level of commitment and resources put forth to address racial climate and harassment issues on the campus. Future goals, many of which build upon existing areas of accomplishment, include UVM's renewed commitment to a campus that does not tolerate racial discrimination or harassment and to a community that reflects a

welcoming, hospitable racial climate; enhanced communications capability to strengthen connections within the University community as well as with the greater Burlington community; improved policies and procedures that address racial discrimination and harassment concerns; enhanced strategies to recruit and retain students, faculty, and staff of color; and an educational experience that provides students with the life skills necessary for success in a diverse world.

## **Community**

Many have suggested that the UVM student experience would be stronger if it emphasized community spirit and a shared community experience. Meaningful relationships with a group of people and a sense of place, as well as a sense of common purpose and some shared intellectual endeavors, are critical elements in this experience. By developing campus environments in which the positive effects of community dominate, we have the potential to diminish the impact of other areas of concern such as binge drinking, off-campus behavior of students, lack of respect for diversity, and the ubiquitous lack of communication among students, faculty, staff, and administration.

Communication needs to be strengthened in many dimensions. UVM students not only want to know: they want to be known. They expect us to care about their success and to reach out to them. We have many communities at the university, and we need to find ways to increase communication and interaction among them. As technology has been introduced into society and into the campus environment, the question of communication has acquired new complexity. It is possible to have frequent electronic contact, but we must explore ways to engage in meaningful and sustaining communications that provide emotional and social support as well as the exchange of ideas, information, and intellectual stimulation.

One feature of the desire for community may be a slow but pervasive decline in the social structures supporting the student experience. Over the past two decades, there has been a marked wane in the vitality of fraternities and sororities, and little has emerged to take their place. Students complain that the campus is empty on weekends, that there are few places to find food in the late evenings, and that spaces and opportunities for gathering and connecting with other members of the campus community are inadequate.

While the characterization of UVM as a party school may be an overdrawn media image in some regards, it is a daily reality for one segment of the student population. Alcohol abuse is a prominent element in this environment, resulting in profound dysfunction throughout the community, disruptive residence hall life, the creation of conflict with surrounding neighborhoods and the city, and ultimately the undermining of many students' academic endeavors. This is a problem throughout our society, which manifests itself in our campus context in distinct and disturbing ways.

UVM has made important advances in addressing the issues surrounding alcohol and substance abuse by taking the first important step of naming and facing the problem. Through our participation in the Robert Wood Johnson project, we are developing a campus and community coalition to create a long-term, sustainable change in the environment and

culture around alcohol use. Our strategy to reduce high-risk drinking involves addressing the problem on a number of fronts, including policy and enforcement, communication, education, programming, and individual counseling.

Building the intellectual community central to the UVM student experience is an ongoing endeavor, focused on developing academically-oriented relationships both among students and between students and faculty. UVM has long been involved in residence-based programs in its Living/Learning Center and continues to experiment with this innovative model. Intensive work has taken place on first-year programs, particularly in the College of Arts and Sciences Teacher-Advisor Program and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Beginnings program. One recent effort to introduce students to the UVM community and the broader Burlington community is the College of Education and Social Service's Community Plunge, in which faculty advisors accompany their new student advisees on a walk through the city, noting sites and issues relevant to issues they will study. Smaller schools such as Allied Health Sciences and Natural Resources have strong communities developed around advising and program-specific activities.

Physical facilities have also emerged as important concerns in this regard. The absence of recreational sports facilities has been noted by students over many years, leading to the opening last year of a small fitness facility as a short-term solution and, more importantly, to the fall 1998 groundbreaking for a new Recreational Fitness Center. A new Library/Student Center complex is under active consideration to provide a focus for community connections and a nexus for collegial interaction. This promises to provide new opportunities for creating learner-centered environments supporting students in all aspects of their campus experience.

### **Responsiveness to Change**

Finally, the UVM student experience must be considered within the broader context of global change. The society and the workforce that our students are planning to enter are changing on a daily basis. Diversity, teamwork, technology, and lifelong learning are basic elements of everyday life. Our graduates will need to manage their own learning and career paths, and UVM must prepare them to do so.

UVM is a living, dynamic environment that can support, promote, and model meaningful change. As an institution, we are experiencing the same unsettling changes that our students will experience as they begin their careers. In many regards, our students may be further along than the rest of us in identifying the learning experiences that may best meet the challenges and demands of our changing society. They expect us to lead by example, showing that we embrace and support change, that we will not tolerate bias and bigotry, that we are engaged with our world, and that we will take bold steps to confront the issues facing society today.

## **Opportunities for Exploration and Action**

The challenges presented throughout this discourse are many, and the list for suggested improvements is long. Consideration of the student experience has been lively, reflecting the enthusiasm and dedication of members of the entire university community for this central issue. Numerous good ideas have been put forward that are worthy of further exploration, and it is encouraging to find that many of these are in areas where we have efforts already underway. We clearly need to find ways to make these endeavors known, to involve more students in those that are successful, and where appropriate, to adapt and adopt these innovative approaches across the entire university.

A closer review of the documentation from the campus discussion will reveal many specific suggestions, including some opportunities for immediate action. While these proposals are too numerous to delineate here, they may be grouped under the following recommendations:

1. Define the qualities of UVM graduates and develop ways to assess related outcomes
2. Examine our curricular framework and consider opportunities for improving coherence and flexibility
3. Increase faculty expectations of students
4. Develop a flexible approach to interdisciplinary educational offerings and degree programs, at least as an option to existing discipline-based models
5. Integrate diverse approaches to learning into regular academic programs
6. Engage the Burlington, Vermont, and broader communities as vital elements of the student educational and social experience
7. Promote the utilization of technology in classroom teaching
8. Design a program of educational and career planning for every UVM student, establishing relationships which extend to meet lifelong learning needs
9. Build a sense of UVM community by increasing both student/student interactions and student/faculty interactions on an informal level
10. Create a distinctive, active, and healthy weekend social life on campus
11. Enhance facilities and programs which bring people from various campus communities together
12. Improve formal and informal communication paths for the entire campus
13. Cultivate an institutional culture that supports change

