

## Finding Purpose

Rick Gatteau

*"From disciplinarian to innovator to role model to confidant to mentor,  
the role of an administrator is a challenge that I am excited to undertake."*

Little did I know that this sentence, excerpted from my 1993 application to the Higher Education and Student Affairs program at the University of Vermont, would so well define my purpose in the higher education profession over the past 15 years.

I must admit that when I first stepped foot on the University of Vermont campus for my interview back in March 1993, I did not fully grasp what it meant to earn a degree in "Higher Education and Student Affairs." During my undergraduate years in the late 1980s, I knew there were people who were "administrators" who worked with college students. There was a beloved Dean of Students, a Psychological Services Center, an Office of Residential Life, and a Career Development Center. The staff in these areas cared about students like me, encouraged our leadership development, and helped establish a meaningful co-curricular experience.

Knowing that I would not be happy at college unless I got involved, I found a home in the Residence Hall Association and as a student worker in the Office of Residential Life. During my senior year, I remember a conversation with one of my mentors who said I should work in a college. I considered it for a moment, but had my mind set on other aspirations; I was a business major and thought I should enter the corporate world.

During college and after graduation, I dabbled in a few fields including law, television news, and the retail industry. Not seeing any as a lifelong career, I realized working in a college might be the right place for me. When I called up that same mentor to inquire about graduate programs to consider, the University of Vermont was one of her top recommendations. So, I applied, not knowing much about the program (and knowing even less about the very cold winters in Burlington).

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My first recollection of UVM was my interview weekend—actually, interview day. The trip was a whirlwind; I was on UVM's campus for exactly 24 hours, changing my flight to leave Burlington and return to New York just before a huge snowstorm hit the Northeast and closed the campus for two days! In those 24 hours, my life changed for the better. I knew it was the right place for me, with the best faculty and professionals, and a supportive group of peers. Days later, I vividly remember receiving the phone call with my offer of admission and the assistantship to be a graduate residence hall director. I was ecstatic that I finally had some direction, and hopefully purpose, in my life as a twenty-something.

UVM had so much to offer. I discovered more about myself and the student affairs profession in 2 years than I have in my entire life. Here are just a few of the more important life and career lessons learned:

Don't compete against anyone other than yourself.

Don't worry about the grades; worry about what you're learning.

Never put a Tic Tac in your mouth just before a presentation; you'll have fresh breath, but you might (in my case, will) choke.

Have the courage of your convictions.

It's good to know how to use a fire extinguisher when you work in a residence hall.

Always be prepared for class, especially when Robert Nash asks to engage in a dialogue with you.

Applying theory to practice in the practicum makes the experience even more rich and meaningful.

Finding a mentor, or two, or three, helps you make better decisions.

It's important to have open dialogue about topics that are often the most difficult (and even controversial) to discuss; that's an essential part of becoming an educated person.

Being a hall director is a 24/7 job, but a very good place to get experience "in the trenches."

Forming your identity is an ever-evolving process; it takes time to discover, understand, and appreciate your true self.

Since graduating from UVM in 1995, there have been countless examples of how I have applied these lessons learned to my daily life. UVM provided the solid foundation of teaching about higher education as a profession as well as the mentors to guide practice in the field. For me, the experiential nature of my two years at UVM proved invaluable to later help navigate through political waters and make informed choices as a student affairs professional. The simple truth is

that having experience under your belt helps you avoid making similar mistakes, and ultimately improves your decision-making skills.

As my career has evolved, I have been fortunate to work on several college campuses—large and small, public and private. Each has been unique in its mission, focus, and campus culture—aspects which have required me to listen, learn, and adapt to my surroundings. It is no easy task, particularly when your belief system is different from the institution or department where you work. In times of challenge, disagreement, or difficulty, I often reflect upon a rich, insightful quote from Professor Robert Nash to guide my thinking: “Find the truth in what you oppose, and the error in what you espouse.”

Regardless of institution type or conflicting ideologies, I have come to realize that every institution of higher education has one common purpose: to educate students. And that is why I am in the field today. I could not imagine working in any other place. I get up every morning excited to go to work, lead a staff, and interact with students. I have the opportunity to be creative, help students make informed decisions, speak to large audiences, employ more efficient and effective business practices, motivate and recognize staff and students, teach others new skills, interact with colleagues across the nation, and help make a difference. I have a career that has meaning and purpose, one that truly helps others define and achieve their own potential. Someday, if I can say I have been successful in my career, it will be because I have given back to students as a mentor just as I was mentored by many incredible individuals associated with the UVM HESA program.

Although it has been 15 years since first stepping foot on UVM’s campus, it still feels like yesterday. Truthfully, I am glad to no longer have the daily pressures of being a student—reading books, writing papers, and balancing the practicum with my assistantship. But, it was this experience, more than any other, which has shaped me as a person and a professional. It’s the reason why, when asked where I went to graduate school, I say with great pride, “UVM HESA.”