

## *The Vermont Connection:* Some Thoughts and Lessons Learned

Keith Miser

It's a great honor to be invited to write a reflection paper as part of the celebration of the 30th volume of *The Vermont Connection*, the student affairs journal for the University of Vermont. I was invited to give some thoughts about the early days in the creation of the journal, student affairs as a profession, and the University of Vermont over these past 30 years.

*The Vermont Connection* is a unique journal: created, edited, and produced by students from one of the top graduate programs for student affairs in the nation. In many ways, the development of this quality journal parallels the development of the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration graduate program. Nearly 30 years have passed since *The Vermont Connection* began. At that time I was serving as the Dean of Students and the Associate Vice President for Administration at the University of Vermont and was honored to be a faculty member in the student affairs graduate program. Several other nationally-ranked student affairs programs had journals at the time, and the UVM faculty supported creating one. I volunteered enthusiastically to be the advisor and to help develop the journal. I discussed the concept in the student affairs capstone class I was teaching for second-year students. The students in my class embraced the idea, and many volunteers came forward to design and create the first volume.

To get started quickly, I asked Mike Dunn, my graduate assistant, to serve as the first editor as part of his assistantship responsibilities. We also asked for volunteers from across the student affairs program to be involved, and again, many students expressed enthusiasm for the project. The name for the journal and the style to be used were controversial, and in typical HESA style caused much debate, discussion, and occasional arguments. The idea of the journal connecting

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*Keith Miser currently serves as the Special Assistant to the Chancellor for International Programs at the University of Hawaii at Hilo after being the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs there since 2000. Prior to this, he was the Vice President for Student Affairs at Colorado State University, 1988 to 2000, and was the Dean of Students and Associate Vice President for Administration at the University of Vermont from 1975 to 1988. He was the Director of Residential Life at UVM from 1971 to 1975. Dr. Miser was a faculty member in HESA and greatly enjoyed serving HESA Students and assisted with The Vermont Connection. Dr. Miser holds his BS in Biology, MS in Counseling and his Ed.D. in Higher Education Administration, all from Indiana University.*

HESA students with each other and with alumni became the basis for the name *The Vermont Connection*.

The style was to be more formal, reflecting high quality intellectual and academic discourse. The style also set this journal apart from other graduate school journals which leaned toward an informal and less professional style. I believe it was this concept of style and quality that gained *The Vermont Connection* recognition throughout the nation as the premier journal for a graduate program in student affairs.

The Editorial Board and the leadership of the journal worked magnificently, building policies, procedures, and responsibilities for the production of the journal. In those early days, absent computers and word processing, the production of the journal was difficult and tedious. Most of the first journals were typed, cut, and glued together to be photographed for later production. The journal was mailed to alumni and friends of the program, and the response was outstanding. It was a few years later that the “unveiling” was changed to occur during the national NASPA and ACPA conferences.

For several years, the journal produced two volumes per academic year. After 4 years, the Editorial Board decided to move to one annual publication and to double the length of the journal. This decision allowed more time for writing and editing, and created an environment for greater involvement of HESA students in the journal production. In the early years, the funding for the journal was very difficult, and the cost was budgeted through the Dean of Students Office. In the 1980s, development efforts were initiated in order to raise money from alumni and friends for the journal to make it independent from a University budget. This independence allowed more stability since the journal would not be affected so much by possible institutional financial crises.

*The Vermont Connection* captures the vision and the hope of an outstanding group of graduate students as they do their best to create a journal of high quality. The journal has grown, developed, and been strengthened over the years through the input of successive Editorial Boards and area editors. Each edition was built on the success of the past to become the journal it is today. This journal demonstrates that sustained effort over three decades can produce something that is of the very highest quality whose voice helps form the soul of the graduate program.

#### A Student Affairs Career: Lessons Learned from Vermont

I was very fortunate to serve for 4 years from 1971 to 1975 as the Director of Residence Halls at the University of Vermont and from 1975 to 1988 as the Dean

of Students and Associate Vice President for Administration. From Vermont I moved to be the Vice President for Student Affairs at Colorado State for 12 years before coming to the University of Hawaii at Hilo as the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs in 2000. In January 2008, I began my transition to retirement and am serving in an exhilarating position as the Special Assistant to the Chancellor for International Programs and the Executive Director of the Center for Global Education and Exchange.

Each of my senior student affairs positions—spanning 37 years—have been challenging, stimulating, and professionally and personally fulfilling. I cannot think of any other profession, positions, or universities that I would have enjoyed more than those I have served. Each of these institutions is distinctive and preserves strong student affairs programs that are student-centered, philosophically sound, and educationally vibrant.

Looking back at the beginning of my career at the University of Vermont, I am filled with emotion and excitement. I think often of the many students, colleagues, and faculty members who enriched my life as a young professional, many of whom I still see and hear from. Student affairs is an extraordinary profession, and the University of Vermont and its student affairs graduate program are of the finest caliber. I remember how our years at UVM contributed so positively to the lives of both Ann and myself and prepared us for our next professional challenges. Both of us learned many lessons at the University of Vermont that became the foundation for the rest of our professional lives. Upon reflection, the following truths learned during my tenure at the University of Vermont had unique and important significance to me as I began my career in student affairs. They reflect the values, ideals, and uniqueness of the HESA program, the University of Vermont, and the state and its people.

### *Freedom as a Value*

The state of Vermont and its great state university are built on the history and principle of personal freedom and its accompanying responsibilities. The freedom to speak, to write, and to act in order to learn are values demonstrated in the everyday lives of Vermonters. These ideals are woven into the fabric underlying the policies, practices, programs, and initiatives at UVM. This notion of personal freedom is so important in thinking about the role of student affairs on a campus. Creating learning situations and policies that reinforce student freedoms is one of the foundations of the student affairs profession.

### *Compassion for the Human Condition*

Vermont is a humane place where society reaches out to those in need of per-

sonal and institutional support. Vermont is a state that cares about the poor, disabled, and those in need of assistance. These values are reflected in most student behavior at UVM and in behavior modeled by most faculty and student affairs staff on the campus throughout the year. The University of Vermont is constantly being challenged to build a university community that is inclusive and diverse and embraces the improvement of the human condition through volunteering, environmental sustainability, and accepting one another as brother and sister.

### *Sustainable Development*

Before the concept of sustainable development became a national concern, the University of Vermont was deeply involved in creating a university that was sustainable and able to operate on a financial margin. The state of Vermont and the university have always been underfunded in relationship to their quality and aspirations and have struggled to maintain a quality educational environment with the financial support that was available. Lessons can be learned from the University of Vermont about prudent expenditures and working hard to sustain an environmental conscience. The University of Vermont and the HESA program have thrived over these past 30 years even with a very low funding base. The example set by the program and the university could be a powerful lesson for other universities and programs across the nation.

### *Importance of History*

Vermonters and the University of Vermont live history every day. Programs, activities, and the ethos of the campus are built on a foundation of historical roots. From its founding in 1791, the University of Vermont has acknowledged history and its proud traditions as a basis for vision and practices that have developed the present university. Using the best of these historical truths and rejecting some that were not appropriate, the university has grown, developed, and matured. Over the past 30 years, the HESA program has been part of this exciting change and development. Good leaders in student affairs are keenly aware of the history of their organizations and the role they play in creating history for future generations of student affairs professionals and leaders. The University of Vermont offers a superb opportunity for HESA alumni as well as staff members to think about history and its role in building a strong and vital future.

### *Student Affairs Professionals as Advocates*

Student affairs staff at the University of Vermont see themselves as tireless advocates for the minority. One can be an advocate for a minority of thought, race, culture, sexual orientation, national origin, age, or disability, to name a few. This notion of being a strong advocate and educator is socially reinforced by

the values of the University of Vermont and through the practices of the state of Vermont in general. Student affairs staff and faculty frequently advocate for groups of individuals who are not able to speak for themselves against oppression, unfair and biased rules, or institutional or individual discrimination. Student affairs staff must act to reflect the highest ideals of a social institution.

### *HESA Program and the Liberal Arts*

The University of Vermont's HESA program is built on a strong and positive foundation of the liberal arts, challenging graduate students to discover, think, and celebrate the liberal arts perspective of the education they are receiving. Many student affairs preparation programs are designed to teach graduate students how to do things. The UVM program is unique by teaching students primarily *why* things are done, in addition to some education about *how* they are done. UVM graduates are ready to face challenges, make decisions, and build social institutions because they chose a program that has this particular philosophy. This perspective puts UVM graduates ahead of many other emerging professionals because of the perspective that the HESA faculty have given them and their ability to think about why programs, policies, or procedures are created.

These six concepts above I learned and had reinforced each day during my tenure at the University of Vermont. They have been a part of my journey through student affairs. My professional experience has been abundantly rich, and I have been so greatly honored to work with students who have given me amazing joy, energy, excitement, and perspective that I would not have had working in any other profession. The University of Vermont was a magnificent place to begin this journey.