



## Our Academic Advantage

I AM OFTEN ASKED WHAT MAKES THE University of Vermont distinct—what in our educational mission and delivery makes UVM stand out among its peers.

I have phrased this overarching question to our faculty in this way: What does it mean to be an educated person? What does it mean to be educated at UVM? And, importantly, what does it mean to hold a degree from UVM?

Over the last several years, our faculty and educational leaders have engaged in an important dialogue on this subject, asking these questions in the context of both our ambitions for our students and our status as an institution of higher learning rooted in our history and values. Our core requirements for all UVM undergraduates, embedded in the General Education Program, reflect the faculty's aspirations for specific competencies and frames of reference that our students will take from their studies at UVM—no matter what their major—and apply as citizens in our dynamic, complex, twenty-first-century world.

UVM's General Education Program comprises four required fields of study: Diversity, Sustainability, Foundational Writing and Information Literacy, and Quantitative Reasoning. Rather than mandating specific classes that every undergraduate must take, these foundational requirements are embedded within classes across the spectrum of majors, encouraging students to immerse themselves in these essential competencies in the context of their individual interests or fields of study.

It is sometimes a forgoone conclusion

that students will graduate from college with well-developed skills in writing and quantitative thinking. This is not always, however, the case. By foregrounding Quantitative Reasoning and Foundational Writing and Information Literacy in the UVM education, we are underscoring the University's responsibility that our students develop these critical skills for responsible citizenship.

The Diversity and Sustainability requirements of the General Education Program speak to values that have long been a part of UVM's identity. UVM stepped forward as the first American institution of higher learning that specifically declared freedom from religious denomination in its admissions, and was an early advocate for the inclusion of both African Americans and women in higher education. Similarly, Vermont has long been regarded as a leader in environmental concerns, proudly recognizing that many of our forebears were national leaders in conservation and regeneration. UVM created the first Environmental Studies Program in the country, and the Food Systems initiative, another first in the nation launched three years ago, is flourishing with students enrolled at all three degree levels.

Diversity and sustainability are both multilayered, complex concepts. While admittedly more difficult to measure, the competencies developed through the Diversity and Sustainability requirements of our General Education Program are also critical citizenship tools for the twenty-first century. We aspire that our students be equipped to

critically encounter the world that they will graduate into, a world in which these big questions predominate. What is personal responsibility in a time of rapid climate change? What is the history of how our borders came to be? These are the kinds of existential questions of our time that our students must be ready to delve into as they develop into next-generation leaders.

How do we recognize success in achieving the goals set forth for each of these four core requirements? Each has articulated learning outcomes, such as developing an awareness of the origins of prejudice, and integrating economic, ecological, and social perspectives in evaluating sustainability. Faculty teams trained in assessment examine specific student work across courses to determine whether the learning outcomes have been achieved. The Faculty Senate currently is assessing each of the General Education fields of study and their goal-oriented learning outcomes to determine effectiveness.

The University of Vermont's mission is "to create, evaluate, share, and apply knowledge and to prepare students to be accountable leaders who will bring to their work dedication to the global community, a grasp of complexity, effective problem-solving and communication skills, and an enduring commitment to learning and ethical conduct." Our General Education Program inculcates this mission into the foundation of our educational structure. It is this mission, in action, that makes UVM's education distinct and a standout among its peers.

—Tom Sullivan