

President's 2019 Convocation Address

Wow, what a crowd!

Greetings! You're my inaugural class, the class I'm coming into UVM with. We all made a wise decision to come to this great university.

This is a time of big transitions in your life as it is in mine. We left our two children at college just about ten days back, and we came home here to an empty nest. But now, that empty nest is filled with 10,000 students! What more could we ask for?

I thought you'd be curious to know that I came to UVM because of its land-grant heritage. I hope that as you spend time at UVM you understand better what that means—what it means to me and what it means to the community. The land-grant mission speaks to our responsibility, our solemn responsibility, to bring the significant assets of our university to bear on our community.

I also came to UVM because of the high quality of our students, our faculty, and our educational and research programs.

And of course, it didn't hurt that Burlington is among the most beautiful places on earth. I hope you've all been discovering that for yourselves.

This campus has transformed during the last few years in many ways. New learning laboratories and living spaces have been built, beautiful historic buildings have been renovated, and innovative degree programs have been created—all focused on making this a robust university for the 21st century, where you can learn and discover and tackle the big challenges of the day.

You're joining one of the most historic and distinguished universities in America.

- UVM was among the first universities in America to admit women as students.
- Our Phi Beta Kappa chapter was the nation's first to admit women and then to admit an African-American member.
- UVM is a place that emphasizes sustainable stewardship of our climate and the environment.
- It's a place fiercely proud of its commitment to diversity and inclusion.
- Our state is the home state of Senator Justin Smith Morrill, who conceived the land-grant mission that President Abraham Lincoln signed into law.
- Our students are Fulbright, Udall, Goldwater, and Truman scholars.
- And for the fifth year in a row, our incoming class—that's *you*—has the highest academic credentials in our history in terms of SAT scores, ACT scores, and so much more. Give yourselves a very big hand!

- And on the other end of things, you'll also be happy to know that our four-year graduation rate is at an all-time high. We're among the top 6 percent of public universities in the nation in terms of graduation rates in four years.

So with all your academic background, you'll help us keep besting that graduation rate, I'm sure! And I mentioned Truman Scholars—not everyone can do this, but our friend Jillian, the SGA president who just spoke, is one of those. Look up how difficult it is to get a Truman scholarship and do your best to emulate that!

I still remember well the apprehension and the excitement I felt when I was at my first week in college. In some ways, as the new president coming in, leaving everything that I was very comfortable and familiar with for 20 years in Indiana, I'm right there with you. In particular, my son is starting as a freshman at Purdue and is going through the same kinds of feelings that you are. And my wife and I are going through the same withdrawal symptoms that your parents are. I have a piece of advice to share: Call them often! You may not need to do so, but they need you to!

I chatted with some of you during Move-In, and I hope that more of you will stop and say hello when we run into each other on campus. Just please don't ask me for directions yet. You and I will be getting to know the campus and the city of Burlington together over the next few months.

Your time at UVM is the time of your life to grow, to listen, to learn from others, to share your perspectives, to open your minds and horizons to diverse ways of thinking and to perspectives that are different from yours. Make the best use of this time. This is your new home, and the university is the best time in your life to explore and work through issues you encounter, both familiar ones and unfamiliar ones.

Your professors and fellow students, our staff, and even our committed alumni are all part of a vibrant ecosystem for learning, discovery, and exploration. We will support, challenge, and encourage you – tomorrow, this year, and throughout your entire journey at UVM. You never have to feel like you're doing this alone.

Embrace the opportunities for learning, working side by side with your professors in research labs, in studios, in the field, through service learning and community involvement, via internships and externships, and through international study abroad programs. Get engaged with the community. This is something Catamounts are very proud of. I stayed back in the dorms during one of my semester breaks to participate in a program helping underprivileged middle and high school students learn math and science. Decades later, one of the things I remember about that time is the feeling of satisfaction I had in doing that. The experience that I gained in two different industrial internships was very important to my future, as was a research internship that I went through, which led to me writing my first research paper.

I know you'll find your own set of excellent options at UVM. Think of this as an explorer's journey, a journey of personal and intellectual discovery. How you focus your energies, the opportunities you embrace, and the issues you choose to get involved with will shape you for the rest of your life. And we will be there with you.

We're each stepping out tonight, together, on this journey. You'll be my first graduating class and I'll be there to shake each of your hands. We will shape this community and that experience will shape us into better human beings, wiser, and more compassionate.

We're here with you to make your learning, and this time of discovery, all that you want it to be. Let's make it count.