

Jillian Scannell

Convocation

Greetings and Welcome to UVM!

Three years ago, I was seated where you are. And while I don't remember the specifics of my convocation, I do remember the *feeling*- which for me was OVERWHELMED. You've just spent the weekend attending events and learning about campus, but tomorrow is still your first day of class. It's normal to feel anxious, nervous, and maybe a little lonely. Everything feels new and possible, but there are so many opportunities before you, it's hard to know which path to choose.

To be honest, I spent my first few months at UVM in a daze of constructive confusion. I knew *what* I wanted – to get involved on campus and make lifelong friends. But, I didn't know *how* to make it happen. Questions like: what club to join, how to meet people, and who I was going to eat lunch with weighed on me. So I did exactly what I suggest all of you do; I tried things. The best thing about right now, is that you have permission to explore. You've all been given these pins signifying your place now as a Catamount, as an explorer forever. Follow your curiosity and see which path it leads you down. Go to meetings of clubs that sound interesting, join your hall's intramural soccer team, explore classes in your different interests, go to a professor's office hours -- there are endless possibilities of things, just put yourself out there and see what happens.

I know first-hand that this is way easier said than done. Halfway through my first semester, I was not even close to feeling connected to campus yet. But this changed the morning after the 2016 Presidential Election. My Intro to Environmental Studies Professor Amy Seidl made space in our 250-person lecture for people to share how they were feeling about the election. There were people with wildly different perspectives, and yet we were able to have a productive conversation . A different type of learning happened, not about concepts or theories, but about real life. That's what made it so powerful. 50 minutes flew by, so Amy offered to get bagels and bring students together that Saturday morning. This

invitation sparked my interest, but honestly, my first thought was ‘what more could I contribute?’ That weekend, I stopped overthinking it and went to the meeting.

After Saturday morning bagels, I became one of the leading members of a group of students who held a rally on inauguration day and chartered a bus to the People’s Climate March in Washington D.C. Here is my pro-tip for all of you: Show up for bagels, because they could change everything. UVM faculty and staff are invested in you and opportunities like this abound – all you have to do is show up.

With all of this activism work, I felt like I was finally starting to find my purpose. So when Student Government Association was looking for appointments to the Committee on the Environment, I knew I would be a great fit. Now as I’m sure you can guess from me standing here as SGA President how that interview went... {pause} but, I actually didn’t get the position.

The reason I am here today is because of what happened after. Just when I felt like I had finally figured out what I wanted out of my UVM experience, I got knocked down. And, to be honest with you, I stayed down for a little while. And that was ok. I needed a little time to be upset and work through my self-doubt and to figure out what I could learn from the situation. Even though I didn’t get the position, that didn’t change the fact that I still thought I would be good at it. With the support of my friends I ran at the end of the semester and won a seat as a senator. Not getting it on the first try clarified, for me, how committed I was to trying again.

I share this because you are likely to have setbacks, and as UVM Class of 1879 graduate John Dewey reminds us: “The person who really thinks learns as much from their failures as from their successes.”

You are about to embark on a journey that will lead you on twists and turns that you can’t even imagine now. You are going to have opportunities, successes and yes, a few missteps, but it will all provide you with an opportunity to learn and grow. And while you may feel overwhelmed and even a little lonely right now, your journey was not meant to be travelled alone. So many people here want to support you. Please reach out, be vulnerable and step up for each other. I have all the faith in the world

that after much exploring, you will each find your way, and everything -- classes, friends, work -- it will all fall into place.

Good luck on your journey!