“A mind without fear”

Remarks shared by Suresh V. Garimella at his installation as UVM’s 27th President
3 October 2019

Thank you.

Thank you for bestowing on me this awesome honor and responsibility. Thank you to the board of trustees – in particular, Chair David Daigle and Vice Chair Ron Lumbra – and the search committee and all the faculty, staff, students and alumni, for trusting me with leading this great institution. Thank you to Governor Scott, Senator Leahy and all the assembled government representatives. And of course, to friends who have traveled some distances to help mark the occasion.

I credit my parents most of all for instilling in their children values and confidence that have stayed with us. They are traveling overseas and could not be here today, but I know will be watching the proceedings. Thank you, mom and dad. My sister and brother and their families are here today. As are my wife Lakshmi and my daughter Shruthi and son Sanjay – to all members of my family, I dedicate this occasion.

Thanks also to my mentors and my predecessors, especially Tom Sullivan, who has given me the greatest gift of taking on leadership of a university that is on a great trajectory and brimming with optimism. And to all of you members of the UVM family and the broader community and friends for welcoming us to UVM and helping us mark this important transition.

As I stand today at this lectern that belonged to renowned philosopher and educational reformer and UVM graduate John Dewey, I am reminded of UVM’s proud history of firsts:

- Our university, founded in 1791, is the fifth oldest college in New England, starting as a private liberal arts school, and becoming one of the founding public, land-grant institutions.
- UVM is the first American university with a charter declaring that no preference shall be given to any religious sect or denomination.
- We were among the first US universities to defy custom and admit women as students (in 1871).
- And our Phi Beta Kappa chapter was the nation’s first to admit women and African-American students.

How do we now continue to build on this proud heritage of 228 years? I know the faculty of UVM offer great and distinctive strengths that will ensure that the university flourishes in the face of any headwinds and challenges, as long as we are guided by a three-fold mindset:

- First, we all can agree that our most solemn responsibility is to the success of our students. They deserve the highest-quality education we can offer. Students should expect our support and mentorship. But we also must help them plan for success in their lives after graduation, through advising and connections to enriching internships and service-learning opportunities right from their first semester. Insuring success also means, importantly, that we do all we can to make a UVM education affordable and accessible to a wide diversity of students.
- A connected, second part of the framework is for us to double down on strengths UVM is known for, enhance our research and scholarship – and our reputation and renown – in these areas, and contribute knowledge for the betterment of society and to solve global challenges.

- And the third part of this framework is to fully embrace and celebrate our land-grant mission. One of the key attractions in my coming to UVM was that it is a land-grant university. Indeed, it is the home state of Senator Justin Smith Morrill, who conceived the land-grant mission that President Abraham Lincoln signed into law, unleashing what I believe to be one of the greatest experiments in higher education. I have the honor of being inspired daily by Senator Morrill’s desk that sits in my office; it is to me, the greatest perk of my position. Senator Morrill’s land grant vision speaks to our responsibility to bring the significant assets of our university to bear on our community.

Governor Scott, I sincerely believe that the success of our state is inextricably linked with the success of UVM. And we will do all we can to enhance the intellectual, human, economic and social capital of our community.

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I have been guided in my journey over the decades by a short poem I first studied and committed to memory in grade school. It goes like this:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action–
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

This poem was written by Rabindranath Tagore in 1913, many years before India won its hard-fought independence. So, what is that heaven of freedom to which we might aspire today?

Some of you know I served in the US State Department for a stint as a Jefferson Science Fellow. What better source to draw inspiration from, than the nation’s third president, Thomas Jefferson, who said:

“Let us in education dream of an aristocracy of achievement arising out of a democracy of opportunity.”

It is that very democracy of opportunity that I hope UVM will be proud to help bring about. Opportunity made available irrespective of one’s origin or skin color, sexual orientation or identity, or economic background. Our university’s early example and our enduring ideals, enshrined in the values we call “Our Common Ground,” demand it. Our diversity is our strength. It must be our inspiration.
Many have shared kind sentiments and best wishes for this special day. One, from my master’s thesis advisor, Dr. Richard Christensen, speaks directly to the solemn responsibility of a president to serve and support the university’s students and faculty:

“*He who would be greatest among you, let him be your servant.* You now assume a position of leadership where you can render great service to your university: the students and the faculty. Your most lasting service could be to figure out how to reduce the cost of a good college education.”

Dr. Christensen, I will do my best.

Some despair that our nation is irreparably ‘broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls.’ But our faith and optimism must endure.

In his acceptance speech to Parliament upon election as Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi said: “Some see a glass as half empty, others as half full. I see it as full, half with water and half with air.”

Despite the challenges and headwinds facing us, I too subscribe to this glass-full view of the world.

UVM has a wonderful tradition of Convocation as our first-year students embark upon their college journey. The theme during convocation this year was ‘Explorers Forever.’ It calls on us to explore, to not be afraid to expose ourselves to new perspectives, to learn from all around us. Indeed, “to turn mirrors into windows,” which as noted journalist Sydney Harris said, “is the whole purpose of education.” After all, if not during our students’ time at the university, then when?

Our students are Fulbright, Udall, Goldwater and Truman scholars, and Peace Corps volunteers. Our four-year graduation rate is at an all-time high and places us in the top few percent of all public universities in the country. And for the fifth year in a row, our incoming class has the highest academic credentials in our history in terms of test scores and much more.

Our students are up to the challenge. I know that our faculty and staff are too!

This wonderful tradition of an installation celebrates a new era. It is not about my being installed as president, but a marking of an important transition and an expression of our collective will and aspiration to reach even greater heights.

I wish for all of us a ‘mind without fear’ and a ‘head held high’ as we work to enable our students’ bright futures. You have my commitment to contribute all I can in our upcoming journey together.

Thank you.