

Convocation Remarks
Dr. David V. Rosowsky
UVM Provost and Senior Vice President
August 26, 2018

Good evening!

Before I begin my remarks, I want to take this opportunity to introduce the academic leadership of the University of Vermont – the Deans.

Deans at the University of Vermont are responsible for nearly every facet of your educational experience; they are the leaders of our colleges and schools, and they are dedicated to your success. Many of our deans are here with us today.

Deans, as I call your name, please stand. Students, as the Dean of your college or school is announced, please also rise and remain standing. By the end, the entire Class of 2022 should be standing and we can thank the deans, in advance, for all that they do for our students.

Lisa Schnell, Interim Dean of the Honors College

Scott Thomas, Dean of the College of Education and Social Services

Nancy Mathews, Dean of the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources

Sanjay Sharma, Dean of the Grossman School of Business

Patricia Prelock, Dean of the College of Nursing and Health Sciences

Thomas Vogelmann, Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

Linda Schadler, Dean of the College of Engineering and Mathematical Sciences

William Falls, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences

These are your academic college and school deans. They are here to ensure your access to a world-class education and your four-year pathway to graduation. They have worked with their faculty to develop the remarkable intellectual journey that begins tomorrow.

Please join me in thanking our deans for their leadership.

(Please be seated.)

As provost, I serve as the Chief Academic Officer for the University of Vermont, and as such, I am responsible for the academic mission of the University and ensuring that we provide a world-class environment for learning and discovery for our students; and for teaching, research, and the pursuit of scholarship for our faculty. But in addition to my formal titles, and my role as Chief Academic Officer, I also serve – unofficially – as UVM’s Chief Optimism Officer.

If you want to learn more about all that is happening at the University of Vermont, what's new on our campus, how our Division I Athletics teams are doing, or where to go to get the best cup of coffee (or ice cream) on campus – I encourage you to follow me on Twitter @UVMprovost.

I want to use my remarks this evening to talk about the four years you will spend here at the University of Vermont. I know you will have important discussions about our first-year reading, *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, in your classes this fall. Tonight, I want to draw attention to several observations Coates shares early in the book that I think are particularly germane to this moment in time, and to the important work that begins tomorrow.

Coates described his childhood understanding of our country as a galaxy, where his portion of the galaxy was black and the other portion was not. He writes, “I knew some inscrutable energy preserved the breach. I felt, but did not yet understand, the relationship between that other world and me.” What a powerful and poignant observation. If not already, I hope that in time you will come to understand that your world is exactly that – *your* world – and that there is a nearly unimaginable diversity of thought, experience, and perspective beyond its borders.

Ours is not the work of preserving the breach of which Coates speaks, ours is the work of identifying intersections, of building bridges, of strength through synergy – but this is an active pursuit. During the next four years, you will be exposed to scientific fact, artistic interpretation, historical context, mathematical analysis, philosophical perspective, political dialogue, and a broader range of people, cultures, backgrounds, beliefs, and ideas than you may ever see again.

It is our job, and yours, to expand every dimension of your thinking and of your sense of self – of your understanding of your strengths, of your weaknesses, of your biases, of your gifts, of your privilege, of your responsibilities, of your place in the world as it currently exists, and of the contributions you will make to the world as you want it to be.

This aspect of your intellectual journey is every bit as important as the disciplines in which you will major. Yes, you will graduate from UVM with a deep understanding of art, or sociology, or engineering, or nursing, or business, but more than that, I challenge you to engage deeply in the *human experience*. If you do, you will leave here armed with not only disciplinary expertise but also the cultural competence essential to forging solutions to extraordinarily complex challenges we face as a people and as a planet.

Coates goes on to talk about how his mother taught him to read when he was only four, and how she taught him to use writing as a means of investigation. In turn, Coates asked his son to do the same. Why? “Because,” he writes, “these were the earliest acts of interrogation, of drawing myself into consciousness.” And he describes how his mother and father were always pushing him away from secondhand answers, instead referring him to books, urging him to seek and formulate his own answers. He describes this, “as much a series of actions as a state of being, a constant questioning, questioning as ritual, questioning as exploration rather than the search for certainty.”

As we gather here on the eve of *your* great exploration, Coates's words are powerful and pertinent: "drawing myself into consciousness," "questioning as ritual," and "exploration rather than certainty." To those I'll add: attention, intention, and engagement.

Among my many wishes for your next four years is that you give this experience – your studies, your faculty members, your classmates, and yourselves, *the gift of your full attention*.

Pay attention. Immerse yourself in the vastness of this experience. Wallow, reflect, ruminate, and contemplate without interruption. Think deeply. Let things simmer. Explore. Question others, question yourself.

Acknowledge complexity. Get comfortable with uncertainty. Invite disagreement and discourse. Allow your opinions to be challenged and even changed. Look at all sides. Get comfortable with being wrong. Admit what you don't know. *Never stop learning*.

This past week, as we welcomed our newest faculty and welcomed all of our faculty to the start of the new academic year, we were privileged to hear a keynote lecture by Dr. Emily Bernard, Julian Lindsay Green and Gold Professor of English, entitled "To Learn a New Language: Ta-Nehisi Coates and the Language of Race and Racism." As she closed her insightful and provocative lecture, Professor Bernard reminded us that there simply is too much at stake now for students to limit their learning to the classroom.

During your four years at UVM, you will have access to majors, minors, certificates, courses, lectures, symposia, seminars, service-learning, teach-ins, performances, field trips, internships, games, teams, clubs, dinners, and debates. There are no limits to what you can achieve while you are here. But we only provide you, as students, with access to all of this. The value only exists if you take *full* advantage of what we offer – if you make purposeful choices, if you are present, if you explore, if you commit.

Class of 2022, you have my best wishes for the academic journey that begins tomorrow. We will follow your progress and we will be with you every step of the way.

Welcome to the University of Vermont!

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