

January 20, 2017 Pro-Environment Rally Remarks
D. Rosowsky, Provost and Senior Vice President

Good morning. I am so glad to be with you today, here, at the University of Vermont.

We sit on the cusp of a new year and a new administration. We use times such as these to look back and reflect on goals reached, accomplishments shared, challenges faced, and lessons learned. And we look ahead with excitement, hope, uncertainty, and often anxiety. Such is the nature of time. Such is the nature of transitions.

While administrations may change directions, science does not. Science only evolves. Occasionally an element of science is disproved, but it does not revert. Science moves only in one direction: forward.

Today, in this new year, at the dawn of a new administration, we have come together to affirm our commitment to the environment and to acknowledge the responsibilities we have as individual citizens and as members of an academic community, to learn, to discover, to understand, to face the world's environmental challenges, and to work to solve the world's critical environmental problems. And more important than whether our motivation is born from opportunity or threat, of strength or weakness, of scientific understanding or political ideology, is that fact that we are choosing to *act*.

Action is one of the challenges author Elizabeth Kolbert issues in *The Sixth Extinction*, which (as you know) was selected as the first-year reading this year. In the book, we learn of the five major extinction events that came before us, and what science tells us are the most likely causes of those events. And we learn that we exist in what is very likely the next in the series of major extinction events – the sixth extinction – and that this event, happening not in glacial time but in human lifetimes, is the result of human beings. We read the evidence, we listen to the science, and we come face-to-face with the facts. The book pushes us to a place of discomfort, if not disbelief, that we could have been the cause. And yet, there it is, in black and white text, in full-color graphs, in scientific journals and the popular press.

Kolbert issues three challenges to her readers. First, Kolbert challenges us to *acknowledge* the historical record of scientific fact – the best our science can tell us, which even if imperfect is certainly of the right order of magnitude. Second, she challenges us to *admit* the role humankind has played in altering our ecosystem.

Before I get to Kolbert's last challenge, I'll issue one of my own: *arm* yourself with the information and understanding necessary to fully and effectively participate in climate conversations, debates, and solutions. UVM offers a stunning array of courses on the environment. Do not waste this precious resource available to you. Make intentional and purposeful choices when planning your course schedule. Because science matters. Facts matter. Truth matters. Arm yourself with them, and give them voice.

Kolbert's final challenge to us is to *act* – with knowledge and humility – to affect positive change. This is the greatest challenge of all. And it is yours.

My generation is the one grappling first with the truth about the causes and impacts of a changing climate. But it is the next generation – your generation – that will get past debate or blame and move on to real action. To do that, you will need to help bridge the divide that has become so evident. Angry or divisive rhetoric will further no cause here. Solutions will arise from the learning and deeper understanding that come from civil debate and discourse. You cannot disengage from those with opposing viewpoints or perspectives. You cannot dismiss mainstream discussions, issues, and needs. You must, instead, be part of those discussions, help to lead those discussions, and provide the knowledge, data, insight, and perspectives necessary to ensure those discussions are productive.

You can look at this inflection point our planet faces as either scary or hopeful. I chose hope without hesitation. Because I believe in each one of you. I know that at UVM we attract, prepare, enable and launch inspired and creative thinkers, innovators, and leaders. Our graduates are *doers*. You lead by combining passion, compassion, and action. Armed with a world-class education and a university pedigree that stresses collaboration and responsibility, humility and humanity, you will change the world. You are thought-leaders *and* action-leaders. You are bright and inquisitive, committed and engaged, responsive and responsible.

Let this day, and this unique moment in time, serve as a touchstone. Let it serve as a reminder that this cause is too great and its stakes are too high, to ever assume that we can rely on any single leader, or political party, or federal agency, or institution, or paradigm to “take care of it.” Because that is simply not possible regardless of which side of the aisle you favor.

The environment demands our collective – and constant – attention, care, concern, time, energy, and investment. Complacency is not an option. Our commitment cannot wax and wane with polls, popularity, public opinion, or some vague sense that we’re in someone else’s good hands.

The good hands are yours. So let’s get started. Your planet is calling.

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