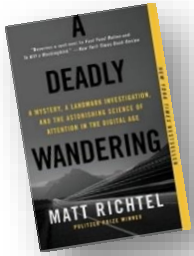


About the Summer Reading Program at the University of Vermont

The Summer Reading Program is a new student's first introduction to the academic life of the University. **A Deadly Wandering** by Matt Richtel is the 2017 first-year summer reading book selection. The book tells the story of a young man coming to terms with a terrible tragedy he caused, texting while driving, and of our awakening as a society to the deepening, sometimes dangerous, role technology is playing in our lives. In addition to being timely and relevant for college-age students, the book offers opportunities for deep learning and deep reflection on topics ranging from technology, to cognitive and brain science, to ethics and the law. We learn about Moore's Law and Metcalf's Law, compulsion and addiction, business models and learning models, human nature and human frailties. And in doing so, we learn about our students, our children, and ourselves.

The role of the book selection in campus-wide discourse

UVM's first-year reading selection is intended to serve as a guidepost for discussions across our university and as a backdrop to intellectual discourse among our faculty, staff, and students. During the year, the book also will inform conversations about our academic programs and how we prepare and inspire our students, vision and re-envision our curricula and degree offerings, and how we posit the University of Vermont as a distinctive and impactful public research university.



The Gifts of Attention and Attentiveness: Reflections on *A Deadly Wandering* by D. Rosowsky, Fall 2017

INTRODUCTION: Welcoming the Class of 2021

In my remarks to our new students, at Convocation, I reminded them of the opportunity to not only read this year's summer book, *A Deadly Wandering* by Matt Richtel, but also to take time to reflect on its messages and the brilliant ways in which the author combines perspectives and disciplines to narrate and explain, to explore and challenge, to warn and to wonder. It is a book for our time and for our generation of students.

In opening my remarks, I underscored the fundamental and ubiquitous safety issue the book explores. In 2007, 11% of drivers at any given time – 1.8 million drivers – were using a phone while driving. Think about that. The temptation of our devices – even at times it is clearly inappropriate, inadvisable, or obviously unsafe – is undeniable. And it is dangerous.

As thoughtful, intelligent people, we recognize we have a responsibility to ourselves and to each other to overcome this temptation. But it's not as simple as that, is it? Because to overcome the temptation means working against our own neurology, our primitive instincts, and our deeply rooted need for connection. I implored our students, in my remarks, to acknowledge that reality. "Put the phone in the backseat before you slip into the driver's seat."

But I moved quickly past the obvious message of the book, which may well have caused some students to tune out, and spoke with them about what the book refers to as our power to attend. Richtel speaks of the onslaught of information we receive from electronic devices. The onslaught, he writes, "taxes our ability to attend, to pay attention, arguably among the most important, powerful, and uniquely human of our gifts."

“Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession of the mind in clear and vivid form out of what seem several simultaneous objects or trains of thought.” –William James

Among my many wishes for the Class of 2021, I wished for them to give their studies, their faculty, their classmates, and themselves *the gift of their attention*. I reminded them that during the next four years, they 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 they may ever see again. “Pay attention,” I urged. “Immerse yourself in the vastness of this experience. Wallow, reflect, ruminate, and contemplate without interruption. Think deeply. Let things simmer.”

But our students, and those of us in the privileged position to help guide their learning and discovery as faculty, must recognize the challenges technology (and specifically our addiction to devices and the connectivity they provide) presents to deep learning and contemplative thought. We must acknowledge “the limits of our stone-age brains, and the challenge our space-age technology presents.”

As Richtel writes, “...even though technology is not classified as ‘addictive,’ neuroscience points to stark similarities between how technology use and drug use trigger chemical release in the brain.” The analogy between social media and drug use may not be a perfect one, but it is nonetheless compelling. And the neuroscience behind both addictive phenomena (stimulus and response) is expanding every year.

“The fear is that we grow so accustomed to frequent bursts of stimulation, we have trouble feeling satisfied in their absence. Think about it: you hear the ping of an incoming text or call, you respond... And each time you respond, you get a hit of dopamine. It’s a pleasurable feeling, a release from the reward center. Then it’s gone. There is no incoming text, no stimulation. You start to feel bored. You crave another hit.”

Pings happen. We know that. And we know that they aren’t going to stop. But we also know that as good as they may feel, ever-present pings diminish our capabilities for deep comprehension, and compromise our ability to reason. And developing the ability to comprehend and reason is precisely why students go to college.

My further remarks:

“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 *pay attention*.

“Of course, our connective technologies can and will support your educational experience. But be aware of their potential to impede meaningful personal, social, and intellectual connections with your faculty members, with your classmates, and with your friends. *Give these people the gift of your undivided*

attention, and expect the same in return. Because these four years are fleeting, but those substantive human connections will transform and transcend this short time you have with us.”

With these comments, it was my hope that I could connect the shared mission of faculty and students – to be attentive, to pay attention to one another – to enable, fuel, and accelerate learning and discovery.

As with any great book, the value is often far more than what appears on the printed page. In the brief sections below, I offer some additional observations inspired by the content and messages of this year’s first-year book.

IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE: The transformational power of a moment

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” –William Butler Yeats

One of the great joys we all experience in our faculty careers is the lighting of a fire, when we see a student’s interest ignite and their life forever altered. Sometimes we facilitate that path-altering moment, sometimes we help to create it, and other times we simply bear witness when it happens. But it is unmistakable when we see it.

As we enter the new academic year and recommit to our role as teacher-scholars and mentors, I hope that we will pay attention to opportunities to impact students in this transformative way. *Pay attention* to our students’ hopes as well as their needs, to their aspirations as well as their limitations. Help them to navigate choices, and to make wise ones. Help them to break through their beliefs to learn about and understand those held by others. Challenge them to think critically, to reflect thoughtfully, and to explore new paths. And help them to communicate respectfully, thoughtfully, and effectively. Help them to be their best, most authentic, most compelling selves. In four short years – really, the blink of an eye – they will be University of Vermont *graduates*. The way our students lead their lives will shine back on our university even as they point their bright light forward.

iSTUDENT: Recognizing, respecting, and responding to the ubiquitous connected student

“In every part of the world with which I am familiar, young people are completely immersed in the digital world – so much so, that it is inconceivable to them that they can, for long, be separated from their devices. Indeed, many of us who are not young, who are ‘digital immigrants’ rather than ‘digital natives,’ are also wedded to, if not dependent on, our digital devices.” –Howard Gardner, Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Our students are digitally savvy. They grew up connected to (and through) technology. Many of us are part of the generation that watched computing become personal and the internet become the most traveled highway, often relying on our children and our students to get us hooked up, linked in, and turned on.

Faculty are educators. But they are also facilitators and mentors. All of this requires that we are able to communicate and engage with our students effectively, in ways to which they are accustomed and most receptive, and very likely in ways that are different from how we learned ourselves. Some faculty are very skilled at adapting to new technologies and new styles of learning. For others, such adaptation is more

difficult. While it is true that every generation is different, and pedagogy has always evolved, we are living (and teaching) in a time where the rate of this change is unprecedented. Think of it as “Moore’s Law” applied to educational practices, modalities, and expectations. Classrooms are flipping, class materials and references are online, and hybrid learning is both exciting and expected. But at the root of the rapid changes is technology and our students’ ubiquitous and handheld connection to, well, the entire world.

Meeting students “where they live” – at paces to which they are accustomed, through platforms on which they are most comfortable, and in ways that excite and engage them – is essential. Asking them to step away from their devices and way of interacting with and existing in the world is a step backward for them. And they are not going to do it. The responsibility falls to us to evolve and adapt along with our students. At the same time, we should model appropriate (not addictive) use of technology – mastering the tool and not being entrapped by it – as well as genuine social interactions, the human connection.

If you are technologically savvy and finding ways to engage (and engage with) your students in their digital world, good for you. If you are less comfortable with technology, or hesitant or anxious, ask a colleague for assistance. Or ask a student. They are teaching us every day.

A DEADLY WANDERING: Students and choices

“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 pay attention.” –D. Rosowsky, 2017 Convocation remarks

Sudden and path-altering transformations resulting from bad decisions or failure to reason can be tragic, as the book reminds us. On college campuses everywhere, students are faced with myriad decisions, peer pressure, and new found freedoms. While faculty should not have to serve as surrogate parents, they often are called upon to establish guidelines, reinforce boundaries, set expectations, and call out bad behaviors. This is not something all of us feel comfortable doing, especially the latter. We may feel it goes beyond our expertise or our workload, or we may simply feel uncomfortable in this role or lack adequate training or support. All valid points, but not acceptable barriers.

As faculty, we have a responsibility and obligation to ensure the best possible learning environment and experience – in our classrooms and beyond. Just as important is the *opportunity* to have positive and even path-altering impacts on our students’ lives. We do this by creating purposeful and meaningful engagement, by *being attentive* and by *paying attention*.

This means paying attention when a student comes to our office to ask for help, for advice, or for direction. But it also means paying attention when we see a student in distress, whether in the classroom or on the campus. Faculty hold the transformational “power of the moment” in their hands. Just as important as the “aha” moment in which a student makes that intellectual connection to a concept or a discipline during a lecture – one that can chart the course of their career and their life – is the moment a faculty member takes the time to check-in with a student who missed a class or failed to turn-in an assignment. These are the moments a student realizes *someone is paying attention to me*. Just as important as grading an assignment and providing feedback through marked papers, is the connection you make with a student after class about inappropriate behavior or coming to class impaired. These are the moments you could truly transform a student’s life and trajectory.

“To make a choice, you need frontal lobes active, and you need few enough competitors in other parts of the brain so that you can engage systems to make a decision.”

Substance abuse on college campuses is a serious issue, as it is at the University of Vermont. We are not students’ parents, nor are we the police. But we *are* responsible for setting both the tone and the expectations for student engagement and student success.

If you see someone smoking pot while you are walking across campus, say something to the student. Tell them to put it out, and remind them that it is illegal and not permitted on campus. If you have student in your class who is drunk or stoned, speak with them (privately) after class. Tell them it is not OK to come to your class impaired, and that it impedes both their ability to learn and that of the others in your class. Tell them that if they believe it is acceptable to attend classes impaired in this way, they should not be in college. Remind them of the investment their family has made in their education.

I know this can be challenging, but here again it might be helpful to speak with colleagues about how they handle such matters. Make this “opportunity for a transformative moment” part of your commitment to your students this year. Help them make purposeful choices. Be present. Pay attention.

“So, Class of 2021, you have my best wishes for the academic journey that begins tomorrow. We will follow you with great interest – we will be paying attention – and we will support you every step of the way.” –D. Rosowsky, 2017 Convocation remarks

“I commend the selection committee on another outstanding choice for our campus. I hope you will read this book along with us and find ways to incorporate it into your classes, residence halls, events, and gatherings. I know our students are looking forward to it.”
--D. Rosowsky, Across the Green, Sept. 2017



David V. Rosowsky is the Provost and Senior Vice President at the University of Vermont (UVM). A civil engineer with degrees from Tufts University (BSCE, 1985; MSCE, 1987) and Johns Hopkins University (PhD, 1990), Dr. Rosowsky is also a Professor of Engineering in the College of Engineering and Mathematical Sciences at UVM. He has been a university faculty member for 27 years, has held endowed chairs at Oregon State University and Texas A&M University, and has held leadership positions at Texas A&M University and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. He is a Fellow of the Institute of Science, Technology, and Public Policy at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University; a fellow of the American Society of Civil Engineers; a Fellow of the Structural Engineering Institute; and a registered Professional Engineer. Dr. Rosowsky is a native New Englander, born and raised in Massachusetts.

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