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The University: Agent of Change in a Changing Age

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I have always regarded America's top universities as agents of change. Social movements are started on our campuses, come of age on our campuses, and move out into our communities. Political and economic theories emerge from our lecture halls and scientific revolutions are born in our laboratories. Our college and university campuses are places where ideas are hatched, theories are examined, practices are studied, and philosophies are debated. In our halls and on our grounds, young people are nurtured to be thinkers, skeptics, analysts, and dreamers. Our universities are the breeders of ideas and ideologies, and they are places where the next generation takes its first steps.

American higher education has come under increasing criticism in the last decade for a variety of reasons. There is debate – in living rooms and boardrooms, and certainly in the media – about the cost and value of higher education. There are accusations that higher education has become politicized, too liberal, or too ideological. And there are some who feel our campuses have become too tolerant, too nurturing, and too protective of students and their sensibilities. We are being accused of coddling students and creating generations of fragile intellectuals. These are serious accusations and there may be merit to some, but they are not new. American higher education has always had its critics, even from within the academy. Yet it remains a compelling model and powerful force, one that is still envied around the world, and one that continues to drive innovation, our economy, the arts, discovery of new ideas, scientific and technological advances, and, yes, social movements.

The criticisms must not be dismissed, however. Even as we remain committed to principles of inclusiveness and accessibility, and equity and justice, we must ensure we are challenging our students (and ourselves) with difficult and controversial subjects, with opposing and inconsistent viewpoints, and with perspectives and even principles that differ from our own. Critical study, higher learning, and ultimately deeper understanding comes from debate and from discourse. We must be made to feel uncomfortable, uneasy, and uncertain at times. But we must also ensure our students feel their classrooms and campuses are safe environments in

¹ *Across the Green* was started as a series of periodic letters from Provost Rosowsky to provide updates on current initiatives and information on topics of interest to the broader UVM academic community. Started in 2013, *Across the Green* was published three times per year during the six years Dr. Rosowsky served as UVM's Provost and Senior Vice President. The *ATG Brief* series continues in the spirit of this communication with topics focused on higher education and leadership.

which to examine difficult topics, debate polarizing issues or even hear from polarizing figures, and criticize established as well as emergent theories. Tall orders, I would agree, but we are up to the challenge. Universities are remarkable institutions.

As the next US presidential election season heats up, we naturally reflect on the last election and how our country has been changed as a result of the changes in Washington. The 2016 election seemed particularly partisan and divisive. It was one in which the spectrum of emotions was on display, angry rhetoric seemed more the norm, and the frustrations and fears of many Americans came to the surface. It was not the best of times for our leaders nor was it an easy time for our country. If anything, the partisanship, rhetoric, move to the extremes, and the resulting divisiveness all have increased in recent years. This is abundantly clear as the 2020 election season gets underway and positions, issues, and candidacies are articulated.

In the days and weeks that followed the 2016 election, I made it a point to sit and speak quietly with students wherever I found them – in our student center, walking across campus between classes, and in the residence halls. We talked about the election season, the democratic process, and even the outcome of the local elections in their home states. They shared conversations they had with their parents about the election. We talked about the privilege of being at a university, part of a diverse and supportive academic community, and having opportunity to study, debate, and learn – from great faculty and from one another. In the end, I asked each student “where else would you rather be than at a university right now?”

If there are challenges to face, questions to ponder, processes to evaluate, and outcomes to understand – where else but at a university to do this?

As provost, I expressed my hope that ours would be a university that chooses not simply to be critical, or to be dismissive or worst yet to disengage or separate from mainstream discussions, issues, and needs. Rather, I asserted, we must be part of those discussions, help to lead and facilitate them, and provide the knowledge, data, insight, and perspectives necessary to ensure they are productive.

Our faculty stepped up and delivered. Courses were created, dialog was facilitated, seminars were held, speakers invited, panel discussions led, class projects and opportunities for community engagement defined. Never has our calling as a flagship public university been so clear, our role so important, or our place in the national discourse so profoundly needed. I was enormously proud of what was happening on our campus. But the work must continue.

For sure we cannot back away from the study of issues we know to be timely and critical, such as climate change. Rather, universities must commit to knowledge discovery, integration, and dissemination – the science, the economics, the policy, the human and planetary impacts – around climate change and adaptation.

But we can also use our place and time in American history to better understand the last presidential election and the dynamics of this new election season. We know, for example, that the 2016 election was the first presidential election in US history to split so clearly along lines of income, race, age, education, and even urban vs. rural population. Early indications are that the

2020 election will see similar patterns. What will be our role, as universities, in addressing the issues that divide us? How will we seek to close the education gap or the income gap? How do we provide access to higher education to rural or historically underserved populations? How do we operationalize our role as institutions of higher learning to continue to reach and educate future generations of voters? How do we address the issues that are challenging and threatening our democracy, our values, our security, our global leadership, and that seem to be further dividing us as a nation?

There is so much we can and must do. Following the last election, I asked our faculty to consider the audacity of this challenge in preparing syllabi, crafting courses, creating degree programs, and – most importantly – engaging with our students. Once again, we are bearing witness to a remarkable time in history. And how our colleges and universities emerge in this time of both political uncertainty, social upheaval, and mounting scrutiny of higher education in our country is up to us.

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www.uvm.edu/~provost/davidrosowsky/Across%20the%20Green%20Jan%202017.pdf



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