



ATG<sup>1</sup> Brief | Leadership blog post, May 2019

## Reflections: Why the week after Commencement is my favorite week

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Two of my favorite events in the university's academic calendar are Convocation and Commencement. As provost, I played a role in both ceremonies and always looked forward to the festivities surrounding these milestone markers in our students' academic journeys with us. But when asked about my favorite time of year at the university, I always say it is the week immediately following Commencement.

Much more than the obvious break in the action that ramps up in the final months of the academic year to a frantic pace of year-end events and celebrations, it is a week for reflection. It is a week for contemplation and honest appraisal, for taking pride in accomplishments and feeling disappointment in failures, and for reaffirming priorities and goals for the next year. The natural rhythm of academia is something we often take for granted. Few other industries are so defined by their yearly cycles - their rhythm - or by annual renewal as academia. It provides structure and predictability, but also affords regular opportunity for reflection.

When we think about reflection, we think about reflecting on the past. But a mirror can be aimed, a light can be refracted, in any direction. In fact, reflection can be both backward-looking and forward-looking. Any value from reflecting on past decisions, actions, and outcomes is realized only if it serves to guide or inform future endeavors. We reflect to learn, and we learn in hopes of doing better in the future. In this way, reflection is about personal, organizational, or institutional accountability.

The week following Commencement, regardless of one's role at the university, represents a sudden and generally welcome downshift in pace. For many at the university, it's a time for closing out files and budgets, placing course notes on the shelf, and cleaning off the desk. It's a time for neatly packaging up the past academic year and making room for the next one. It's a time to catch up on overdue commitments, immerse in one's scholarship at a level not possible during the academic year, and free oneself from rigidity of the semester calendar.

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<sup>1</sup> *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.

For me, it is also a time to ask (and answer) difficult questions, to assess personal goals, and to reaffirm or redirect efforts in both my academic/scholarship and administrative/leadership roles. Here, I share reflective questions specifically related to administrative leadership. These questions have been my companions every year in the weeks following Commencement. Taking time to thoughtfully and honestly answer them has always proven worthwhile in shaping my strategies and my goals for the next year, but also in helping me grow as a servant-leader, communicator, and colleague.

*Where did you succeed?* We all want to find evidence of success, of successfully meeting goals, of accomplishment. It's human nature to look first for such evidence when undertaking a reflective exercise. What did we do right? What did we do well? Why did we accomplish that we said we would accomplish? This is more than a chance to feel good about how we spent the past year, it also creates a framework for the more difficult questions that follow, whether diving more deeply or acknowledging the gaps.

*Where did you fail?* Even with best of intentions, skills, motivation, and support, we fail. We try new things, we take new approaches, we employ new strategies, and we sometimes fail as a result. Perhaps think of this as "failure by commission" (to borrow from the study of human error). We may also fail to communicate, consult, inform, or engage the right individuals or groups, even inadvertently. We can call this "failure by omission." Some failures may suggest a change in strategy, others a change in goals. Failure can cause disappointment or resentment, a wide range (and sometimes complicated mix) of emotions largely dependent on whether we believe our failure was caused by us or by others. Acknowledging failure is only the first step. Doing the hard work to understand the causes and sequences of events that led to the failure (or prevented the success) is essential to the learning and growth that can follow. As leaders, we often maintain exceedingly busy schedules that do not allow time for this hard work during the academic year.

*What transformational or enduring change did you enable? What incremental change?* Leaders often are called up to be change agents, whether that change is selective or systemic, reactive or strategic, transactional or visionary. Higher education is evolving and institutions are endeavoring to do the same – responsive to new needs, opportunities, and expectations, but always working to be respectful of mission, history, and culture. While shared governance is intended to engage faculty and others at the university in goal setting, decision making, and creating academic and related institutional policy, it is generally senior leaders who are expected to make organizational change. They are held accountable both for successes and failures that result. What changes have resulted from our leadership, motivation, engagement and enabling of others that was truly transformational? What changes have been smaller, perhaps only a single process improvement or removal of a barrier? What incremental changes have, taken together, created a more significant change? How has culture change been realized? How are the changes – whether strategic, operational, or cultural – being perceived? What monitoring or messaging needs remain?

*What groundwork did you lay?* Often even incremental change must be preceded by significant groundwork including policy change, advance work with various constituent groups,

communication of needs and objectives, building support, and creating expectations for progress. While not always visible or perceived as significant, we should take pride in laying groundwork. It is the bedrock on which meaningful change is built.

*How did you make peoples' lives better, their jobs easier or more rewarding?* This is one of my favorite reflective questions. As leaders, this is perhaps our best destiny along with strengthening the overall health of the institution. Just as it's important for people to feel valued, they must also feel institutional leadership is working on their behalf, enabling both their success and their professional growth.

*How have you supported or enabled people or groups?* Here is the opportunity to drill down and acknowledge specific ways you have enabled the success of individuals or groups at the institution. Who has been supported, motivated, incited, or engaged to achieve their goals? Who is in a better position than they were a year ago to contribute to the university and its strategic highest priorities? Which groups or programs have seen improved visibility, impact, or rankings as a result of your support, encouragement, or leadership? Academic leadership is fundamentally servant-leadership. We should be comfortable taking pride in the ways we have enabled the success of others.

*How have you created barriers or been harmful to people or groups?* Again, we must be able and willing to look at both sides. What decisions have you made or not made, or actions have you taken or failed to take, or strategic priorities have you articulated or failed to articulate, or policies have you created or modified (or enforced or failed to enforce) that have resulted in people feeling less motivated, less valued, disenfranchised, frustrated, or even angry? How could this have been avoided or otherwise mitigated? In some cases, little can be done and of course it's not possible to make everyone feel uplifted, enabled, valued and of primary concern in all decisions. Similarly, not everyone can avoid impact or even be impacted equally. (Change is necessarily biased. Perception of change is most certainly biased.) But we must acknowledge when decisions have negative consequences, whether avoidable or not.

*How have you grown as a leader?* Leadership progress is more than just accomplishment, it's about growth. While we may be focused primarily on seeking evidence of growth in our teams, organizations, and institutions, it is just as important to look for evidence of personal growth. Have we grown as a leader? How? Has this growth been intentional, and if so, what steps specifically did we take to enable that growth? Is that growth continuing? Are you committed to further growth or improvement? Do you know what steps you will take to continue on that path? Just as important, had we planned for growth but not realized it? If so, why not? Identifying barriers to personal growth is just as important as identifying those that impede team effectiveness or project success. If growth as a leader – whether interpersonal skill development, building new trust or mandate, finding new energy or new patience, improving communication, or improving team-building or project management skills – was an explicit goal for the year and that growth was realized, it's important to take the time to recognize and appreciate both the effort and resulting success. Neither can be assured and both are worthy of acknowledgement.

*What are your weaknesses? How can you improve and grow further? What steps will you take?* Use this time of reflection to acknowledge weaknesses. And be as specific as possible. Sweeping statements are often difficult to effectively address. For example, “I am impatient” may be too broad. On the other hand, “I become impatient when people aren’t following my logic as quickly as I wish” is a much more specific statement that immediately suggests what may be needed. Other statements such as “I don’t always take the time to bring people along as decisions unfold” may seem specific, but can be made more useful (instructive) if made more specific, for example by adding “when I consider those decisions to be of low importance to them, but they feel otherwise.” I have found such honest appraisals on this annual cycle to be enormously helpful. And I have used trusted colleagues as sounding boards when framing specific weaknesses (sharing my perceptions and hearing their perceptions) as well as steps I could take to address them. “Here is where I think I went wrong. This is what I think I might do differently next time. What do you think?”

Leadership is a process of continual improvement. Growth as a leader can only occur when we are honest with ourselves about our successes and our failures, our strengths and our shortcomings, our abilities and our limitations. But the opportunity for regular reflection is a fortuitous feature of life in the academy. The week after Commencement starts a period of immersive scholarship for some, a more self-dictated if not slower pace for many, and hopefully a time of restoration for all. For academic leaders, it is a time to take a breath but also to take stock of what has been accomplished. It is a time to be self-critical but also self-affirming. If we are honest in our appraisal, and if we put in the hard work, we can make this time of reflection truly valuable – to us and to those we serve.



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