



ATG¹ Brief | Leadership blog post, July 2021

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ATG Capstone

A remarkable thing has happened. Eight years have gone by since I joined the University of Vermont as provost in what seems like a blink of an eye. Yet this chapter seems as substantive, rooted, and remarkable as any in my life and career. My time at UVM has been personally and professionally rewarding in more ways than I can count. I have learned here. I have grown here. I have formed relationships. I have celebrated shared accomplishments and the high achievements of so many others. I have worn different hats and had varying responsibilities. I have leaped and I have stumbled. I have succeeded and I have failed. But above all, I have served – with joy – to the best of my abilities and with unwavering commitment. I loved the roles of provost, servant-leader, professor, and mentor. My family loved our time in the Champlain Valley. Our children were raised here. We enjoyed our time in Vermont to the fullest, drinking in all that it offered, in all four seasons and all corners of our mighty little state.

As I prepare to move, and button up chapters of our Vermont life and our time at UVM – with full confidence we will return often to visit our friends and “Vermont family” – I wanted to take the opportunity to write one final piece in the *Across the Green* series, a capstone to the series I started in 2013 as a new provost to regularly share thoughts, plans, and progress with the UVM academic community. The series continued after my six-year term with shorter *ATG Brief* essays on a broad range of higher education topics that I hoped might continue to be of interest to some of the regular readers of *Across the Green* over the years. I was always grateful for the feedback I received on these essays.

In this final “capstone” essay, I have only two objectives: (1) to say thank you, and (2) to share my wishes for the UVM academic community I was so privileged to serve.

Thank you to everyone that welcomed me to Vermont and into the UVM Family. Thank you to President Sullivan and the UVM Board of Trustees for entrusting me with championing and

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.

stewarding the academic mission of our great university, with advancing its visibility and impact, and creating new and important programs, facilities, and opportunities for learning and discovery – for students and for faculty. Thank you to the talented and dedicated colleagues in the Provost's Office for taking on the challenge to become the best that we could be in service to our academic community and to the president's strategic goals for UVM.

Thank you to the many deans with whom I worked over the years. We built more than a team, we built an engine. And when that engine was firing on all cylinders, we really did move mountains. Speaking of which, thank you to the UVM Foundation for allowing me to be part of the remarkable *Move Mountains* campaign. Thank you to my engineering colleagues for welcoming me to the College of Engineering and Mathematical Sciences as a faculty member.

Thank you to the leadership, coaches, and staff at UVM Athletics for allowing me to play a small part in fostering the success of our amazing student-athletes, and for welcoming me and my family into yours. Thank you to my fellow senior leaders and the many professionals in offices across the University – from admissions, to enrollment management, to research, to finance, to communications, to international programs, to student affairs, to the UVM Foundation and the UVM Alumni Association, and more – for your energies, your competencies, and your commitments to our two highest priorities: academic excellence and student success.

I also want to thank the faculty in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering for welcoming me into the department, its life and its mission. I hope that I added value over the last two years. I also want to thank the students in my classes. You breathed life into this professor-turned-administrator and reminded me why I chose an academic career more than three decades ago. I loved every class we spent together. You energized me, made me laugh, and made me want to be the best teacher I could be. You amazed me with your grit and resilience. I hope I was able to be helpful as you navigated the pandemic so skillfully.

Now let me close with my wishes for you – the amazing academic community at UVM.

1. **Lead with trust. Row together.** University leaders nearly always come from faculty backgrounds and most often choose to serve for selfless reasons. They want to be successful in their roles, and they want the university to be successful through their service. I have met many university senior leaders in my career. They are honest, fair, ethical, generous, and compassionate, even when faced with challenging circumstances, limiting constraints, and difficult and sometimes unpopular decisions. Support those in leadership roles that have committed to your success. Do not just sit back and watch for missteps. There will be missteps. We are all human. Lead with trust. Assume good intentions. Assume honesty and integrity. Do not fall back on old patterns, war stories, or unfounded assumptions. Instead, and as I have said often, "Support one another and expect great things. You will not be disappointed." Lift up others. Give generously. Commit to the University's success. Ask, "how can I help?" Then step up.

2. **Push boundaries. Welcome change.** My thoughts on this are best summarized in my blog essay (2016) on change. See: <https://www.davidvrosowsky.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/On-Change.pdf> Lean into change for all the right reasons. Welcome it, look for opportunities to affect it, and appreciate/celebrate what it enables. Commit to institutional reform as fully as you do curricular reform. Expanding mission, responding to trends, seizing opportunity, realizing growth, creating new markets and new models for sustainable revenue, rethinking the structure of everything from departments to degrees – should not be feared, resisted, resented, or eschewed in the name of tradition or academic purity. When confronted with our changing world, if we choose not to respond – not to adapt – decisions affecting our future are taken away from us and made by others. A colleague who led one of the largest public university systems in the country once told me that the university should “become the best at getting better.” I love this notion.
3. **Reaffirm the tenets of *Our Common Ground*** in the context of the challenges universities like UVM are facing today and will face in the years ahead. *Our Common Ground* is a remarkable statement. And while the words need not be amended, their application and relevance to the community at any point in time can certainly be reconsidered. Challenges change but values do not. Constraints may increase but so too may opportunities. Student success will always remain of paramount importance but student needs may change. Leaders may turnover but the fundamental mission of the University is immutable. The specific ways we exercise and assume responsibility, show one another respect, and innovate as an institution may (and should) be responsive and adaptive. Take the time to regularly reaffirm both the values and the commitments expressed in *Our Common Ground*. Keep them relevant, potent, and present. This will provide strength to face the challenges ahead.
4. **Civility and humanity. Respect and kindness. Humility and humor.** I wish these in abundance for everyone. We are not only all working at the same university, toward the same noble goals (teaching, learning, discovery, scholarship, service), but we are citizens of the same community and nation, occupying the same planet, orbiting the same sun. We also all share the same shortcomings, imperfections, and failings. We can never know all that is happening in the lives of those around us. Some are distracted. Some are struggling. Some are in pain. Compassion is not a zero-sum game. Neither are civility, humanity, respect, kindness, humility, and humor. They are all infinitely renewable resources. Use them often.
5. **Model positivity.** Why not choose to be positive? It’s easier, costs nothing, and it’s a far more pleasant state of being. Smile more. Laugh more. Find joy. We can choose whether to live under a dark cloud, on a stormy sea, mired in negativity and anger – *or* to look for (and find) the good, the positive, and the hopeful. We choose how we live our lives, how we present ourselves to and engage with others, and what kind of energy we put into the world. Commit to being the department, the office, or the group on campus that models positivity. It’s contagious.

A senior leader’s tenure is brief in the life of a university. We are transients passing through a timeline that spans generations and even centuries. Many faculty, by contrast, serve for generations, and boards of trustees provide intergenerational continuity.

Each August, I would somehow work these words into my Convocation remarks to our new first-year students: “We will follow your progress and we will be with you every step of the way.” In that same vein, I offer the following: I will follow UVM’s progress and take enormous pride knowing I played some small part in helping to set the conditions for that success. Thank you for the privilege.

Go Cats!



David V. Rosowsky was Professor of Civil Engineering at the University of Vermont and served for six years as UVM’s Provost and Senior Vice President (2013-2019). These personal reflections are based on 15 years of experience leading organizational and institutional change in higher education. Prior to joining UVM in 2013, he served as Dean of Engineering at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and before that as Head of the Zachry Department of Civil Engineering at Texas A&M University. He previously held the A.P. and Florence Wiley Chair in Civil Engineering at Texas A&M University and the Richardson Chair in Wood Engineering and Mechanics at Oregon State University. He is a Fellow of the American Society of Civil Engineers, the Structural Engineering Institute, and the Institute of Science, Technology, and Public Policy at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. In 2019, he was a Fellow and member of the inaugural cohort of the Association of Governing Boards (AGB) Institute for Leadership and Governance in Higher Education. Following eight years at UVM, he joined Kansas State University as Vice President for Research in July 2021.

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The full catalog of **Across the Green** and **ATG Brief** memos and essays (2013-2021) can be found here:

<https://www.davidvrosowsky.com/across-the-green/>