



UVM'S LAND GRANT MISSION IS PARAMOUNT

An op-ed by President Garimella published in the Rutland Herald and Times Argus Jan. 14, 2020

Against the back wall of my UVM office sits an antique wooden desk. Its surface is bare of books and paper because it serves no mere utilitarian purpose. As the desk that once belonged to Vermont Sen. Justin Morrill, author of the Morrill Act of 1862 establishing the country's first land grant universities, it's an inspirational symbol for me — a daily reminder of UVM's status as one of the nation's first land grants and of the solemn responsibilities that come with that designation.

Count me as a true believer in the land grant mission and among its greatest fans. The first land grants, so-called because the U.S. government donated federal land to each state to establish a university, were a brand new idea: higher education for everyday people focused on the practical subjects of agriculture and the mechanical arts, whose purpose was to improve the economic and cultural well-being of the people in their state.



It was UVM's status as a land grant that, in no small part, drew me to the university. Why am I so passionate about our land grant mission? Because I am a strong supporter of the social contract at the heart of that mission. And because Vermont, as much as any state in the nation, faces a series of daunting challenges that a land grant university like UVM is powerfully qualified to address. Take one that Governor Scott laid out in sobering detail in his recent State of the State address: the existential threat to Vermont's future represented by our shrinking workforce.

How can UVM help address this crisis, which is projected to reach a tipping point in a short five years, when the number of Vermonters who are not working will equal the number who are? By taking full advantage of a remarkable renewable resource: the nearly 2,500 young people who graduate from UVM every year with bachelor's, advanced and medical degrees, many of whom come from out of state.

Currently, about 40 percent of our undergraduates stay in Vermont to work after graduation. But many other students tell us they would like to establish their careers in Vermont if more good jobs that matched their interests were available.

UVM is hard at work to help create those employment opportunities by supporting the job creation initiatives of the state and incubators like the Vermont Center for Emerging Technologies. We do this by spinning off new companies based on our faculty's research, by forming partnerships with large corporations like Google that not only fund research by our faculty and students but could potentially establish satellite operations in the state, and by ramping up our global engagement to attract investment from other countries where UVM has a research and educational presence.



There are many other ways UVM engages in its land grant mission of partnering with Vermonters to address the state's challenges. Many people know of UVM Extension's nationally acclaimed work helping Vermont farmers tackle everything from farm viability to environmental issues. Less known are the many other UVM programs designed to help improve the lives of Vermonters.

For instance, with Senator Leahy's help, UVM has established the Rural Center of Excellence on Substance Use Disorders in the Larner College of Medicine and the UVM Medical Center to confront the state's opioid epidemic. Each spring, UVM's Philosophy Department spearheads Philosophy Week, a series of public events held around the state that encourage Vermonters to wrestle with life's most significant questions. And Vermont EPSCoR and the Vermont Genetics Network, statewide programs centered at UVM that bring in nearly \$8 million in federal funding annually, make sophisticated technology and learning opportunities available to Vermont high schools and colleges, promote workforce development and enhance a culture of research in the state. In all, there are more than 200 programs at the university designed to help Vermont and Vermonters. That's good news, but the unfortunate truth is too few Vermonters are aware of them.

To address this knowledge gap, we plan to restructure existing resources and look for ways to partner with the state, to create a kind of front door to UVM that will make it easy and convenient for communities, nonprofits, businesses, schools and others to learn of and tap into the university's resources. Stay tuned for the details.

In an influential 1999 report, the Kellogg Commission called on institutions of higher learning to abandon their ivory towers and become "engaged universities." UVM was a pioneer in that effort and, during my tenure, it is my goal to further expand our involvement with issues of concern throughout Vermont.

Engaging with the state not only helps Vermont, it benefits the university. We enrich the educational experience of our students by giving them a real-world laboratory in which to deepen their classroom learning. We broaden our faculty's research portfolios. And we serve our highest and best use as a land grant institution by bringing critical resources, our people and our expertise, to bear on the problems facing the communities we serve.

The historic wooden desk I keep close by will continue to inspire me. And I will ensure that UVM's land grant mission — to help the state confront its challenges and shape a bright future for all Vermonters — will remain a top priority for Vermont's university.

For more examples of the university's engagement: go.uvm.edu/engage