

The Vermont Connection

Volume 25 *Beyond the Ivy Walls: Mapping the Modern University*

Article 1

January 2004

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Recommended Citation

Gibbons, Jackie (2004) "HESA Reunion: June 28, 2003," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 25 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol25/iss1/1>

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HESA Reunion: June 28, 2003

Jackie Gribbons¹

This article was first delivered as a speech on June 28, 2003, to all those present at the closing banquet during the 2003 Higher Education & Student Affairs Administration (HESA) Reunion Weekend. It appears here as a powerful reflection on the HESA program by the only founder who has remained here since its inception.

First, please join me in a show of huge thanks and appreciation to Rick Gatteau and Rob Kelly as the movers and shakers for this first-ever reunion and the first-ever alumni/ae association. Way to go!

I, for one, have never liked to listen to an after-dinner speech, let alone deliver one. So I am not going to do so. Instead, I have decided that the best way to convey my thoughts to you is through this letter:

It seems like ages since I communicated with some of you, because it has been. I hope that this finds you and yours in good health and filled with joy in your life! As for me, I am fine - still enjoying my so-called "retirement" working one-third time (ain't no such thing), still the practicum and résumé diva (as someone described me), and still passing the time happily mowing, gardening, playing with chipmunks and birds at my home, and ending the day with a martini, sitting in my Adirondack chair by the pond. Some things never change, including the color of my hair, but it all keeps me in good shape.

So, what's new that I can share with you through my lens? Funny how things really do change while seeming to remain the same.

As you know, we have a new president who has already been making a difference during his first year, an exciting vision for the next decade that includes plans for a multi-million dollar student center, an honors college (a new HESA student will be its first graduate assistant), increased enrollment, elevated standards for academic and intellectual excellence, and a mandate for taking The University of Vermont (UVM) to the next level in the curricula and all of our programs, including intercollegiate athletics. Quite a dream; sure hope I am still around to sit in our new field house to watch women's basketball!

Speaking of HESA, we are excited about our newly admitted class of 19 students, nine of whom are students of color. Our students are still among the brightest and most qualified in a pool of impressive candidates. They represent a diversity of gender, geography, background, experience, ethnicity, color, and preference. We continue to draw from coast to coast including Alaska, Colorado, Ohio, California, Canada, and others. When candidates come for interview weekend, we describe our program as arguably the most academically, intellectually, and ethically challenging among masters program peers. Our learning environment is one where our students read a lot, think a lot, write a lot, talk a lot, and do a lot of striving for balance of theory and practice, all within the context of pluralism, and understanding and appreciating difference. When they graduate, they are prepared!

Our assistantship providers cover the waterfront with a welcome multiformity. Our students are offered assistantships in a dozen or so departments. Our practica continue to grow in numbers and offerings from University Police Services to the Vice Provosts Office. And the coveted Vermont Connection gets better with each publication, spanning over two decades as the first of its kind among our competitor preparation programs. In all, we enjoy what I believe is well-deserved respect within UVM and our profession, which enthusiastically seeks our graduates because they recognize the high level of their qualifications. So, you have a lot to be proud of and to claim as your very own.

Talking about who we are causes me to reflect on who we have been throughout the three plus decades of our history. Looking back, I am enormously impressed with how this program has grown and flourished, remembering all the while how much each of you have contributed to the distinction of the UVM HESA program within our profession. I must admit to wondering where all of this time has gone, reminding myself that I was still in my 30s when I joined Dick

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Powers and Roland Patzer to found this program.

When I think about this acclaimed program, I think first of people. Some of these folks will not ring a bell for you, but I want you to know who they are and how important they were to who we are today. Ken Saurman, our first full-time faculty member and department chair...Robert (A.K.A. "Bob") Nash, who Ken got to jump into the fray...Bob Young, David Holmes, Deb Hunter, and Kathy Manning as former program chairs. Our invaluable adjunct faculty, all exceptional practitioners: Keith Miser, John Moore, Paul Oliaro, Pat Brown, Rosalind Andreas, Annie Stevens, David Nestor, and others. Our current faculty: Deb Hunter (program chair), Bridget Kelly, Kathy Manning, and Robert Nash. A faculty which is among, if not, the finest in the nation. They are published, nationally recognized, respected educators and leaders and have amassed honors including University Scholar, Fulbright Scholar, and outstanding UVM faculty award, and have been national conference program chairs and presenters in demand. I am personally honored and blessed to be among their ranks, and the only secretary I can remember, Diana Dubuque. Finally, I remember all and I mean all of you. Would you believe that I am the only remaining faculty who has read every application ever received and connected with every student we've ever had? Good grief!

This fact prompted me to think about who you are today, so I did a mini-profile just to see what you look like. I know that you will see yourself in many of my descriptors:

- You have been leaders in higher education, your institutions, and our professional associations including: ACPA, NASPA, NAWA, ACUHO, and others at state, regional, and national levels.
- You have been assistant and associate deans, directors, faculty, vice presidents or presidents, or have ventured into new professional venues where you use your knowledge and competence.
- You have earned the coveted title of Doctor.
- You have received many accolades and honors.
- You have been mentors and role models for your students and staff;
- You have been our very best HESA recruiters and have hired our very own as your very own.
- You have been the literal backbone for HESA at UVM.
- You have served your communities.
- You have found your life partner.
- You have had children.
- You have lived an honorable and fulfilling life and you have kept us in your lives with Christmas cards, notes, letters, emails, and pictures of your kids and dogs.
- You have never forgotten the two years you spent in HESA.

What a trip, huh?

Finally, I remember what your HESA experience might have been for you and for all of us. From the onset, it was clear that those of you who would be among us would bring special significance to the UVM community of scholars, and indeed, each of you did just that. Whether it was in the form of your person or in the substance of your competence and experience, one theme rang true with every class ever admitted to this program: each of you would individually prosper and substantially enhance the quality of our time together. Magical things seemed to happen. As graduate students you shared a common, yet varied, experience while moving toward your individual goals and ambitions. You accomplished this with persistence, passion, moments of anxiety, and just the right touch of pain. Through the years there was little debate that teaching and learning needed to be and, in fact, were partners in the process. And the relationships between us created the environment within which our mutual learning could flourish. This collective learning has helped me to become the person and professional you and I have come to know and has resulted in the deepening and stretching of my base knowledge, beliefs, values, and professional style. Thank you for teaching me so well.

I have rambled long enough; this is probably the longest letter I have written in years so I will sign off here. I salute you for who you are and what you have accomplished in your life, and I will always remember the warm, loving, and supportive times we have spent in this common experience called the UVM HESA program. We are indeed better people for having this opportunity. And please know that you may have been out of sight, but never out of mind because no one could ever take your place at this place.