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# Looking Back at 30 Years ... What I Have Learned

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## Looking Back at 30 years...What I Have Learned

Michael Dunn

It has been 30 years since Keith Miser, The University of Vermont's former Dean of Students, asked me to assemble *The Vermont Connection (TVC)*. Beyond developing a vehicle for professional writing, it was a way for UVM HESA graduates, who were scattered all over the country and world to stay connected. From its modest beginnings—which involved begging graduate students, UVM faculty, and staff to contribute—this publication has grown into a top-notch professional journal with an extensive selection and editorial review process.

In the fall of 1979, I began the Student Development in Higher Education track at UVM with approximately 20 others. Although I have not kept tabs on all my friends over the years, my estimate is that there are only five to eight of us still working in the field. So, almost 30 years later, beyond the significant innovation in the way we interact with the world—email, iPods, Facebook, and of course, the Blackberry—I have developed the following personal and professional “truisms.” One of the most important things I have learned is that your professional life will mirror your personal life. Being honest, fair, competent, and compassionate is a good way to conduct your life.

What I've learned....

1. It is always about the students—do not make it about you.
2. Listen more, talk less. As a young professional, I thought I knew more than I did.
3. Develop your team; pay attention to your relationships with colleagues, and make student leaders feel valued.
4. Be bold and take initiative, but honor campus traditions—if they are positive.
5. Lead a balanced life—work is important, but...
6. Say “what if” or “why not” instead of “we can't because.”
7. Acknowledge others, both personally and professionally; we did not get to where we are without the help of others.

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*Michael Dunn, Bachelor of Science from UVM in 1977 and HESA '81, is Director of New Student Programs at Radford University in Virginia where he has worked since 1985. He is married to Peggy Mabaffy-Dunn also HESA '81. They have three children, Zachary, Carly, and Adam – one a college graduate, one in college and one soon to be. His professional work with new students and raising his own family has kept him “in touch” with the way 18 year olds think.*

8. Pay it forward—help others as you were helped.
9. Take the responsibility of supervision seriously. Like a good classroom teacher of young children, one bad supervisor can color one's appreciation of the profession.
10. Be intentional—adopt a plan and then adapt it.
11. Do not underestimate your impact on those you serve—colleagues, students, and alumni/ae. Remember the final scene from “Mr. Holland’s Opus”? It is a wonderful movie about a teacher’s personal and professional journey through life.
12. Keep it in perspective. Respect student affairs work, but recognize its place in higher education, the community, and the world.

I am fortunate to work with many outstanding student leaders who serve on my campus. Like many of you, my undergraduate leadership experience was the impetus for entering a graduate program in student affairs. Often when I counsel them, I let them know that I have genuinely enjoyed almost every aspect of my professional career (there were a few days I could have done without). But in the end, when I recognize that 30 years later I still look forward to each day at work, is that not a wonderful testament to my decision to enter the world of student development?