

UVM ScholarWorks

Foreword

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FOREWORD

Lee Burdette Williams

Those of us privileged to teach, advise and supervise the current cohorts of HESA graduate students and their counterparts in programs around the country know the harsh truth of this moment: we walk a tightrope in swirling winds.

Is it better to join these social justice warriors in their efforts to transform our institutions? Or is it wiser to counsel temperance and patience as we watch our institutions transform themselves?

Is it more logical to steep them in the beloved history of our profession, imparting our knowledge of Chickering, Gilligan, Kegan, Cross and the other theorists whose work is tattooed on our hearts? Or smarter to let them rail against the heteronormative, white-centric, patriarchal canon of the profession we hold so dear?

Should we travel back to the most critical moments of student affairs—Berkeley’s Sproul Plaza, Kent State’s grassy lawn, Michigan’s appearance at the Supreme Court? Or push forward and join them on the ramparts of today’s crises: sexual assault, transgender rights, divestment?

How do we do all of this and more? How do we encourage their passion while grounding them in an understanding of higher education and their future place in it?

I worried about this throughout the winter of 2016, knowing that in the spring I would be teaching the newest students in the UVM HESA program. The program had experienced some unsettling challenges the previous year, and I didn’t know what awaited me with this particular group. I certainly didn’t know how much they would influence my own thinking. But they did

The UVM HESA graduates of 2018, in the space we created for our weekly classes, restored my faith in the future of our profession. They were a group of hard-thinking, question-asking, finger-in-the-lion’s cage students who evidenced all the passion of their counterparts before them and across the country in other programs, but did this one thing very differently: they listened to one another. Not perfectly, not all of the time, not always without judgment, but in ways that left me encouraged and emboldened to, on occasion, push back. After a few weeks with

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them, I felt like they were there for the right reason: to learn, and they intuitively recognized the adage that the reason we have two ears and one mouth is that so we might listen twice as much as we speak.

In his recent work, the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt shares his concern that our universities are supporting an orthodoxy that is antithetical to the original purpose of higher education. He cites Thomas Jefferson's vision for the University of Virginia: "For here, we are not afraid to follow the truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error as long as reason is left free to combat it." Haidt continues, "If Jefferson were to return today and tour our nation's top universities, he would be shocked at the culture of fear, the prevalence of unchallenged error, and the shackles placed on reason."

That is certainly the view of today's universities that many people, both liberal and conservative, have. Sometimes I have that view. And then I remember how I felt on Wednesday evenings in the spring of 2017 as I walked across campus after teaching my class on critical issues in higher education. I always left feeling better about higher education and student affairs than I had felt on my way to class. I knew as I entered the classroom that my students would be prepared, having done (most of) the assigned reading, but more importantly, I knew that they would place their respect for one another above their need to make a point, that they would give each other space and attention, would laugh when I made a joke, would ask for clarification on a confusing comment, and, when troubled by something another person said, would let that person know, in a respectful and mature way, why it troubled them.

I try not to dwell too much on fond memories of my own early career in higher education, knowing no experience would match the airbrushed image I carry with me. And I try not to obsess too much about the future of higher education, despite regularly reading the *Chronicle*, the *New York Times*, and articles by Jonathan Haidt and other higher education critics. In between thinking about the past and pondering the future, which were precisely the tasks of the class we shared, there is the present: the moment in which we find ourselves, and we need to remind ourselves to look around and enjoy its many facets. The 2018 UVM HESA cohort was that moment for me—16 weeks of looking back, yes; 16 weeks of looking forward, undoubtedly; but most important, 16 weeks of the present, in their presence, knowing that if they can take the spirit of that classroom into their workplaces and future classrooms, they will make the kind of difference we need.