

Suresh V. Garimella, President of the University of Vermont and Professor of Mechanical Engineering

Commencement Address (as prepared) – Sunday, May 19, 2024

Greetings on this beautiful morning!

Welcome, everyone, to the UVM campus—members of the board of trustees, university leaders, faculty members, distinguished guests, family and friends, and of course every one of you who will receive a degree today. You, your achievements, and your future accomplishments... those are the reasons we have all gathered and what we celebrate and reflect upon today.

It is my great privilege to preside over the university's 223rd Commencement. As we look back on your commitment, perseverance, and old-fashioned hard work, I hope you share the pride of all those who are gathered here to celebrate the significant milestone you have reached in your life's journey. At UVM, we are fully invested in student success and this day paints a vivid portrait of success realized.

Before I proceed, let us take a moment to recognize everyone who supported you during your years at UVM and before. Would all of the parents, grandparents, siblings, spouses, partners, families, and loved ones please stand so we may recognize and thank you?

These champions of your success provided relentless encouragement, words of wisdom, care packages, and plenty of hugs. THANK YOU, on behalf of the graduates and on behalf of the entire UVM community. Well done, families and friends! (Please be seated.)

Despite calling today your "Commencement" it is hardly the beginning of your life's journey. After all, you and your fellow graduates have traveled from every part of the US and some 75 nations to find yourselves ready to receive a degree, conferred here on the Green this morning.

Recall for a moment the nearly infinite twists and turns along the paths that brought you together. Yet, while your paths have differed, your sense of purpose and mission have often overlapped with one another's. At times, your paths intersected. You have all endured a worldwide pandemic which was at its height around the time most of you arrived on campus four years ago. And just a month back, your paths converged again when you

experienced a total solar eclipse, an experience I think we will all remember as a magical moment, well into the distant future.

Most clearly, your paths have converged in your commitment to the essence of UVM through our collective effort to forge a thriving future *for people and planet* and to do so guided by Our Common Ground values.

Over the five years since I came to UVM, I've thought long and hard about what sets this university community apart from most other schools; and it comes down to that one simple concept: our universal commitment to *people and planet*. Today, as you prepare to leave the campus, I want to express my fervent desire that you will take this commitment with you as a roadmap for your continued journey in a world that needs young people like you to lead us to a healthy future *for people and planet*.

The people of UVM know that acting together—**together**—as a campus community is the way we make our impact for a healthy planet. During the crisis brought on by COVID, we set a national example at UVM of cooperation and determination, prioritizing a healthy community and sustaining our precious learning environment under the most challenging conditions.

This class, which lost so many experiences to the pandemic, made a commitment to look out for one another. You understand what it means to act *for people*.

This year, likewise, you and the people of UVM set an example for acting as a community that wants a better, more peaceful planet. Even when the world seemed strained to a breaking point, and peace a distant goal, in **this** community we modeled a way to engage, to discuss, and to **disagree**, that valued dignity, that respected difference, and that left room for all the many voices willing to speak up *for people and planet*.

But what does it mean to learn and live your lives with a commitment to a thriving future *for people and planet*?

For one thing, it means we must act today if we expect a healthier, greener tomorrow. Responsibility for people and planet comes with a sense of urgency, knowing that we cannot wait for someone else in some other time to do the right thing. We must act today *for people and planet*.

You also understand the importance of social responsibility, prioritizing the welfare of whole communities. So, when devastating floods ravaged our state last summer, hundreds of UVM students, faculty, and staff volunteered in communities near and far, and the close-knit team in our departed friend Jarlath O’Neil’s Spatial Analysis Lab jumped in to make immediate contributions to our state’s recovery. A sense of social responsibility is required when acting *for people and planet*.

Many of you and your faculty have labored for years understanding the impacts of climate change on our region and helping communities become more resilient. Whether as a graduate fellow with the Food Systems Research Center or a student in a Rubenstein School course focused on understanding how bird populations adapt and respond to catastrophic phenomena, you take with you an understanding of the importance of sustainability in all its many forms—something that is in our DNA here at UVM. A commitment to sustainability is required when acting *for people and planet*.

Working for people and planet also requires awareness of the world beyond our immediate surroundings. It requires understanding that the actions we take in our own communities reverberate throughout the ecosystem, often with benefits—or consequences—far away.

Thus, a successful future leader, and a successful Catamount student, must adopt a truly global mindset. You have learned through your classes, research projects, internships, entrepreneurship opportunities and study abroad just how far-reaching the reverberations of our behavior can be. How we govern our corporations, steward our resources, and sustain our environment has lasting impact far beyond our national borders. With language skills and cultural understanding that crosses borders and political divides learned in our newly organized School of World Languages and Cultures, you will be the influencers and decision-makers of tomorrow who will steward our *people and planet*.

Your commitment to people and planet also means you understand the tremendous impact that humans have on the health of our planet. You understand that societies cannot be healthy without also maintaining a healthy environment.

Today’s honorary degree recipients have both demonstrated a lifelong commitment to people and planet, as a teacher-scholar and a philanthropist. As their lives of impact show, working for people and planet is not limited to any specific profession or discipline.

Finally, I hope that your UVM experience has shown that securing a thriving future for people and planet is a responsibility for **all** of us.

Yes, it is clear that the many Catamounts who study and pursue careers in healthcare and environmental sciences will play a role. But, there is a role for each of you, whether you follow the path ahead to become lawyers, artists, teachers, engineers, and business leaders, or choose from any of the many other career opportunities UVM students proudly pursue.

You can make a difference and you must. We simply can't hope that others will take the lead. Catamounts, you must lead and you must succeed!

All that you have learned and accomplished has propelled you to this point and you are well prepared to go forth where your success can benefit the larger world. Please know that you will not be alone, for you will always have the UVM community worldwide rooting for your success.

So, go forth, UVM Class of 2024, in pursuit of a *thriving future for people and planet*, armed with *Our Common Ground values*, and supported by the alumni, faculty, and staff of this great university. We know you will make a difference and we can't wait to watch you do it!

Congratulations, graduates!