Imagine walking across the University of Hartford campus on a warm, sunny day in April. Outside the Integrated Science, Engineering, and Technology complex, two young women are tossing a football back and forth. Inside the complex, in the acoustical engineering suite, three groups of students are huddled around computers working on projects with various industries in the area while Professor Bob Celmer occasionally looks over their shoulders.

In the Koopman Commons of the Hartford Art School, Mary Frey, professor of photography, sits on a bench talking to seven students sitting on chairs and the floor around her. In a seminar room in the Harry Jack Gray Center, a group of communication students works together on a public relations campaign for a national competition. And from the windows of the Alfred C. Fuller Music Center, the mellow sounds of a jazz saxophone fill the air.

I witnessed these events on a short walk I took this spring; I didn’t pick them to illustrate anything. But I think they do illustrate something that I believe is worth noting. Each of these learning situations, with the exception of the football toss, was a preprofessional activity. Each, with the possible exception of the jazz saxophone solo, was a group activity; each—to some extent—was informal.

While academics, including myself, love to argue about how important the liberal arts are, I think we sometimes miss an essential point: learning is learning. The aims of education—liberal, professional, or artistic—are to encourage critical thinking, good communication skills, and the power of analysis. Every major has at its base the mastery of a discipline, not only because the subject matter is important but also because it fosters habits of thinking that will last a lifetime.

Secondly, each activity I saw was a small group-learning environment. I believe that is the most significant change in learning I have witnessed since I was an undergraduate 45 years ago. We learned in two essential ways then: in a class or by ourselves, reading books. We still have great classes and great teachers—many Barney graduates will remember Professor Charles Canedy—and reading, whether in a book or through an electronic device of some sort, is still vital. But more and more often, our students help teach each other in small group environments. I think that form of learning is more active and, hence, more lasting.

So what does tossing a football have to do with any of this besides the sheer joy of relaxing and having fun? Simply this—much of the learning on this campus, as on any other, goes on outside of a strictly academic environment; it goes on through learning about ourselves, often not in organized group activities. We should celebrate that form of learning as well.

This summer, our provost, Lynn Pasquerella, will be leaving the University to become president of Mount Holyoke College. In her too short two years here, one of the most important things she has taught me is that the life of the mind is the most important thing that a college or university can inspire. In her own work in philosophy, or in the work she inspired or supported here in others, she helped me realize every day the importance of encouraging and celebrating learning.

One of Lynn’s most memorable contributions here was to start a group she called “difficult dialogues.” In this group Lynn encouraged faculty and staff to talk with each other about the topics we usually avoid discussing, such as disability, gender, and race bias. Like all the activities I described above, this was an informal learning environment. I know from the participants that their time together challenged and stimulated everyone who took part. For me, it exemplified learning of the highest sort.

This column is for Lynn. I am sure she will stimulate such learning among faculty, staff, and students at Mount Holyoke. She has left her mark here. We will all miss her.