

CULTURE EATS STRATEGY FOR BREAKFAST

Remarks for the Opening Convocation

August 22, 2017

I draw the title of, and the inspiration for, my remarks from a phrase coined by management guru, Peter Drucker, and popularized by many business executives. Culture is one of those constructs that has received much study, and many definitions exist. The definition for culture that I use is, “how we do things around here,” which captures the important reality that culture influences behavior. And, this is why “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Any leader at Hampden-Sydney can propose all kinds of plans and strategies but if those strategies are inconsistent with our culture, they will be eaten for breakfast. So, our culture is very important, and that is what I want to focus on today.

When most people hear the word “culture” they tend to think of something monolithic and unified, but it is very important to emphasize that culture is a fabric consisting of many strands. In any organization, even the best, we find many useful strands of culture that are powerful and influence people in the organization to act and work in useful and beneficial ways. It is the job of organizational members to celebrate and do everything we can to enhance and strengthen those positive elements of our culture. But, in any organization, and again I want to emphasize that this occurs even in the best organizations, we can find strands that are less useful and lead to dysfunctional behaviors. It is our job, the job of every member of the organization, to pull those strands out of our culture.

The challenge of course is that culture and resulting behaviors are so closely intertwined that eradicating dysfunctional elements in our culture require giving-up the behaviors that are associated with those cultural elements. This means that changing culture is like giving-up a bad habit—it can be very hard to do. And, it also means that while I can talk with you this afternoon about our culture, all of us are stewards of our culture. All of us have responsibility for strengthening the best aspects of our culture and addressing the less useful and dysfunctional elements.

Before I go further with these ideas, I want to begin by emphasizing that this is an outstanding College in so many ways and a very good College in nearly every way. So, we begin this exercise at a huge advantage. Put another way, it’s as if we are starting a new season in shape, well conditioned, and ready to go. Furthermore, and very importantly, we begin with a strong sense of who we are and what our mission is. We are blessed to have a 242-year old mission “to form good men and good citizens” that is even more distinctive and compelling today than when it was authored by the College’s first president in 1775.

It is also important to acknowledge that there’s no way I can speak with you today in any sort of comprehensive way about our culture. So, I will necessarily focus on just three topics: High expectations, our daily lived experience on this campus, and brotherhood. As the year continues, I will welcome opportunities to speak with you more about these topics as well as any other aspect of our culture, and I will welcome your active involvement in strengthening those positive aspects of our culture even as we seek to eliminate those dysfunctional elements.

Let's first talk about our expectations. As I mentioned we are very good school, even outstanding in many respects. We have a very distinctive approach to higher education that goes well beyond our being one of a handful of remaining colleges for men—our educational experience is a very unique and special combination of rigorous academics, character development, and brotherhood that has, for centuries, produced men of extraordinary competence and integrity who have made and are making important contributions in the places where they work and the communities where they live. There is a great deal to take pride in, and I'm pleased that so many of our alumni and students carry themselves with a wonderful combination of humble and respectful swagger. This is how it should be when you are part of, a product of, such a distinctive and very special school.

But, I sometimes sense that we have doubts about our potential. As much as we love this College and are proud of Hampden-Sydney, I sense that we have doubts about what we can accomplish. I can understand this doubt. Ever since George Washington gave his Potomac River canal stock to the school that has become Washington & Lee, we have pursued our special mission with a much smaller endowment than that rival. Through some obscure calculus, we are ranked around 100 in the US News rankings for national liberal arts colleges even though I believe that the educational experience we offer here is every bit as good as what I have experienced at other fine liberal arts colleges that are more highly ranked. And, of course, the near death a few years ago of Sweet Briar, our close ally in single-sex education, makes us question whether we can avoid a similar fate.

We must confront these doubts about our potential. They are dysfunctional strands in our organizational culture. They hold us back. They are in the back of our minds as we go about our work. They can become excuses for why we sometimes fail to achieve our goals and why we sometimes fail to live fully and boldly into our mission. We must rid ourselves of these doubts. Again, our mission “to form good men and good citizens” is more vital, more important, and more relevant than at any time in this College's or this country's history. We offer students an amazing educational experience. We are strong financially. We have just completed a terrific recruiting year. We surpassed our fundraising goals for the past year and we have ambitious, achievable fundraising goals for the future. We must have high expectations for the College and for everything we do here. And, we must meet those high expectations because we are unwilling to accept anything less.

Second, I want to offer some observations about our culture around the student experience here. The vast majority of our students have an incredible experience here. The stories of our transformative work that current students and alumni have shared with me give me tremendous pride in having the privilege of leading this College. The accomplishments of students, faculty, staff, and alumni inspire me and they should inspire all of us. Student life here is governed by our Honor Code and Code of Conduct. At last year's and this year's Honor Convocation, our freshmen have heard me draw a sharp distinction between the prevailing morality in our society and what we insist upon here at Hampden-Sydney. In a day and age when nearly everyone has bought into the notion that “it's okay if nobody gets hurt,” and at least a few have come to believe that “it's okay if I don't get caught,” we ask you students not just to sign your name to a document but to live every day with honor required by our Honor Code and the integrity described in our Code of Conduct. Our Honor Code and Code of Conduct are surely among the most important elements in our College's culture.

Our mission “to form good men and good citizens” and our Codes are indeed lofty ideals, and the problem with lofty ideals is that a gap can grow between those ideals and the lived reality. But the response can never be to say that the expectations and ideals are too high. Instead we must make an

effort to have our daily lived experience more closely conform to our ideals. So, we need to strengthen those aspects of our culture that help us strive toward our ideals even as focus on those aspects of our culture that drag down our behavior. Let me offer a couple of examples:

First, we need to look at those aspects of our culture that encourage unsafe behaviors. I have said a number of times over the last several months that it is difficult to form good men and good citizens if we don't first keep you and your visitors safe. Administratively, we have taken a number of steps to create a safer campus environment, but we all need to focus on how we can keep each other safe. What culturally can we do to provide guardrails around our behavior? We encourage you to join sports teams and fraternities, clubs and organizations, but we need all of you to be official or unofficial members of our No More organization. For all of the alumni I've met over the last year who have told me that they made some of their happiest and very best memories here at Hampden-Sydney, I've also had two alumni share with me how their time here made them alcoholics. They take personal responsibility for this, but it is hard for us to claim we fulfilled our mission of forming good men and good citizens during their four years here. Likewise, drug use and sexual harassment and assault are totally incompatible with our mission and ideals, and they are also the greatest threat to this College's reputation.

You have heard me say that I want us to live more fully into our mission. What I mean by this is that we must ensure that every student at Hampden-Sydney enjoys and benefits from the same high-caliber experience here. In short, I'm saying "no man gets left behind." You have to find your niche here and you need to help each other find a niche. And, even as we want to strengthen existing programs and organizations, we are also pursuing new opportunities to enhance your student experience here. For all of the hunters, fishermen, and outdoor enthusiasts here, it is time for us to have an ambitious and outstanding outdoor adventure program.

If we can more fully live into our mission and ideals, if we can not only ask each other to comply with our Honor Code and Code of Conduct but to embrace those expectations and make them the lived reality here, and if we can ensure that all students benefit from the Hampden-Sydney educational experience, then we will create over time a truly distinctive student culture here—one that sets this campus apart from other colleges and universities.

On brotherhood, I shared with the freshmen last Friday, that we need them to find friends here, that we need them to get engaged and connected, and today, I ask this entire campus community to help them do that. A student cannot thrive unless he feels he belongs and that he is engaged. So, let us all do what we can to help the newest members of our community feel that they belong here. And, let us all help them learn our tradition of looking everyone we meet in the eye and saying "hello." This is another of the most important and most valuable elements of our College's culture.

We all know the difference between authentic and superficial friendships—one translation of a Proverb puts it this way: "Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin." Let us pursue those true friendships, let us foster here the culture of authentic brotherhood so that we care and look out for each other. And above all, let us foster here a brotherhood that brings out the very best in each other. As another Proverb puts it, "Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another."

We need to create a culture of starting together and finishing together. For a long time, it has become a part of the Hampden-Sydney culture to say, "look to your right and look to your left, and

one of the three of you won't be graduating from Hampden-Sydney." I also understand that the word on the street in some of our recruiting territories is "Hampden-Sydney is easy to get into but hard to stay in." And, I can understand that there might be some pride in making these statements. They allow us to imagine that Hampden-Sydney might be too challenging for some students; that we have what it takes to get through here but some other students do not.

But, I see these statements as a weakness in our culture and brotherhood. Certainly some students come here less prepared for college; some are less motivated to study and excel. But, if we have a culture here that says at the outset that we don't expect some of our students to graduate, won't this likely become a self-fulfilling prophecy? (And, by the way, from a recruiting standpoint, it is very hard to convince the parents of prospective students that Hampden-Sydney is a good choice if they believe that their son has a one-in-three shot at failing to graduate from here.) You need to challenge yourselves and one another, and look to your right and look to your left and say, "I will see you on graduation day." And, you need to repeat this statement often because repetition is one of the most powerful ways to establish and reinforce positive aspects of our culture.

A year ago, I spoke with the College's faculty about the importance of an institutional saga—a sense of mission that is so widely embraced that it becomes an animating force that gives meaning and purpose to what we do, while providing powerful motivation and momentum that carry the institution forward. In a very real sense, our "saga" is our culture. We are members of a remarkable organization, beneficiaries of a wonderful legacy. We have all of the makings of a powerful organizational saga. What I have been saying since I arrived is that we only need to live-into our mission, embracing the highest of expectations and charting only the highest aspirations for ourselves and our great College. If we do this, then we will not only create here very distinctive College prepared "to form good men and good citizens" for another 242 years, but we will also create a College whose fame will spread far and wide, so that when people talk about the great undergraduate colleges in this country, Hampden-Sydney will be one they mention.