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The purpose of college in 2011

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Today's guest blogger is Christopher Howard, president of Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia. Hampden-Sydney is a prestigious liberal arts school known for academic rigor, a strong core curriculum and a distinctly preppy culture. Howard, 41, is something of a rising star in Mid-Atlantic academia.

THERE EXISTS a familiar crescendo during the holiday season that achieves its apex as the New Year begins. If your family is like mine, it began with great anticipation about gifts, both receiving them and choosing just the right one.

But after the presents were opened and the last bit of leftover turkey was devoured, we turned our attention to contemplating the purpose of the holidays and our ambitions for the upcoming New Year. As the president of one of America's oldest institutions of higher learning, Hampden-Sydney College, I thought it appropriate to offer my comments on the purpose of a college, for higher education is, or should be, central to the ambitions of all our young men and women.

A bit of history is illustrative.

Universities, when they were established more than a thousand years ago, focused on educating clergy and instilling religious piety. Over the years, religious education was supplemented and then supplanted by the notion of civic virtue and, eventually, by secular humanism, which became the core purpose of institutions of higher learning.

The 1800s gave rise to the German university with its graduate students and deliberate focus on research.

The American concept of a liberal arts education, which included emphasis on teaching and, usually, the shaping of moral character, was shaken to its core as research universities attracted talented professors, eager students, and government and foundation dollars.

But undergraduate students still needed some degree of moral formation or at least some growing up. Colleges and universities still have to address this need—particularly for the Millennials, our wonderfully over-programmed, over-achieving, and, at times, over-confident young people born after 1979.

I think David Brooks has it right when he states, "Over the past century or so, people have built various systems to help them understand human behavior ... useful in many circumstances; [but they do not] completely explain behavior because deep down people have passions and drives that don't lend themselves to systemic modeling. [But] there have been rare and strange people who possessed the skill of taking the upheavals of thought that emanate from The Big Shaggy and representing them in the form of story, music, myth, painting, liturgy, architecture, sculpture, landscape, and speech ... that help us understand these yearnings and also educate and mold them." Some may cringe at Brooks's squishy argument. However, we must never forget how foundational to the growth, development, and success of our young people is understanding the world around us and our place in it.

Professor Richard Light from Harvard's Graduate School of Education has demonstrated that students who

connect one thing they are doing inside the classroom with at least one thing outside substantially increase their chances of graduating. Engagement—another popular buzz word in academia—is important.

Many students today are simply not engaged with the academic program. Instead, they cling to social media and forgo some of the deeper relationships previously forged face to face. To engage them we need to be in their spaces, but not in their faces. We need to be deliberate in our programs so that the central tenets of engagement—purpose, passion, and calling—are always front and center, while still maintaining our dedication to providing an exposure to the liberal arts, in their entire rigor.

The central task of an educator is to ensure that students are learning how to make sense of the world and to understand their place in it. They must do so in order to adapt to change. My friend Robert McDonald, chairman and CEO of Proctor & Gamble, warned Hampden-Sydney graduates at our commencement ceremony last May that they were entering a "VUCA" world—a world that is Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. I have since added "R" for Real-time, for the pressure that exists to be instantly aware of events that occur around the world.

I can think of no better way to assure that Millennials are prepared to adapt and ultimately to lead tomorrow's world than to ensure they understand—first themselves, then their world. In fact, my New Year's resolution is to do just that.

