

College: The Experience Is What Matters Most

Dr. Christopher B. Howard, President, Hampden-Sydney College

The debate now raging about the return on investment (ROI) of a college degree took a turn for the better last week when the Gallup organization and Purdue University released their much anticipated findings from the “Gallup-Purdue Index,” a college graduate well-being study.

Gallup has long surveyed people around the world about their well-being and has come to several interesting conclusions. First, there are many types of well-being. Gallup identifies five in their Gallup-Healthways Well-Being 5: purpose, social, financial, community, and physical. Surely one could imagine more, but Gallup is off to a good start and has collected much data over the years to support its claims. Secondly, these well-beings impact each other. For example, what good is a high mark for financial well-being if you are unhealthy, and perhaps even vice-versa? Finally, coupled with workplace engagement, it is those who are “thriving” in multiple well-beings who are living the “best lives.”

For those interested in the ROI question, the results were encouraging as several college experiences appeared to lead to a higher sense of well-being and workplace engagement. Moreover, the report’s executive summary offers sage advice for all of us committed to improving outcomes in higher education. The report states:

“The data presented in this report suggest, however, that the answers lie in thinking about things that are more lasting than selectivity of an institution or any of the traditional measures of college. Instead, the answers may lie in what students are doing in college and how they are experiencing it. Those elements—more than any others—have a profound relationship to a person’s life and career. Yet they are being achieved by too few. It should be a national imperative.”

A “national imperative” to think more about how students “experience” college rather than selectivity should galvanize the next level of discourse and debate. As the president of a liberal arts college for men, I encourage our faculty, staff, administration and trustees to focus our collective energies on this topic daily. We encourage other

institutions to do the same. Starting with our recently released publication entitled *What Works: Raising Boys, Engaging Guys, and Educating Men*, we ask educators, thought leaders, and other experts to think deeply about how men experience college. Why men? Because the other “national imperative” of 21st-century higher education is to improve the performance of males. Men compose 40 percent of the college population and lag their female counterparts in virtually every measure of academic achievement, from kindergarten to doctoral studies. Our society must do more to determine what works when educating boys and young men.

As Dr. Linda Sax notes in *What Works*, “using data on over 17,000 undergraduates nationwide, my research examines how several dozen college environments and experiences contribute to students’ academic achievement, personality and identity, and political and social values. Of the several hundred significant effects of college that are measured, nearly three-quarters are different for women and men.”

My colleagues and I here at Hampden-Sydney College are encouraged to think that our work at a men’s college can assist other institutions dedicated to ensuring that men in colleges and universities everywhere succeed. Armed with new evidence provided by the Gallup-Purdue Index about how the college experience impacts graduates’ workplace engagement, well-being, and ultimately ROI, I encourage educators, foundations, businesses and concerned citizens to join with us as we identify what works when educating men.

The stakes are too high to do otherwise.



Dr. Christopher Howard is the President of Hampden-Sydney College, a private liberal-arts college for men in Virginia. Dr. Howard is a graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy, where he earned a BS in political science. A Rhodes Scholar, he earned his doctorate in politics at Oxford University and an MBA with distinction from the Harvard Business School. Before his appointment as President of Hampden-Sydney College in 2009, Dr. Howard served as Vice President for Leadership & Strategic Initiatives at the University of Oklahoma, where he also served as the Director of the Honors College Leadership Center and a President’s Associates Presidential Professor.