

Being The Most Popular Kid in the Class Doesn't Work Forever

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

I can recall vividly the seventh-grade student council competition. My social studies teacher dutifully scanned the classroom for volunteers, exhorting at least one of us to run for office. Never shy to voice my opinion, it was not too difficult for me to accept her charge. “Howie for Student Council” posters joined similarly decorated signs for candidates vying for a coveted position as a representative of the people. More importantly, time drew nearer and nearer to the day when each candidate was expected to give their campaign speech to students waiting anxiously with open ears and closed minds.

After the fifth candidate finished, it was my turn to speak. I was passionate, energetic, and interested in helping my fellow students; however, my talk was not terribly remarkable. But regardless of my oratory skills, I had something every kid needed to win an election: popularity. Like most other young people that age, I equated popularity with leadership. Not much changed during my successful runs for office through high school and even college, but I eventually arrived at positions in the military, Corporate America, non-profits, and higher education where, by definition, making unpopular decisions represented effective leadership. The desire to be popular had somehow become a liability.

As the president of Hampden-Sydney College, I am impressed each day by young people who figuratively and literally want to change the world. Through their work with clubs, organizations, and even their very own 501(c)(3) corporations housed both on and off campus, these young men work diligently for a greater good, leading as best they know how. They support popular causes and, not too unlike my seventh-grade student council campaign, they remain generally well-liked by all they encounter. But I think it is important to caution this at times overly-confident generation, as well as the reader, that *leadership is not a popularity contest*. Moreover, those of us who teach and develop future leaders must educate these apt pupils on what is just around the corner in their often peripatetic lives.

Professor Ronald Heifetz of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University often talks about leadership being a dangerous place. It is even more so for young people

if they transition to leadership roles unprepared mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and even physically for the daunting tasks at hand. As old-fashioned as it may sound, we need to provide opportunities for emerging leaders to develop toughness—or what Dr. Angela Duckworth from the University of Pennsylvania calls GRIT—if they are to survive and thrive in the 21st century.

I am not arguing for a Dickensian grey world consisting of ritualistic slaps on the wrist, just because. However, I am reminding scholars and practitioners of leadership education alike to recall that no matter how elegant an idea may be, it often takes an individual with the courage to endure some degree of deprivation to see it through to the end.

Perhaps the best way of achieving this goal is to intentionally link character education to leadership development, with the appropriate crucible experiences incorporated along the way. Good examples include individuals like Bob McDonald, CEO of Proctor & Gamble, and Colonel Mark Hyatt, Executive Director of the Foundation for Character Development, who sponsor important initiatives that assist with positive character formation.

The military calls it the “loneliness of command,” while others, describing the quintessential leadership role, the American Presidency, describe it as “the glorious burden.” Whichever title one chooses, leadership is not a seventh-grade student council election. We must keep this precept in mind when developing the next generation of leaders.



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.