



Remarks for New Student Orientation – “A Very Special College”

Larry Stimpert, President

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Welcome to the members of the Hampden-Sydney College Class of 2023, and to your parents, siblings, and our Hampden-Sydney colleagues.

Before getting into my remarks, I ask you freshmen to reflect on the parents, teachers, coaches, and other mentors who prepared you to excel during these next four years at Hampden-Sydney. And, take time, soon, to thank them for their mentoring. Your appreciation and thanks will be a blessing to them. I also want to take this moment to acknowledge your parents and the thousands of alumni and friends of this College, who, through their financial contributions and scholarships, make it possible for you to receive the benefits of a Hampden-Sydney College education.

I have given this talk the simple title, *A Very Special College*, because that’s what you have chosen to attend. Every year, we seem to have one new freshman who shows up not realizing that this is a college for men, but I’m assuming most of you know that you are attending one of only a handful of colleges for men in our country. Our students and alumni tell me that attending a college for men strengthens friendships, improves the classroom dynamic, brings out their best, and provides more leadership opportunities—over 80 percent of our students have held a formal leadership role on campus by the time they become seniors.

But being a college for men is only the most obvious distinction at this special college. I want to introduce you to some of the many ways that Hampden-Sydney is unique, and I invite you to quickly own this special College and its distinctive culture.

Let me start with our name. This College is named for John Hampden and Algernon Sydney, British noblemen who lived in the 1600s. They believed that the power to govern should reside with the people and not with the monarch. This naturally made them unpopular with the British king, and they both gave their lives for their beliefs, one by execution and one in battle. At the time of the American Revolution, patriots in this country had formed Hampden-Sydney Societies, named for these two martyrs to the cause of representative government. Our College’s founders wanted to prepare leaders for the emerging American Republic and so their choice of name would have alerted everyone that they were establishing an alternative to the “royalist” College of William & Mary, named after two British monarchs.

In addition to knowing about our namesakes, you should know that the College has been pursuing the same mission “to form good men and good citizens” since it opened its doors in 1775. Like the College’s name, the choice of this mission was quite deliberate. Wanting an alternative to the tyranny of a British king, the patriots who founded this College knew that, in the words of writer Andrea Wulf, “the traditional control mechanisms of society—which were based on fear and force—had to be replaced by self-control, moral integrity and industry.” Wulf quotes Benjamin Franklin on this point, who stated: “Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom,” and also, John Adams, who asked “whether there is

public Virtue enough to support a Republic,” even as he was writing to his son, John Quincy, to “ever remember that the End of study is to make you a good Man and a useful Citizen.”

So you see, our College’s name and our longstanding mission of forming “good men and good citizens” had great meaning when Hampden-Sydney opened its doors in 1775, and our name and mission still have great meaning and purpose today: This College remains steadfastly committed to preparing you to inherit and to lead this great Republic.

So, how do we prepare you to be “good men and good citizens?” Through a special combination of rigorous academics and character development. Rhetoric is the centerpiece of our academic program because there is nothing more important than you leaving here knowing how to think critically and creatively and to express yourself well. We emphasize the study of our Western tradition and what we can learn from other cultures so that you understand how our society came to value individual freedom and how we have struggled over the centuries to make that a universal value. We believe you should take courses in U.S. history and government so you can become knowledgeable, effective, and engaged citizens. In short, we believe it is important for you to be exposed to many different subjects and disciplines even as you develop expertise in a major. In a world that is changing so fast and so radically, your capacity to think, to draw insights from a wide range of knowledge, to discern what is important from what isn’t important, and to communicate your views effectively will prepare you well for success throughout your life and career.

But it is not enough to develop your intellect. As another college president once said, “. . .intellect by itself is essentially amoral, capable of evil as well as good. We must develop the character which makes intellect constructive, and the personality which makes it effective.” We develop your character in many ways here, but especially through our Honor Code and Code of Conduct. At first, these Codes will seem like a set of high expectations. And, they are; but our goal is to have these high expectations become a way of life and a mindset that will influence your behavior in your work, in your family, and in your community for the rest of your life.

There are many unique aspects of our College’s culture, and I look forward to you discovering them over the next few weeks. But I want to highlight one more special Hampden-Sydney tradition. Unlike most college campuses where the sidewalks between classes are a collision course of students looking down at their phones, we expect you to look each other in the eye and greet each other as you move about campus. Why do we put so much emphasis on the courtesy of saying hello to one another? Because we believe that acquiring the habits of decency and respect in simple matters like greeting other members of our community will ensure that you will act decently and respectfully in bigger matters. We want our culture here to be one of civility, and one that encourages you to become your best self, the best man you can be in everything you do.

By now, each of you will have received a little booklet, *To Manner Born, To Manners Bred*, authored by Tommy Shomo, an alumnus who devoted much of his career to educating young men at this College. Last year, we celebrated the 40th anniversary of this publication, which is an indication of its lasting impact. Though this book can teach you what fork to use at a fancy dinner party, it is much more than a book about etiquette; it is really a guide to being a good man and a good citizen.

Following high school, many young men must immediately assume responsibility for earning a living, for being on their own, or for renting or owning a home. By attending college, and especially this special College, you have the privilege and, really, the luxury, of having four years of preparation between the time you leave home and the time you must assume these responsibilities. Toward the end of his book, Tommy describes this period in your life:

This campus is a little world, and for our students it is their special place for four years. They know, however, that it will not be their world forever, and they are preparing themselves to be “good men and good citizens” as understood in the 18th century and in the 21st century. It is a treasured thing for a youth to have a special place in which to become a man—a beautiful place where honor is a virtue, civility a habit, and learning a goal.

It is a treasured thing to have this special College and this special time in your life. Use these next four years to become your best self and to help your new brothers to do the same.