

TOO GOOD NOT TO BE BETTER

Remarks for Opening Convocation
August 23, 2021

Over the last several years, I've spoken a lot about our mission and culture, and I want to do so again today while also focusing on our culture of civility, our shared brotherhood and community, and our responsibilities to one another.

This is an easy place to love. At the end of my second year here, I was talking with Chad Eisele, our athletic director and golf coach, who was just completing his first year here. He said, "You know, I feel like this College is more my *alma mater* than my own." And, I replied, "I know exactly what you mean. I feel the same way." For an institution to have that kind of effect on people is very special.

What is it that makes this College so remarkable and so easy to love? Because this is not just another college, but one that has a very special sense of purpose and meaning. We are blessed to have one of the most distinctive missions of any college or university anywhere, "to form good men and good citizens"—a mission that is only more relevant and important today as when it was written in 1775. The operative word in this mission is, of course, that word "good." For our College's founders, who were also our country's Founders the word "good" was all about virtue. For our founders, goodness and virtue also meant a willingness to put the general welfare above self, an understanding that even as we pursue our own individual ambitions, we must also be concerned about the common good. That focus on the general welfare is as important and needed today as it was in 1775.

So how are we doing at living up to and into our mission? The question reminds me of a legendary English professor at DePauw University who wrote at the top of a student's paper, "Too good not to be better." That phrase is not only the title of my remarks, but I believe it captures well an outlook that each of us should possess, both for ourselves and for the institutions of which we are a part. Today, I want to address two areas where I believe we are too good not to be better.

Civility.

This College has always held its members to the standard of civility, and so it isn't surprising that we consider our Code of Conduct—that a Hampden-Sydney student will behave as a gentleman at all times and all places—to be as important as our Honor Code.

Civil debate is in our College's DNA. Our Union Philanthropic Literary Society, the second oldest college debating society in the country, does an outstanding job of modeling civility. The UPLS was debating abolition in the 1830s and 1840s and, more recently, I've heard our students passionately civilly debate a wide array of topics, including whether the College should admit transgender men, whether body building is a sport, and whether Donald Trump is destroying the Republican Party.

Our commitment to civility means that we treat one another with great respect. Having an environment in which we can respectfully share ideas and opinions and even say foolish things is an environment that is conducive to learning. Many of you know I am fond of the expression, "how do

I know what I think until I hear what I say?” and this is why classroom discussions are such a powerful way for us to learn. Often, all we have to do is say something in order for us to hear how uninformed or illogical the statement was.

This is also an environment where we encourage you to have difficult conversations among your friends and brothers, with the safety net of mutual respect. Not wanting to hurt others doesn't mean that we shy away from sensitive topics; it doesn't mean we shouldn't ask a question even if we don't know the best way to ask it; and it doesn't mean that we won't sometimes unintentionally say something that someone else finds offensive. All of these situations are opportunities for learning and for deepening your relationships.

And, civility should govern all of our behaviors. For several years, I believed that we will have accomplished something if we reduce the number of sexual assaults that occur here, and, thanks to the work of many individuals and our sports teams who have taken a lead on our prevention efforts, we have. But given our mission and what we value here, why would we allow even one sexual assault here?

Civility requires that we respect all of the members of our College community, whether we are on or off campus, and that we respect visitors to our campus. We've all seen a student or fan at an athletic event who shouts obscenities at the opposing team. While we might say, "I would never do that," we have a responsibility to remind that individual that he's not living into or up to our Code of Conduct or our College's expectations. In contrast, a few years ago, I received a letter from a couple who had stayed at the same hotel as our baseball team. They had been so impressed by our players' politeness and behavior that they had taken the time to send me a letter complimenting the College that produced such fine young men. We are all part of something bigger than ourselves and we represent Hampden-Sydney and one another at all times and in all places.

Our commitment to civility also means that we treat our beautiful campus with care. We are all the current stewards of Hampden-Sydney with responsibilities for preserving it for future generations. We are working to make it an even more attractive campus, because we want you to learn to understand and appreciate beauty and the importance of great design while you are students here. Like many of you, I love to walk all over campus, and I'm often not only picking up sticks, but also cans, bottles, and Cook Out cups. Treating this campus as if it is yours is a great way to prepare for the day when you will have a home of your own. We can all contribute to leaving this special place better than we found it.

The Brotherhood

The College's remarkable brotherhood is also too good not to be better. As iron sharpens iron, one man sharpens another, and we will only realize our brotherhood's full potential if every student thrives and is sharpened here. The best way for all of us to thrive here is to be engaged—engaged in our work, engaged with a good group of friends and colleagues, and engaged in the life of this campus. We offer all of you an array of ways to be engaged here, and we want to see all of you soon find your niches and start thriving here.

And, members of this community who aren't engaged aren't just missing out on all that this College has to offer, they aren't contributing either, which detracts from the quality of the educational experience for everyone.

As the first Proverb Jordan read reminds us, anxiety and concerns can weigh us down, and sometimes all we need is to know someone cares or to get a word of encouragement. For example, if you see a student who isn't studying enough, ask him to study with you. I hear occasionally that newer faculty members are concerned that if they set high expectations they will be criticized in their course evaluations. The reality is that students who criticize faculty members for setting high expectations aren't students we want here.

Nothing is more motivational than working toward a plan, and our Compass initiative is designed to help every student develop a plan for making the most of the four years you have here. And, even if you are undecided about a major or a direction for your career, your Compass plan will be one that helps you discern your calling and select a focus. Faculty advisors play a critical role in getting advisees to have a plan and to be working toward that plan. Let's all be working here to fulfill our potential.

For most students, this campus is the most diverse place you will have lived. One of the most valuable ways you can learn here to is to meet and get to know people who are different from you. Treat one another with great respect, get to know others, learn how to talk with one another, and work to understand each other's worldviews. I sometimes hear a student use the phrase, "You do your thing and I'll do mine" to describe the College. That is not what a college is all about—college and colleague share the same root, which means "partnership," which, of course, is a big part of what our brotherhood is all about. So, our attitude really needs to be, "Tell me more about you and what you do."

We have to look out for and take care of each other. In the time of COVID, we are very focused on the wellbeing of every member of this campus community. But, we know from many tragedies over many years, what takes the lives of members of this community, and we need to hold each other accountable for ensuring that no more lives are lost to alcohol and substance abuse. If you see someone here who is intoxicated or who has a substance abuse problem, it is not enough to say, "I wouldn't get myself into that condition." Your brothers need you to do much more than that. Help intoxicated people get home safely and unharmed. Help those who have alcohol and substance abuse problems get help. And, make sure that someone who is drunk never gets behind the wheel of a car.

This coming Saturday at 11:00 a.m., we will dedicate a portrait of Alex Byrne, a Hampden-Sydney student who would have graduated in 2019 if his life had not been cut short three months earlier due to an alcohol related accident. It's not surprising that Alex's parents want his life to make a difference. The painting is entitled "Am I My Brother's Keeper?" and it will hang inside the Brown Student Center. All of you are invited and encouraged to attend the dedication, which will take place in front of the Brown Student Center. More important than the dedication day, Alex's parents and I hope that as you and all future Hampden-Sydney students walk by that painting you will be reminded of your responsibilities to your brothers, that you are your brother's keeper.

In closing, I've shared two good things about Hampden-Sydney that together we can make better. I challenge you to identify other ways to make that which is good about Hampden-Sydney better. Why? Because nothing in life is more rewarding than being a part of something that is noble—something that is bigger than ourselves. And, if we commit ourselves to living fully into and up to our mission and the high ideals of this great College, when people talk about the great colleges and universities in this country, Hampden-Sydney is one they will mention.