

CIVIC VIRTUE AS A WAY OF LIFE

Remarks at Hampden-Sydney College Commencement
May 9, 2026

Dr. Larry Stimpert, President

Trustees, Faculty and Staff Members, Community Members, Alumni, Parents, and Members of the Class of 2026:

Welcome to this special day for our graduates, your families, and Hampden-Sydney College! For you graduates, this is one of the most important days in your life. On behalf of a very proud College, I offer an enthusiastic congratulations to you and to your parents and families! And on behalf of a very grateful College, I also thank you, parents, for entrusting your sons' education to Hampden-Sydney.

Today we bring to a close our College's 250th anniversary commemoration. I'm confident that you members of the Class of 2026 will always remember that you graduated during this milestone year. We also honor and recognize today the members of the Class of 1976, who have been on campus for the last few days celebrating their 50th reunion. Like you, they graduated during an important anniversary year for both the College and the country. And that makes the brotherhood your two classes share even more remarkable.

The theme of Hampden-Sydney's 250th anniversary commemoration is "Civic Virtue: Then and Now," which reflects the belief of our country's and our College's founders that civic virtue is essential to the success of a republic, and that it is just as essential today as it was 250 years ago on the eve of our country's Revolution.

So, let me begin with a question for you graduates: How will you embody civic virtue as you leave this remarkable College? And for all of us who love Hampden-Sydney, how will we, working collaboratively, carry on the work of cultivating civic virtue as we embark on the College's next 250 years?

The concept of "civic virtue" is rarely discussed in everyday conversation. Last fall, we held a three-day symposium on civic virtue that many of you attended. While several of the panelists and speakers helped us better understand civic virtue, none of them paused to say, "write this down, here's the definition." So, what is civic virtue?

Having now lived for four years with our College's Codes of Honor and Conduct, you graduates might say that civic virtue is about personal honor and integrity—and, our country certainly needs honorable men. But civic virtue is something more. It is one thing to possess honor and integrity. It is another to put them into action—to serve, to contribute, and to make a difference in this world. Civic virtue is honor in action.

Honor and integrity are like wealth—they only have value when put to good use. And the most important thing honorable people can do is to serve and contribute to the greater good. Forming

men for whom civic virtue would become a way of life—that is what our Founders intended when they founded this College 250 years ago and gave it its mission “to form good men and good citizens.”

Our country’s and our College’s founders were students of history, and they knew that earlier experiments in representative government had not always fared well. From their studies, they also concluded that civic virtue was the one indispensable requirement for a successful republic. If you are ruled by a monarch or tyrant, you only have to stay in line and be a good follower, but a successful republic requires far more—it requires citizens who are willing to serve it and to sustain it.

Your four years here have prepared you well for a life of civic virtue. You all arrived here with some sense of a calling. You may not have found that calling yet, but you have inside you this idea that you were put on this earth to do something worthwhile and meaningful. To prepare you to pursue your purpose and calling, you have taken Western Culture and many other courses that have immersed you in the question of what it means to be a good man and a good citizen. From your Rhetoric courses you’ve become effective communicators. Along the way, mentors, role models, and this College’s distinctive brotherhood have helped you define the kind of man you want to be. Over the last four years, you’ve taken on responsibilities that have honed your leadership skills, shaped your judgement, and taught you how to get things done.

And, in everything we do here, we seek to develop your character. The character of Hampden-Sydney men is one of the reasons I consider it such a great privilege to lead this College. You are men of integrity—marked by grit and determination, by empathy, and by quiet confidence. You are not boastful, and, above all, you get things done.

By far, the most rewarding aspect of my job is to watch how you have grown in competence, character, and effectiveness. Over the years, I’ve spoken with many seniors who have told me they could never have imagined during their freshman year being the man they are now four years later. My colleagues and I take satisfaction in that growth, the responsibilities you have assumed, and the contributions you have made here. You are well prepared to live lives of civic virtue. We know you have much more to contribute in the years ahead—as friends, colleagues, husbands, fathers, neighbors, citizens, and leaders.

The Hampden-Sydney educational experience that has sharpened your intellect, shaped your character, and cultivated your personality is the finest form of higher education—and it carries with it great responsibility. As you leave, I challenge you to make the most of your talents and of the education you’ve received here, and to live a life of civic virtue—of giving, serving, and contributing. You may well reply that this is asking a lot of you, and you would be correct. But the alternative is to live an aimless or selfish life that offers little satisfaction.

Giving, serving, and contributing—these are the paths to a fulfilling life. And it is precisely this life—a life of civic virtue—that our country now most needs you to lead.

Congratulations!