

MAKING THE MOST OF A HAMPDEN-SYDNEY EDUCATION

Remarks for New Student Orientation
August 18, 2017

Members of the Class of 2021, Parents, Siblings, Faculty, and Staff:

Welcome to Hampden-Sydney College. We are excited about your arrival and the start of your educational journey. And, we are grateful to you parents who are here today—without the nurturing you have provided, it would be much more difficult for us to do our important and noble work. You parents are also members of the very special Hampden-Sydney community, as well as partners in our educational endeavors.

In the next few minutes, I will share some thoughts about the College that I have come to know and love very much over this past year. And, at the risk of sounding too much like your father, I will also offer a few thoughts about how you can not only get off to a great start, but thrive during the next four years.

Every college considers itself distinctive, but there are many reasons why Hampden-Sydney is a very special college. One of these is our history and legacy. In a day and age when every organization has a mission statement, it is remarkable that this College has been pursuing the same mission authored by its first president in the year of its founding, 1775. That mission is “to form good men and good citizens.” We believe this mission is even more important and relevant today than at any time in the College’s history. Our world desperately needs good men and good citizens in our homes, in our communities, in public life, and in every field of endeavor.

To prepare you to be good men and good citizens, we offer a unique combination of rigorous academics and character development. Rhetoric is the centerpiece of our academic program. We believe there is nothing more important than a young man knowing how to express himself well. 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, the 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.

We believe you should study our Western tradition. It’s not that the West has always gotten it “right” or that we don’t need to be open to what other cultures and civilizations can teach us, but it is very important for you to understand how your society came to value individual freedom and agency and how we have struggled over the centuries to make those values universal values. Along the way, you will be exposed to much wisdom and many beautiful works of human creativity. We will also ask you to take courses in U.S. history and government because we want you to be knowledgeable, effective, and engaged citizens. And, we will also ask you to study a foreign language, in part because the capacity to learn a foreign language demonstrates intellectual flexibility, but also because we want you to develop an appreciation for other cultures and ways of life.

This very campus is an extension of our classrooms—not only are you inheriting the legacy of charter trustees, Patrick Henry and James Madison, and those students who have come before you, but the beauty of our architecture and the campus landscape should raise your aesthetic sensibilities and create a desire to promote beauty in the homes and communities where you will one day live.

While all colleges offer an educational program, few today are interested in developing their students' character. Perhaps they have decided that this isn't their job, or perhaps they believe that notions of right and wrong have become so relative that they are reluctant to prescribe what it means to be "good men and good citizens." But, we are committed to the simultaneous development of your intellect and your character. As another college president once said, "It is not enough to develop intellect, for 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."

Our emphasis on character has its foundation in our Honor Code and Code of Conduct. Tonight, you will pledge to uphold our Honor Code—"the Hampden-Student will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor tolerate those who do." The Honor Code will change your life starting now. Visitors to this campus often note how surprised they are to see bikes that aren't chained to the bike rack or laptops left in the library while students go to lunch or dinner. This "bicycle effect" is a wonderful part of the rich Hampden-Sydney culture and tradition. But you will carry the Honor Code with you and it will continue to be a part of you, influencing your actions and how you live your life, long after you leave here.

We expect you to live with honor and integrity, but we also expect you to behave as a gentleman from this day forward. This past summer, I read Owen Wister's novel, *The Virginian*. Near the beginning of the book, Wister writes:

The creature we call a gentleman lies deep in the hearts of thousands that are born without chance to master the outward graces of the type.

But you are among those privileged few who have an opportunity to master both the outward *and* the inward graces of a gentleman. Each of you should have received by now a copy of *To Manner Born, To Manners Bred*, written by Tommy Shomo, an alumnus who spent nearly his entire professional career in service to this College. My favorite line in this little booklet comes near the end where you find this sentence:

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.

Hampden-Sydney is that special place, and the qualities described in this booklet and the daily lived experience you have here will offer important lessons that will set you apart from, and provide you with advantages over, other college students. I was speaking with an alumnus not long ago and I asked him why he thought he had been so successful, and he replied, "I send thank you notes." Hampden-Sydney men live out their lives as gentlemen in simple but profound ways. For example, we don't walk around looking at our mobile phones and bumping into each other; instead you are expected to look each other in the eye and say hello to one another as you pass.

Let me conclude by offering a few ideas about how to get off to the best possible start here:

First, you have to make friends and get engaged. Many Hampden-Sydney students I've met this past year have told me that they wish they had reached out and connected with their fellow students sooner. Their comment has always been the same: "I saw guys together and I just assumed I was the only person here who didn't have a friend." If, a few days from now, you have this same feeling, then you have to take the initiative and be vulnerable enough to make the first move to introduce yourself to others. As tough as it can be, chose now to take that risk; it will be one of the best moves you ever make. And, be open to befriending guys who aren't like you; these are the people who will have the most to teach you.

Also, you cannot thrive as a student here until and unless you feel you belong here. You have to get out of your room and get connected with other guys and activities. Athletes have an advantage because you already have a team to which you belong, but we'll be hosting an activities fair next Tuesday evening, and you'll see that we have scores of clubs and organizations that you can join. Get out of your room and find your team and your passion here. And, while I'm on the subject of getting out of your room and engaging, you know that some young men have a special affinity for video games and digital media. We enjoy them a lot, and, in fact, our brains respond to video games much the way they respond to nicotine and other addictive drugs. If you are addicted and don't have the ability to shut down the game or your phone and start to study without your mom or dad telling you to, then consider having your mom and dad take your gaming console and other electronic devices home because your parents won't be here to tell you to turn them off and study.

This prompts my second piece of advice: You have to take your classes and studies seriously. No matter how rigorous and demanding your high school was, Hampden-Sydney is going to be tougher. And, we do not have grade inflation here, so if you do average work, you will receive a "C." As Woody Allen has said, "80 percent of success is showing up." But just showing up won't be enough here; you must do the work and you have to put a lot of effort into the work and you have to push yourself to excel. But more than just getting off to a good start, make your college years a time of intellectual adventure. Find time to read for pleasure, try new subjects, discover new interests, stretch yourself. You will never have an opportunity like these next four years to feed your intellect.

Third, you need to know that college is a team sport, and the quality of your experience here will be a reflection of the quality of the team you create for yourself. Make your professors, your faculty advisor, coaches, RAs and student affairs staff, work study supervisors, and your Hampden-Sydney brothers your teammates and collaborators. Don't be afraid to ask for, and be open to, the constructive criticism, advice, and wisdom they can offer you about how to make the most of these four years and your life ahead.

Finally, be safe and take care of yourself and each other. This summer, I have been reading, *The Teenage Brain*, by Frances Jensen. It's been a great read in part because my wife and I are sharing a house with two teenagers of our own, and we share this campus with you and hundreds of other teenagers. Probably the most interesting point I've taken from this book is that our brains develop the desire to try new things, to experiment, and to take risks long before they develop the ability to assess those risks objectively. So, you and your friends need to help each other develop the capacity to think and say, "what could go wrong" or "let's think twice" before you proceed with your adventure.

In closing, you come to this day, this crossroads moment in your life, with hopes and aspirations. Down deep inside each of you is a belief that you are a very special person, and you have good reason for believing this, because each and every one of you carries the potential to do great things and to leave your mark on your homes and families, your communities, the organizations where you will work, and our larger world. This is a place that will nurture those hopes and aspirations and equip you to be a good man and a good citizen if you take advantage of all this College offers you. More than anything, my colleagues and I wish for each of you four extraordinary years where you push yourselves to achieve your full potential.