

HIGHER EDUCATION AND HAMPDEN-SYDNEY COLLEGE: CONTINUING RELEVANCE

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In 1781, John Adams wrote a letter to his 13-year old son, John Quincy, that included this passage:

You will ever remember that all the End of study is to make you a good Man and a useful Citizen.

Had Adams seen an advertisement published six years earlier in the *Williamsburg Gazette*, promoting Hampden-Sydney, a new college in Southside Virginia, which had as its mission, “to form good men and good citizens?” It’s likely that Adams’s choice of phrasing was just a coincidence, but this coincidence underscores the importance our Founders attached to education and its role in providing the emerging American republic with leaders. And still today, beyond our families, it is our country’s colleges and universities that have primary responsibility for preparing young people to take on roles of leadership and responsibility. Higher education is and will be one of the greatest forces for good in our society.

Yet over the last few decades, the landscape of higher education has seen profound change. Once widely respected, colleges and universities are now bombarded by negative news stories. Schools are criticized for being too expensive and spawning a student debt crisis, for not offering a relevant curriculum, for not requiring students to study and learn more, for not doing enough to make campuses welcoming and inclusive, for going too far to make campuses welcoming and inclusive, for having low graduation rates, for not addressing binge drinking and sexual assault, for not helping students obtain internships and jobs, and for many other shortcomings. Some of these criticisms are fair and deserved, but, in their quest for headlines, the media typically ignore the positive impact colleges and universities have on the lives of their students, and the positive impact those students have in our world.

Other challenges to higher education include dramatic socio-demographic shifts in the traditional college-age population, rapid growth in the number of non-traditional college students, and a long period of static family incomes making affordability even more difficult. Because of these changes and challenges, colleges and universities are in a critical period of transformation; higher education is not what it was, and almost surely not yet what it is likely to become.

Today, I will offer some perspective, including thoughts about the criticisms that are deserved and those that are exaggerated. I will also use Hampden-Sydney as a case study to describe how we are not only working to position the College to thrive in today’s competitive higher education landscape, but, more importantly, how we are working to ensure that the College fulfills its mission of forming the good men and good citizens our society so desperately needs.

One of the most frequently cited criticisms of higher education is a lack of relevance. Various majors are criticized for leaving graduates poorly prepared for success in the workplace. However popular

these arguments are, the data do not support this view. The lifetime earnings of an English major, for example, are not significantly different from the lifetime earnings of a business major.

What is important, of course, is what college graduates bring to their jobs. Surveys of hiring managers always underscore the need for critical thinking, communication, and teamwork skills. This is why at Hampden-Sydney, the premise of our academic program is that young men must know how to think and express themselves well. So the cornerstone of our curriculum is our two-semester freshman Rhetoric requirement. Students must then pass our RPE, or Rhetoric Proficiency Exam. On the day of the exam, our alumni gather all over the world to drink a toast to the sophomores who are taking the RPE—we must surely be the only college or university in the country that gathers its alumni together to celebrate students taking an examination. Knowing how to think and communicate well ensures that our students excel during their college years and prepares them for success after graduation.

A second concern is that college costs too much. In evaluating this concern, it is important to remember that the earnings premium of a college degree has never been higher—college graduates can expect to earn, on average, twice as much as those who have only a high school diploma. It is, however, true that for most of the last half-century, the “sticker price” of attending college has risen faster than inflation, but during that same time, most colleges have awarded generous grants and scholarships. Hampden-Sydney is a good example: our stated annual cost of attendance is \$59,000, but after financial aid awards, the average cost of attendance is less than \$35,000 (though the actual cost can vary widely based on a family’s ability to pay).

More recently, Hampden-Sydney has adopted a new approach to pricing, tying increases to the higher education price index. As a result, we have increased our sticker price by less than two percent in each of the last two years. This puts pressure on the College to control costs and to increase non-tuition sources of revenue.

Another topic that gets media attention is student debt, and while the value of student debt is now greater than credit card debt, it is helpful to have additional perspective when analyzing these news stories. The first thing to keep in mind is that the undergraduate students and alumni of traditional public and private institutions hold only about one-fifth of all of outstanding student debt. In contrast, nearly 45 percent of all student debt is graduate student debt—loans taken-out by current or future doctors, lawyers, business leaders, and other professionals, so it’s likely that these debtholders will have sufficient incomes to pay back these loans. Most worrisome is that 36 percent of all student debt outstanding is held by those who attend or have attended for-profit schools because only about one in four of the students attending for-profit, four-year colleges graduate with a degree, casting doubt on their ability to repay these loans. This is the student debt story that ought to be getting much more attention from the news media and policymakers.

College completion rates are also a real concern. The prevailing wisdom is that most students complete an undergraduate degree in four years. Only 14 percent of the undergraduates enrolled in a for-profit school graduate in four years. The statistic is better for public colleges and universities, but still only a dismal 35 percent. Private colleges, which offer a highly personal approach to higher education, do better but not all that great—the average four-year completion rate at all private colleges is only 53 percent.

At Hampden-Sydney, we can boast that 94 percent of our graduates complete their degree in four years, saving their parents the cost of a fifth or sixth year of tuition and fees and getting those students into high-paying jobs and top graduate programs sooner. And, our graduation rate is seven percentage points higher than the average for men at other private colleges. And, we have a comprehensive plan in place to improve our graduation rate because we want to be able to tell prospective students and their parents that we offer young men a better educational experience than they will get anywhere else and that if their son starts at Hampden-Sydney he will finish at Hampden-Sydney in four years.

There is also the challenge of civil discourse, surely the most vexing issue on college campuses today. Without free expression, how can a college or a university claim to be a place of learning rather than a place of indoctrination? Classrooms will not function as they need to if students self-censor their thoughts. The great English writer, E. M. Forster has asked, “How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?” This is precisely why we need our colleges to be places where students can say anything, so they can hear what they say, develop the ability to evaluate the merits of their thinking, and learn how to distinguish between intelligent and well defended arguments and those that aren’t logical or lack merit or are merely inflammatory. Here’s a quote from a Hampden-Sydney student that describes the result of the kind of open dialogue that occurs at our College:

I hold firmly to the belief that no discussion is so polarizing that common ground cannot be found, and so I engage my friend, family, and foe in conversation and debate. With this guiding principle—a principle I developed at Hampden-Sydney—I am able to approach any situation (often delicately) with genuine confidence, and, as a result, can win allies in the most challenging situations.

Thus far, I’ve shared some thoughts about how Hampden-Sydney is dealing with many of the most important issues facing higher education. Let me also offer some observations about how we are approaching the future boldly and seeking to provide leadership in the world of higher education.

Hampden-Sydney has been pursuing the same mission of “forming good men and good citizens” for 243 years—a mission that has only increased in importance and relevance. Just as distinctive as our mission, is the way we fulfill that mission. At a time when many colleges and universities seem adrift, we hold fast to a few timeless principles about how to offer young men a transformative coming-of-age experience.

First, we believe in rigorous academics. In addition to our Rhetoric requirement, we believe students should study our Western tradition. It’s not that the “West is best” or that the West has always gotten it “right” or that we don’t need to be open to what other cultures can teach us, but it is very important for our students to understand our society’s creativity and genius and how we came to value individual freedom and agency and how we have struggled over the centuries to make those values universal values. We also require students to take courses in U.S. history and government because we expect them to be knowledgeable, effective, and engaged citizens. And, we require students to study a foreign language, in part because we want students to have an appreciation for other peoples and their cultures, and also because the capacity to learn a foreign language teaches and demonstrates intellectual flexibility.

Perhaps most importantly, we believe in the power of high expectations to transform youth into men. Here’s how a current senior describes this transformation:

During my high school days and even early in my college career, I wanted to do the bare minimum. As everyone knows, the bare minimum isn't acceptable here at Hampden-Sydney. At first, I hated having to actually do my school work and put forth effort, but I quickly saw the results of high standards. The professors and coaches here hold everyone accountable and they aren't shy about calling-out someone if he is slacking or not performing to the best of his abilities. My work ethic has changed drastically since the day I stepped on this campus back in 2015, and I can't credit my H-SC experiences enough. The improvement I have seen in my grades and overall lifestyle is vast, and I can't wait to keep improving.

And, here is how another Hampden-Sydney student describes this transformation process:

Another experience that has transformed me at Hampden-Sydney is learning not only to trust people but also to become trustworthy. Trust is hard to find these days, but at Hampden-Sydney you rarely encounter anyone who isn't trustworthy. One of the things I realized early on was how much trust the professors put into each and every man. I say man because I have never seen a professor treat any of us like boys; they all immediately treated us like men and trusted that we would behave like men.

We believe that developing character is every bit as important as developing intellect. Our country faces an ironic conundrum that at a time when we most need individuals who have a moral compass and the ability to distinguish between better and worse courses of action, most of our colleges and universities have abandoned the teaching of 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, at Hampden-Sydney, we are committed to the simultaneous development of intellect and 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."

We instill character and values by asking our young men to live with two cherished codes—our Honor Code and Code of Conduct. But, perhaps even more important than these codes, Hampden-Sydney students develop character by living in an environment of accountability for their words and deeds. Here is how a current senior describes this process:

The most profound lesson Hampden-Sydney has gifted me is that it is ... not necessary to identify with the majority. Knowledge and truth may not be where the majority says it is. Popular opinions and actions deserve to be analyzed and critiqued. Rather than feeling a pressure to conform and remain within the safety of the majority, I have been equipped with a freedom to search and discover truth for myself. I have been taught the importance of honor and integrity and the need to uphold these values.

Finally, we believe in the power of brotherhood. Our alumni know well the bonds that are forged at Hampden-Sydney. And, this brotherhood is shared from one generation of Hampden-Sydney men to the next, so it is no surprise we are cited for having one of the best college alumni networks or why we made *The Wall Street Journal's* Top Ten list for career preparation last year. But, the Hampden-Sydney brotherhood is more than friendships and networking. It is a culture, an expectation that we will hold each other accountable for living into our mission to form good men and good citizens. It is a manifestation of the Proverb that just as "iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." Here's how a recent graduate describes this aspect of our brotherhood:

This place is my brothers who compel me toward excellence with a uniquely powerful combination of support and friendly competition. This place has formed not just who I am now, but who I will be for the rest of my life. I have matured, grown, failed and succeeded, but most importantly, I have become a better man and a more complete person.

And, here is how another student describes the Hampden-Sydney brotherhood:

What I found at Hampden-Sydney was more than I could have hoped for: I found myself growing academically and socially, and my character was changing. Through the help of friends, professors, and other mentors, I became a more complete individual, acquiring qualities like a respect for service, a drive to lift others, and the motivation to spread this growth beyond myself. I could not have done this without the support group that I developed. They drove me to embrace the College's position that the formation of a good man and a good citizen was imperative. I am grateful to all who assisted me on this journey, and in addition, I am grateful that they also revealed to me the greatest secret—that this journey doesn't end.

For all of the reasons just described, my colleagues and I take a great deal of satisfaction in the educational experience we offer young men, but we are not immune from the real and significant challenges facing higher education that I discussed earlier. So rather than become complacent, we are preparing boldly for the future: We aim to offer the finest coming-of-age experience a young man can have. This is an ambitious, perhaps even an audacious goal, but it is achievable, because this is the experience that so many of our students already have at Hampden-Sydney.

To achieve this goal, we are enhancing every aspect of our College's academic and co-curricular program. We are strengthening our signature Rhetoric program and expanding the activities and programs offered by the Wilson Center for Leadership in the Public Interest and the Flemming Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation. We are also emphasizing "learning by doing," so that our courses offer more opportunities for hands-on learning, and our students find their way into multiple internship, research, and off-campus study opportunities before they graduate. And, we are seeking to give our students additional opportunities to develop their leadership talents and to enrich their educational experience by strengthening our outdoor education program with the aim of making it one of the finest in the country. And, we are also asking our young men to live more fully into, and up to, our Honor Code and Code of Conduct—not because we are being told to do this or because of the microscope of the #MeToo movement, but because this College has always believed that men should live lives of honor and integrity.

In everything we do, we seek a differentiation that will set us apart from other colleges and universities. This is our strategy for a strong and distinctive Hampden-Sydney that will thrive now and in the future.

We are in the midst of a major fundraising effort to support the initiatives I've just described and to raise funds for scholarships, which will always be our greatest need, so that we can ensure that future generations of young men have access to a Hampden-Sydney education regardless of their family's financial circumstances.

Hampden-Sydney enjoys a remarkable legacy and a powerful saga that give meaning and purpose to our work while also providing the momentum to carry our College forward. We are charting an

ambitious future. Our aim is to create an even more distinctive College, a College that is well prepared “to form good men and good citizens” for another 243 years, and a College whose fame will spread far and wide, so that when people talk about the great undergraduate colleges in this country, Hampden-Sydney will be one they mention.