

A FATHER'S ADVICE

Remarks for New Student Orientation
August 23, 2018

A very special welcome to the members of the Hampden-Sydney College Class of 2022, parents, siblings, and my Hampden-Sydney colleagues.

I encourage you members of the Class of 2022, to reflect on your parents, teachers, and other mentors who have prepared you to excel here at Hampden-Sydney. They provided you with a foundation upon which you will build your college career. I also want to acknowledge parents and thousands of alumni and friends of this College, who through their financial contributions and the scholarships they have funded, make it possible for you to receive the benefits of a Hampden-Sydney College education.

Your arrival has special meaning for me because just as you are arriving at college, so also is my son, Connor, starting college. I attended his new-student orientation program last weekend at Colorado College, a fine school where I taught for 17 years in Colorado Springs, where both of our children were born. Now it is fair for you to ask why he is not attending Hampden-Sydney, and I will tell you that I did my best (and Dean Garland also did her best) to recruit Connor to Hampden-Sydney. One night, when I was singing the virtues of this school at our dinner table, our daughter, Renee, spoke-up and said quite adamantly, "Dad, it is too close to home in a whole new way." Given that we live in that house right over there, she may be right.

My wife and I agree on most things—and on nearly all of the important things—and we both believe that the fundamental responsibility of parenting is to prepare children to be independent and to leave home. And so, we have spent the last 18 years preparing our son to be independent and to leave us. But, as all of you parents know, it is very difficult to see a son or daughter go.

Earlier today, you received a packet that contains a little booklet, *To Manner Born, To Manners Bred*, authored by Tommy Shomo, a member of the Hampden-Sydney Class of 1969 and an alumnus who devoted nearly his entire professional career to educating young men at this College. This year, we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the publication of this little book, which is about much more than etiquette; it is really a guide to being a good man, a good citizen, and a gentleman.

Following high school, many young men must immediately assume responsibility for earning a living, for taking care of a family, or for renting or owning a home. By attending college, and especially by attending this College, you have the privilege and, really, the luxury, of having four years between the time you leave home and the time you must assume such responsibilities. Toward the end of his book, Tommy describes this in-between period this way:

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 very special place and very special time in your life. During these next four years, you can prepare yourself to be all you can be in your life. We are seeking to form good men and good citizens—this has been our mission for 243 years—and we do this by offering you an extraordinary coming-of-age experience provided by a highly talented, dedicated, and demanding faculty and staff. We are offering you a unique 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 how to express yourself 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, 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.

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, and also because we want you to develop an appreciation for other peoples and cultures.

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, at Hampden-Sydney, 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."

With my own son going off to college, I have spent much time over the last year thinking about all of the lessons I've tried to impart, the times we've shared together, what great qualities he picked-up from me and what bad habits he acquired from his mother. Or, more likely, it's vice-versa. I've also spent a lot of time thinking about what I haven't told or shared with him, and, like a procrastinating student who puts off studying until the night before the exam, I've tried to cram a lot of advice into him during the last few weeks.

So, very much from my heart, let me share with you young men of the Hampden-Sydney College Class of 2022, who are all unique individuals, but also not all that different from my own son, some of the advice I have been sharing with Connor over the last few weeks.

First, get to know the faculty and staff of this College. You are attending a school that offers a very personal form of higher education; so make this College's faculty and staff members your mentors. The Gallup organization last year released a study that found that the two key predictors of whether College is an amazing experience or just a so-so experience are whether, "I had at least one

professor who made me excited about learning,” and “I had a mentor who encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams.” So there you have it, even before you have your first college class here, you already know how to make these next four years an amazing experience. Go see your faculty members, tell them about your dreams and passions, talk with your RA and ask him for advice. If you make our faculty and staff members your mentors, they will help you develop a love for learning and they will connect you with opportunities that will enrich your college experience and broaden your world.

Everyone here is committed to mentoring you and seeing that you get the most from these four years. I was walking across campus last spring and ran into Zach Shields, a junior from Charlotte, North Carolina. We talked a bit and then he said, I’ve been meaning to ask you if you had any advice about how I could get a banking or finance internship in New York this summer. By coincidence, I had just spoken with an alumnus who runs a private equity firm in New York, who asked me if he couldn’t get a Hampden-Sydney student to intern with his organization. This student, who I just ran into here on campus last spring, returned from that internship a couple of weeks ago. If a chance meeting with the College’s president can produce that sort of opportunity, imagine what your professors who see you every week can do for you.

My second piece of advice is this: have a great first year. College should be a very enjoyable time, and we want you to have some of the best times of your life here, but get off to a great start. Don’t ever neglect your classes. This is one of the few colleges in the country that doesn’t have much grade inflation, so if you do mediocre or sloppy work or if you think you can write a good paper the night before it is due, you will likely get a “C,” a “D,” or an “F” here. You may already think you want to go on to medical school or to law school or to business school or some other graduate program. It is very hard to pull-up a low grade point average acquired during your first year.

You have to be self-disciplined here. Your mom and dad aren’t going to be around to tell you to do your homework. They aren’t going to be monitoring the hours you spend on your PlayStation, your Xbox, or your phone. Trust me on this: you will derive much more satisfaction by graduating with a great GPA four years from now than from spending 5,000 hours on Fortnite.

Third, make the most of the Hampden-Sydney brotherhood. Make friends, and make friends with guys who are different from you, during your first few weeks here. I have talked with several students over the last two years who got caught up in the crazy notion that they were the only person here who didn’t have a friend. Take a risk and sit down next to someone you don’t know in the Pannill Commons and get to know the guy sitting next to you in class. Make friends with upperclassmen. Above all, make friends with guys who are going to bring out the best in you, guys who will encourage you to act like a gentleman even as you have fun, guys who are smarter than you, or in better shape than you, or who have experienced things you’ve never experienced before. Stretch yourself. And, be safe. Brothers have a great time with each other, they tease and razz each other, but brothers look out for one another and they finish what they start together.

My final piece of advice is that you find something here that you care about and you get involved. There is hardly anything more essential to your becoming a good man and a good citizen than to take responsibility for making something good happen. Many of you have already taken on important responsibilities and excelled. You have been leaders in your high schools, you have been team captains, you have had jobs and looked after younger siblings. But, now you have opportunities to take-on new and bigger responsibilities.

This College is a leadership factory. We like to say that our students run the College, and in many ways, we have an uncommon commitment to student self-government. As you take on leadership roles and responsibilities at the College, reflect on your effectiveness in those roles, and use your experiences to learn about yourself and about how you can become a better and more responsible man and leader. It is all too common in our society for people to take credit when things go right, but to blame the situation or someone else when things go wrong. This tendency is so common that psychologists call this the “self-serving bias.” But Harry Truman was right: when you are the leader, the buck stops with you. Take on and own the responsibilities that come with being a campus leader so that you are prepared and know how to be an effective leader in the organizations where you will work and in the communities you will one day call home.

So there you have it, four pieces of advice I have given to my own son and that I am happily giving to you. I will close by sharing with you an excerpt from a letter sent to me by a rising senior as I was getting ready to start my job here at Hampden-Sydney two summers ago. These words capture well the life-changing experience a Hampden-Sydney education can be:

The transformation I see in myself after only three years is nothing short of astounding. I've learned how to work hard and I've come to understand no one cares how hard you work because the bottom line is if you're not producing, it doesn't matter. I've learned how to balance multiple tasks. I've learned nobody is willing to fix your mistakes without consequences, so you must take it upon yourself to be responsible. I've learned that if you really want something, you must be diligent in your preparation. Finally, I've learned perseverance. There were many nights when the next day or the next test seemed impossible, but you can never give up no matter how bad it looks.

Hampden-Sydney offers you the same opportunities we gave this young man to learn and grow and to become a good man and a good citizen. Welcome to the great adventure that awaits you here.