

COLLEGE IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Remarks for New Student Orientation

August 20, 2020

I have been thinking a great deal about what this day means to you—this moment when you begin college. Our alumni tell me that the four years they spend here are the most formative time of their life. And, so you should be excited about the adventure that awaits you. But you are almost surely a bit anxious too. You feel your high school teachers have prepared you well for college, but you've probably also heard that college is going to be a lot more demanding than high school. You are saying goodbye to your parents and other family members who have been there for you. You have left good friends behind, confident that you will make many new lifelong friends among your Hampden-Sydney brothers, but right now it feels awkward to introduce yourself to people you haven't met before.

Yes, going off to college is a challenging journey in the best of times, but you are also starting college in the midst of a worldwide pandemic. And, that makes the process of adjusting to college life even more challenging. Look at how you are sitting, spaced six feet apart, and you are going to be meeting your new Hampden-Sydney brothers behind masks so you won't know if the person you are meeting is smiling or frowning. You're not only worrying about making a successful transition to college, but you also have to worry about whether you will contract a wily virus that you may not even know you have.

Typically, I use this time to share with the newest members of the Hampden-Sydney brotherhood what makes this school so distinctive and special, and I will do some of that, but mostly I'm feeling the need to give you advice. I'm probably feeling this way because of the pandemic, and I, like all of us want to do everything we can to ensure that we are able to stay here on campus learning and living together. I'm also wanting to give advice because our own daughter is also going off to college this year, and my wife and I will soon be living in that big house next door all by ourselves (unless you include the cat). I have been a pretty good father this summer, not offering our daughter too much unsolicited advice, but that won't stop me from passing along to you four recommendations as you prepare to start your college career:

To frame my advice, I want to encourage you to think of these next four years as a journey that you've been looking forward to taking all your life. What do you need to do to make this journey special?

First, you need to be safe. You wouldn't think of getting in a car without fastening your seatbelt, and for right now, until we get a vaccine or acquire herd immunity, you can't leave your room without putting on your mask, and wearing it. Masks are even better than seatbelts because they will protect you and ensure that your journey is safe, but they will also keep all of the other passengers on the trip safe.

As a college for men, we know quite a bit about you, and one of the things we know is that most of you haven't fully developed the capacity to prioritize and assess risks. Most of you think you are

quite invulnerable. So we know it is important to remind you all the time that your choices have consequences.

And, speaking of the other passengers on your journey, my second piece of advice is to meet them. Not only are they bright and talented and interesting and have much they can teach you, but here at Hampden-Sydney, they are also your new brothers. We have a tradition here at Hampden-Sydney that is going to be more important this year than ever. When we walk down the sidewalk, we don't look at our phones or get caught up in the music we're listening to, instead we look at everyone we meet in the eye and we greet them. We do this because it is the right thing to do, and we are convinced that if you learn to do the right thing in something as easy as saying "hello" to the members of this community, then you will be more likely to do the right thing when you are faced with bigger tasks and challenges.

And, let me say a few things about your Hampden-Sydney brothers. As many of you know, brothers tease each other, they often compete with each other, and they can sometimes give each other a bad time, but brothers stick together, they have each other's back, and they can bring out the best in each other. Have as your goal to meet and get to know every one of the brothers in the Class of 2024. You don't have to meet every one of them this year, but make it a point to expand your circle of acquaintances and friendships every semester. I guarantee you that you will have a richer and more valuable journey if you take this advice. And, I would also especially encourage you to meet people who are different from you—people who come from a different part of the world than you do. Meet people who have different interests and hobbies; they will help you discover new interests and talents in yourself. Meet people who have a different skin color than you so you learn what it is like to walk in their shoes.

My third piece of advice is to make the most of your journey. Try things you like, and try things you've never tried before. This will likely be the first time you'll have an opportunity to take a philosophy course or a religion course. You can learn to become proficient in a language you studied in high school, or you can start all over learning a new language here. Don't look at any of our courses as "required," instead, think of them as opportunities to learn and expand and become your best self.

Above all, go see your professors outside of class. You may be thinking, why would I do that? Or you might be thinking, my professors must be very busy and they probably don't have time for me. The essence of a small college is its personal approach to education. Our professors are here because they want to know their students, but even more important, they want to know your dreams, your hopes, your aspirations. Now to be sure, this year is a bit different, and it may not be as easy to just drop by and visit with your professors as it usually is, but take advantage of their office hours, and know that you can always schedule a meeting with them outdoors or at some venue that will allow for appropriate social distancing.

But, I want you to emphasize that during these next four years, some of your professors will get to know you so well that they will know you better than you know yourself. So you should want to meet with them and take full advantage of their mentoring. And, they remember their students and follow them into their careers. If you are wondering what you can do with a major in Physics or English or Government or any other major, ask your professors what their former students are doing. They'll not only tell you, but they'll also introduce you to those alumni who will then help you

get internships and provide you with other career advice. This, by the way, is one of the big advantages of coming to a college with the second best alumni network in the country.

Finally, use this journey to become the very best man you can be. You now have four years at a very special place and at a very special time in your life. I often say that we want to educate the whole man here—your intellect, certainly, but also your physical, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual dimensions. This completeness is a big reason why Hampden-Sydney alumni are so successful. At the end of your four-year journey here, we, of course, want you to be smarter, but we also want you to have developed a character that will channel your intellect in useful and beneficial directions.

We want you to be able to communicate easily with anyone, whether your future boss, your date, or the custodian who cleans your building—every single human being has worth and something to teach you, so learn how to have rich and deep conversations with others. We also want even non-athletes to develop the habits of lifelong health and fitness. We want you to develop empathy so that you can see the world from others' vantage points and acquire the skills of servant-leaders. And, we want you to develop your spiritual life. Many of you come from a faith tradition; many of you do not. To be a complete person, you must explore and deepen your spiritual dimension, and we have resources here to help you do that.

You have a lot on your mind today, and so there's only one way you will remember any of the advice I am sharing with you and that is by starting to follow my advice and applying my recommendations today. So four pieces of advice for your journey: be safe, especially this year; meet everyone on the trip; take advantage of every opportunity on the journey, especially the opportunity to have your professors mentor you; and use this time to become the best man you can be.

Let me close by noting that all of you either already have or will have, after today, a copy of the little book, *To Manner Born, To Manners Bred*, written by Tommy Shomo, a member of the Hampden-Sydney College Class of 1969. My favorite part of the book comes at the very end, where Tommy has this to say about our very special College:

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 truly is a treasured thing for you to have this special place and these four years to grow into the man you want to be—a man who carries himself with the confidence that comes with having competence and character.