

OUR TIME IS NOW

Remarks for the Opening Convocation August 23, 2020

The start of a new academic year is an exciting time. Ralph Waldo Emerson was moved to describe our important work here as a gathering of “every ray of various genius” to our “hospitable halls,” where we “by ... concentrated fires, set the hearts of ... youth on flame.” From conversations I’ve shared with faculty and staff members and many students who have been returning to campus for the first time in five months, I know we share this same sense of excitement.

Still, even among those who are most eager to be here, there’s apprehension as we approach this particular year. A big part of that apprehension is obviously due to the pandemic. Not only are we wary of an invisible virus that can cause serious illness and even death, especially among those who have a chronic health condition, but we also have daily, visible reminders of our altered condition. The usual handshakes of brothers returning to campus must be forgone, and our newest brothers must meet and bond with each other and with our upperclassmen and faculty and staff members behind masks.

If this was the summer of COVID-19, it was also the summer of George Floyd, and it is hard to think of any other recent event having had such a profound impact on our awareness of the unfinished work we have to do in our country and on our own campus around race, diversity, inclusion, and ensuring equality of opportunity. We find ourselves together now on this idyllic college campus—for many of us, the most diverse community we have ever lived and studied and worked in—eager to do the right thing for our brotherhood and beloved College, but also unsure how to engage meaningfully with one other for tough conversations about race. Patience, grace, and a willingness to listen and learn will go a long way to making those conversations successful.

We are also anticipating another contentious presidential election. To be sure, every presidential election is contentious, but this one, like the last few presidential elections, is occurring in a political landscape that has become highly polarized. Many of our states have long been blue or red, and within blue and red states, we have always had blue and red regions. But, what is new and concerning is how divided our political parties have become, with one party nearly all more liberal than conservative, and the other party nearly all more conservative than liberal. Our news media, on which we depend to be informed citizens, is mostly failing to provide objective reporting, so that many of our major newspapers and cable news networks have become propaganda machines.

One of the worst consequences of this growing political divide is that many opinions have now become so tightly held and reinforced that they take on a self-righteous, moralizing quality. Divisions permit no dissent and allow no questioning. In such an environment, it can be very difficult and often impossible for our leaders to find common ground, to compromise, to work together on behalf of our communities or nation. Even this global pandemic quickly became politicized, so instead of uniting to defeat a common foe, leaders on both sides are using this crisis to bludgeon each other.

Perhaps it's no surprise then that surveys conducted over the last few years show that many citizens in this country have become disillusioned with democracy. Doubts about the viability of our country's system of government have been growing for several years now, and these doubts are especially pronounced among millennials and those from Generation Z.

The growing disillusionment with democracy is cause for serious concern; in fact, I see it as a much more serious concern than our present pandemic. No system of government is perfect, but our country's founders fought a Revolution in order to secure for us the opportunity to live in a country free from tyranny. It's true that for almost 250 years, we have struggled to extend the "blessings of liberty" to all of our citizens. But even when we failed to live up to our ideals in the past and even now in those situations when we still fail to live up to our ideals, I don't know of any nation with loftier ambitions. So, just as we strive here at Hampden-Sydney College to live up to and into our mission and ideals, so too must we commit to being those citizens that will help our nation do the same.

In fact, more than ever, this College has an essential role to play in ensuring that our nation lives up to its ideals and ambitions. Founded 245 years ago, on the eve of our country's Revolution, its mission "to form good men and good citizens" who would be the leaders for our emerging Republic, remains as important and as relevant as at any time in our country and College's history.

And, we have a time-tested and highly effective formula for producing good men and good citizens, consisting of our educational program, our emphasis on character development, and our brotherhood.

A young man must be literate across many disciplines to be an effective citizen. Our educational program is also designed to provide our students with an understanding of how our society came to value freedom, our country's struggle to make that freedom apply universally to all, and how our national, state, and local governments function. Above all, we think it is important that young men know how to express themselves effectively, and we also know that to write and speak well, one must also be able to think well. It is no surprise that our graduates leave here so well equipped to serve and lead the organizations where they work and the communities they call home.

We also know that civil discourse, debate, and the freest possible exchange of ideas and perspectives is essential to intellectual growth and rigor. Classroom discussions, weekly debates held here on our campus by one of the oldest college debating societies, and conversations over lunch and late at night are just some of the ways we encourage students to share their views and perspectives. But even more than the sharing of views and perspectives, we want these dialogs to challenge our ideas, to sharpen our logic, to help us see and understand different perspectives, and to change and broaden our minds.

Beyond this educational foundation, our College's founders knew that virtue was essential to our country's experiment in self-government—that's why our mission is "to form *good* men and *good* citizens." Our founders knew, as we also know today, that intelligence by itself can be a dangerous thing, and that intelligence requires character and virtue to direct it in effective and beneficial ways.

In addition to living with our Honor Code and Code of Conduct, we develop character here by encouraging young men to be involved and to take on responsibility and to be accountable to one another. On a small campus like ours, every student who wants to can be involved, and by their

senior year, more than 80 percent of our students have taken on a leadership role here on campus. It is no surprise that *Princeton Review* ranks Hampden-Sydney's student government as the fifth most active among the 380 top colleges and universities it evaluates.

This fall, our students can demonstrate and further develop their character by doing some very practical things like wearing a mask and distancing themselves appropriately. I was speaking with a senior last week who shared with me that he wants to spend every day of his senior year on this campus. He asked me to ask everyone in our community to wear a mask. I'm sure we all share his desire to be here, so let's use these next several weeks to show the world how well we can live into our ideals by not only opening successfully but staying open.

Something else our students can do this fall to demonstrate their character and commitment to our democratic way of life is to vote. We want you to limit travel this fall, so students, please make a point to request your absentee ballot before your state's deadline. Through your participation we can also show the world why *Princeton Review* ranks Hampden-Sydney as having the 14th most politically involved students.

The final element of the Hampden-Sydney "formula" is our brotherhood. The four years our students live here in residence provide a remarkable opportunity for our College to model how we are to live in a democratic republic. At the Honor Convocation last Thursday evening, I shared with our freshmen that after graduation they should probably plan to lock their doors, but that from their time here they will carry with them a model of how we are supposed to live together with decency and respect and trust.

So what a privilege we have to study, live, and work here at Hampden-Sydney as we together prepare future citizens and leaders who are competent and committed to doing the right thing, men who are prepared to take on responsibility and be accountable for their actions, while benefitting from a brotherhood that encourages every student to be his best self. These have been the defining qualities of the Hampden-Sydney educational experience for 245 years, and they ensure that this remarkable and distinctive College remains relevant for centuries to come.