TO LEAD OUT

Remarks for the Opening Convocation
August 27, 2019

When small colleges do their best work, they awaken a spark and fan the embers of a fire that lies within every student. One author describes this fire as "a sense of enormous expectation, the sense that one's life is important, that great achievements are within one's capacity, and that great things lie ahead." Ralph Waldo Emerson describes our work this way: "Colleges… can only highly serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they … set the hearts of their youth on flame."

Often students come to us with flames already lit or flames that are easily lit. But the setting of some of our students' hearts aflame can be difficult. When I was teaching and had student advisees, I would work especially hard with my "shortest path" advisees—those who seemed determined to find the shortest path between orientation and commencement, not really interested in the side roads that would make the journey more interesting and more fulfilling. One of my colleagues and I would talk about the "leading a horse to water" problem. We knew we couldn't make the horse drink, but we decided we could dunk the horse's head in the water and hope that the horse would realize how good the water tasted.

I once asked a highly respected faculty member how he got his students to engage in his classes. He said, "Oh, it's tough. On the first day of class, I get down on my knees in front of the students and I beg them to take my class seriously or to drop my class if they won't be all in." I confess I never got down on my knees and begged my students to engage, though I was not averse to the subtler forms of encouragement including the use of active learning pedagogies, creative assignments, demanding group projects, and, every professor's last resort—offering extra credit.

But, of course, there are no guarantees that anything will engage the student who can't or doesn't want to be engaged. Some students arrive at college before their brains have developed the ability to prioritize and to discern what is more and less important. We know that disposition is formed at an early age, and once set, it rarely changes later in life. So, some students are just more laid back and passive than others. We also know that interests vary widely and that some subjects will be a tougher sell than others.

And, many educators are fine with all of that. From time to time, we say things like, "he has to become an adult sometime," "he has to meet me at least half-way," or "he has to learn that his choices have consequences," to justify why the unengaged student is not our problem. I've said all of these things myself many times. But what persists and troubles me is the loss of potential. Last year, one of our campus leaders told me that what he likes most about the College's mission "to form good men and good citizens," is that it expresses the desire that lies in the heart of every student—that every student here wants to be a good man and a good citizen, and that every student has within him enormous potential and the expectation that great things are within his grasp. We really can't afford to lose any of that potential, especially given how many young men never finish high school or never have the opportunity to attend college.

In my own case, I was the first member of my immediate family to head off to college, so I didn't know what to expect, but I knew that attending was a privilege and I knew my parents were sacrificing to send me to college. Not long after starting college, I had one of those cognitive dissonance moments when I realized that a couple of guys were always in the lounge of our dorm. They were usually watching TV. They would also play foosball from time to time, but mostly they just watched TV. It didn't seem to matter what time it was when I was walking by—morning, afternoon, evening—they'd be in the lounge. And, I'd think "I'm not quite sure what I'm supposed to be doing here, but I'm pretty sure that I'm not supposed to be watching TV."

One of the things I didn't know I was supposed to do is meet with my professors outside of class. I had been a pretty good student in high school, and I hoped to be a good student in college, but I very much had what I call a "transactions approach" to college. I would faithfully go to class, the professors would give me assignments, I'd do the assignments, my professors would give me grades. My parents would pay more tuition and fees, and I would go on to another semester of classes. I couldn't possibly imagine that my professors might actually care more about me than whether I showed-up for class and turned in my assignments and exams, that they might actually care enough to ask me about my aspirations, or that they might have advice for me. I wasn't particularly shy; I just thought my professors were too important to be particularly interested in—or bothered by—me.

Fortunately, like so many of the college students who attend small colleges like Hampden-Sydney, I benefitted from the grace of people reaching out to me. A government professor suggested that I intern for my Congressman. That same professor suggested that I take advantage of the Washington Semester Program offered by American University. Later, a history professor suggested that I take advantage of another history professor's travel course which allowed me to see six cities in the former Soviet Union during three very cold weeks in January. As my senior year got started, a professor urged me to do an honors research project. Some of you have heard me say that this particular professor got to know me better than I knew myself—something that can happen at small colleges like this one. She encouraged me to consider becoming a college professor—the best advice I ever got, but advice I did my best to ignore until I was 29 and started graduate school.

My friends were a great influence too. My roommate was from another small farm town, but he was much more sophisticated. He was always politely pointing out to me what a bumpkin I was, but he also patiently explained allegory and metaphor, told me the important books I hadn't read during my high school years, and took me to see art exhibits. Many of my friends were from the Chicago suburbs, and so they would take me to their homes and we would go into the city and they introduced me to freeways and mass transportation, skyscrapers and architecture, and company headquarters and museums—all part of a world I had never before encountered.

In short, it is fair to say that because of the help of others, I made the most of my college years. And, I am now privileged every day to hear stories about how—through a combination of faculty, staff, and student effort—Hampden-Sydney students are making the most of their college years too. Earlier in our program today, we celebrated the accomplishments of several of our students who are making the most of their time at the College. But, how can we be sure that *all* of our students make the most of their time in college?

This fall, we launch Compass, our College's experiential learning initiative, through which *all* of our students will participate in at least three faculty-guided experiential learning opportunities, including

opportunities to engage in field work, internships, research, service learning, and off-campus study, as a requirement for graduation. Already our freshmen have met with their advisors and begun discussing how Compass can help them get the most from these next four years. Though our upperclassmen do not have the Compass graduation requirement, we encourage you to take full advantage of the Compass opportunities as well.

This afternoon, I want to emphasize two of the most important and exciting aspects of Compass:

First, Compass will ensure that *all* Hampden-Sydney students—not just those who are self-directed—find a mentor or mentors who will help them make the most of their college years. Our best faculty advisors have always gone beyond just making sure that their advisees are taking the right classes to graduate on time, but Compass will require—as never before—advisors and advisees to focus on advisees' aspirations and goals. Together advisors and students will map out how the Compass requirements can be deployed to help each student more fully realize his potential.

Second, Compass will foster learning and increase the likelihood that our students will have those experiences that psychologist Rollo May has called "moments of encounter." There's a lot of truth to the idea that learning only occurs as we move beyond our comfort zone, but the challenge is that most college students are pretty comfortable with school by the time they get to college. So, we need all of our students to engage in those experiences—in or out of our classrooms—that push them out of their comfort zone and provide them with moments of encounter.

All of us who teach have seen the importance of these encounters—a student who is awakened by a particular class or assignment, or by an internship, or by a semester or a year of studying abroad, or by an opportunity to serve in our community, or by the opportunity to do research with a faculty member. After that encounter, everything started coming together for that student; classes took on an exciting new sense of purpose; college had new meaning; life had direction. The fire within that student was lit. We want every Hampden-Sydney student to have this kind of encounter, and Compass should guarantee that every Hampden-Sydney student does.

There are some interesting paradoxes in academic terminology. To celebrate the conclusion of our students' educational experience, we hold a "commencement." Likewise, you might be surprised to know that "educate" is derived from words that mean "to lead out" or "to bring forth." We will all be forgiven if we thought the meaning was "to pound in" or "to hammer home." With Compass, let us look forward to academic years, semesters, summers, and breaks that are filled with encounters that help "to lead out" or "to bring forth" the potential of every Hampden-Sydney student and set his heart aflame.