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Hampden-Sydney's Superstar Prez Makes Splash

By Justin Pope
Associated Press

HAMPDEN-SYDNEY, VA: You may be accomplished, and you may be cool. But step aside. You're no Chris Howard.

As a teenager, Howard helped lead his team to a Texas state high school football championship. At the Air Force Academy, he was a standout running back, academic All-American, class president and Rhodes Scholar. He earned an Oxford doctorate and Harvard MBA, worked at two Fortune 500 companies, started a foundation for South African students. He won a Bronze Star in Afghanistan, survived a plane crash, and is writing a book. He rubs shoulders at the Aspen Institute, Council on Foreign Relations, and Renaissance Weekend. He's handsome, dresses like a GQ cover model, has a beautiful, charming wife, and benches 205.

Nobody who knew Howard was surprised when, just 40 years old, he added college president to that almost comical résumé.

The surprise was where: tiny and tradition-bound Hampden-Sydney College.

It was a place that matched his personality. But there wouldn't be many black faces around—and Howard is African-American.

"I said, 'Hampton? That's great!'" recalled Marine Lt. Col. Jerry Carter, Howard's best friend from their military days, mistakenly assuming his buddy had been tapped to head historically black Hampton University, about 120 miles east of here.

"No, Hampden-Sydney," Howard replied.

"What's that?" Carter asked.

Visiting Hampden-Sydney, 60 miles southwest of Richmond, feels like stepping onto a 19th-century campus. It's one of just three remaining all-male colleges. Students still take rhetoric, receive uninflated grades, and dress in coat and (often bow) tie for football games. Visitors are greeted by passers-by, per instructions in a book of manners assigned to all new students. Backpacks are left lying about without fear of theft, thanks to a revered honor code.

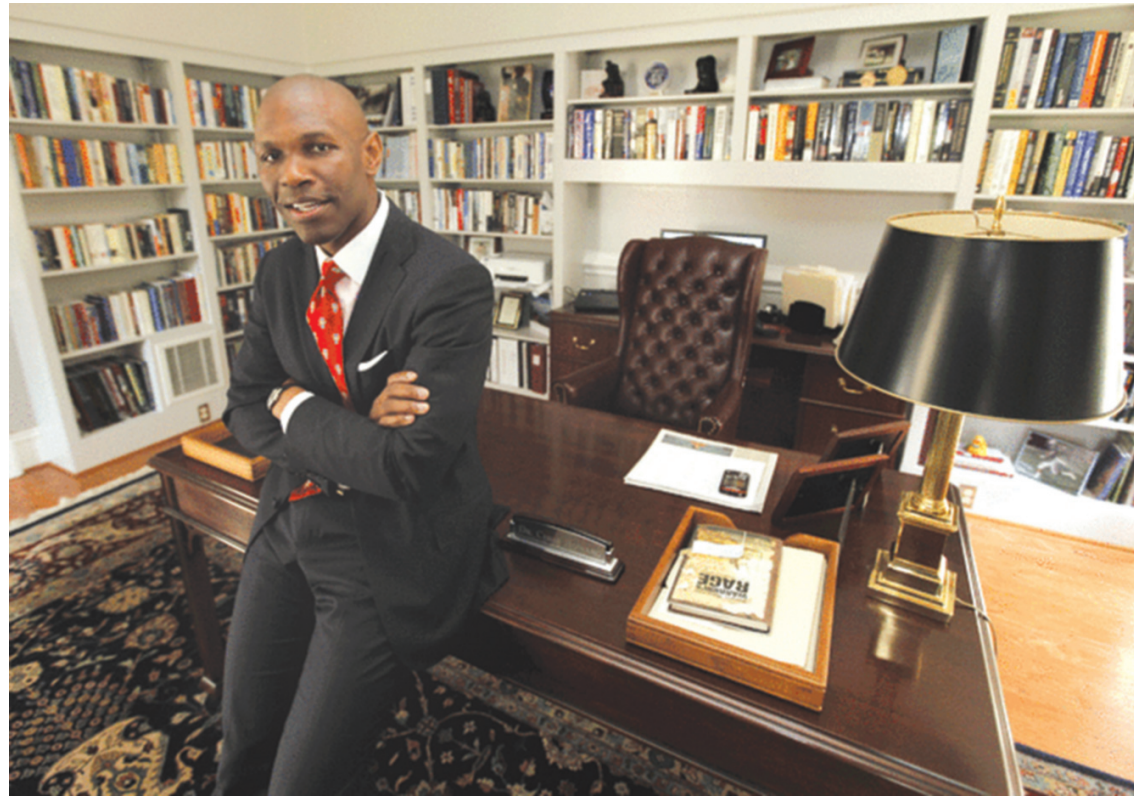
It's also overwhelmingly white. The 5 percent of students who are black isn't far off other Virginia schools, but there is a special weight of history here. Surrounding Prince Edward County was on the losing side of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* desegregation lawsuit; later, it shuttered its own public schools for five years rather than integrate them.

But so far, Howard and Hampden-Sydney look like a perfect match.

On a recent Friday, with a reporter tagging along for the day, Howard bounded across a campus older than America to address a group of the college's famously fanatical alumni, some getting their first glimpse of their new president, just two months on the job.

The all-white audience complimented his résumé, but wanted to know, why here?

"I feel like I knew the contours of a Hampden-Sydney before I knew of Hampden-Sydney," Howard answered, portraits of 10 of his 23 presidential predecessors lining the walls around him. He talked about his own mentors



President Howard in his office. Photo by Steve Helber (Associated Press)

and upbringing, and how the hands-on approach here struck a chord. He talked about how Carter, his military friend, was shaped by his experience at Morehouse, the equally proud historically black all-male college.

"I wanted a place that was small and 'high-touch,'" Howard told the group. "I wanted a place that deals with character. I wanted a place in the South. I wanted a place that plays some good football."

He talked up the college's historical ties to the military, dating to the Revolutionary War, and promised not to move too fast: "I've got to be very humble. Institutions of higher education don't necessarily cotton to quick change. You leave a lot behind you might need."

The alumni beamed. They were listening for shibboleths, keywords that showed he understood the College's unique sensibility. Character. Honor. Gentleman. Football. He departed to a standing ovation.

"I'm not just blowing smoke. It's the way I was raised," said Howard, sipping a Manhattan with Maker's Mark bourbon in a downtown Raleigh, N.C., hotel bar after giving a similar talk to parents and alumni there last month. "I was an African-American who grew up in the South with a father who was an Army officer. I went into the military myself. I had no choice but to say, 'Yes sir, no sir.' That made me very comfortable to transition to Hampden-Sydney."

On campus, Howard is a ball of energy. He hits the gym at 6:45 each morning, his special assistant, Drew Prehmus, in tow with a pad of paper and BlackBerry. "He never turns off," Prehmus says. Howard's bench press is well off his college days but it seems safe to call him the only college president in America who could plausibly start on his school's football team.

Being 20 years younger than the average college president—just 13 of 2,100 college chiefs are 40 or under, a 2006 survey found—is both an opportunity and a challenge. "He's not our age, but to know he's not an old geezer really makes him very relatable," says Hosea Jones, a senior from nearby Farmville.

Howard regularly joins students

for cafeteria meals, and has held dozens of meetings with them, including the first presidential address to the full student body in 20 years. He spent 40 minutes on the phone advising one recent grad on his Harvard Business School application.

"His speeches make you want to do that extra 10 percent," Jones said. "He's lifting up the spirit of this campus."

Still, Howard knows his job isn't to be students' friend; Hampden-Sydney has serious challenges, including substance abuse, highlighted by a 2007 drug raid that stained the college's reputation. "I want you to know the buck stops here," Howard tells the parents and alumni in Raleigh, outlining several steps he's taken to combat the problem.

Howard also wants to elevate

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Hampden-Sydney, which has Presbyterian roots and dates to 1775, to the very top tier of liberal arts colleges. Academically, it's not there yet. Average SAT scores are a solid but unspectacular 1109. Hampden-Sydney's brochure highlights two former students—former President William Henry Harrison and comedian Stephen Colbert—but doesn't mention that neither graduated.

From alumni, Howard gets the

message many weren't academic superstars and they don't want the place turned into Swarthmore. Howard says he understands. Hampden-Sydney has never been difficult to get into, but he likes that it's rigorous and no cinch to graduate. He assures them it will always have space for "the good kid who's figuring it out," he said. "The kids who go to the Ivy League schools, they just figured it out when they were 8. Others didn't figure it out 'til they are 19."

Howard's network of friends and mentors is staggering—he claims 4,000-plus e-mail contacts. "I tell (students) anything you may be thinking about doing, he has done, been successful at, or knows the guy who started it," Prehmus said.

Howard can be a bit of a name-dropper, throwing out CEOs, generals, filmmakers, and pro athletes in his circle, or talking about his time at Oxford and Harvard. But it isn't gratuitous. Rather, he seems to be trying to inject a vocabulary of contagious excellence into the place, and reinforcing how much networks can help individuals and institutions move up in the world.

Beating out 100 candidates, Howard accepted the school's presidency beneath a portrait of Confederate President Jefferson Davis at the formerly all-white Commonwealth Club in Richmond.

"You have made history," he told college supporters in accepting the appointment. "You have overlooked some historical cleavages . . . and some issues in our society and you overcame those." The audience figured he was jumping straight into the race issue, but he was just setting them up. "You chose a Baptist!" he said. They roared with laughter.

The episode reveals Howard's talent for putting people at ease, but is also a reminder that race will inevitably play some role in his presidency. He appears to be one of just two black presidents—other than at historically black institutions—of a traditional four-year college in the South (Sydney McPhee of Middle Tennessee State is also black).

Jones, the senior resident advisor, who is black, says he has always felt welcome on campus; the only time he

sensed any negativity was the night of President Obama's election, though he thinks that was more of a partisan issue. (Jones is a Republican himself, and the student body is unmistakably conservative.)

Still, he'd like to see more black students, and he thinks Howard's presence will help.

Plenty of college presidents arrive with good will and brilliant résumés only to crash and burn after colliding with the established campus culture. Just ask Lawrence Summers about his time at Harvard.

But if Howard succeeds here there is little doubt he's an up-and-comer.

Howard won't go there yet.

"My friends don't believe me—they think I have to be six chess moves ahead," he said. But, "for the first time in my entire life, it's not that I've declared victory, but if it goes well I could be here 10 years from now, 20 if they'll have me, and they'll say, like in the Bible, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'"

Stephen Trachtenberg, the former longtime president of The George Washington University, who mentored Howard and recommended him for the job, seems to doubt this small school in Virginia is the end of the line.

"Obama was lucky he didn't have to come up against Chris Howard," he said. "I think he'll make an extraordinary president of Hampden-Sydney, but I think he's a man we're going to hear more from."

Selected list of media where this Associated Press article appeared

Tuscaloosa News.com, Tuscaloosa, AL
AL.com, Birmingham, AL
Herald, Monterey, CA
Sacramento Bee, Sacramento, CA
Union-Tribune, San Diego, CA
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Washington Examiner, Washington, DC
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