

HARKNESS AND HAMPTON

A Brief History: Most Hamptonians are aware that “Harkness Hall” has been an important residential building for male students at Hampton University since the mid-twentieth century. However, few may know of the historical significance of the building’s namesake (Edward Stephen Harkness) and the implications of his very interesting educational philosophy, as well as his extensive philanthropy, upon American education.

Edward Stephen Harkness (1874-1940) inherited tremendous wealth based upon his family’s early investment in Standard Oil. One of the wealthiest American philanthropists of his generation (rivaling John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and Henry Clay Frick, amongst others), Harkness became a principal donor to various Ivy League Universities (e.g., Harvard, Yale, Columbia), the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and major elite boarding schools in New England (viz., Phillips Exeter and St. Paul’s School).

The generous and extensive educational philanthropy of Mr. Edward Stephen Harkness has been recognized by the United Negro College Fund as well as by many HBCUs. Aside from Hampton’s, various HBCU campus buildings have been ascribed the name “Harkness Hall”, (e.g., on the campuses of Morehouse College and Clark Atlanta University).

The Harkness Table:

Edward Stephen Harkness not only believed in funding American art endeavors (including the famed “King Tut” tomb excavation enterprise) and American educational institutions (secondary and post-secondary), he maintained deeply held convictions about democratizing or equalizing education. He encouraged the centering of student voices and the collaborative involvement of teachers/professors.

As a result, the “Harkness Table” was born. Used first at Phillips Exeter, and later in similar boarding schools as well as other elite school environments, the Harkness Table is oval-shaped, made of sturdy, beautiful wood, and seats approximately 12-15 people, including the professor/instructor. In this environment, the professor takes the role of a “guide by the side” rather than a “sage on the stage”. Conversation is student-centered and student-driven, with the students themselves driving inquiry, expanding and expounding upon academic/intellectual points, offering and requesting clarification, asserting related textual references, examples, etc. The students together explore text, problems, and projects – all while maintaining good “group process”, and engaging in appropriate turn-taking behaviors. Students do not raise their hands or seek permission to speak. Instead they practice sophisticated behaviors; indeed they are being prepared for many things, including the board room!

Possible Implications for Our HU Instruction:

We, at Hampton University, already have a “Harkness Hall”. We have superior faculty and students. Perhaps we should integrate into our pedagogy, in an intentional way, the time-honored practice and methods of the Harkness Table.

It will fortify student confidence, enhance their facility with language, discourse, and discipline-specific vocabulary -- all through regular, disciplined, and relaxed, but focused, peer-group applied use of collegiate exchange, and student-led, and not always professor-led, inquiry.

FOR MORE, PLEASE SEE: [History of Harkness: the men behind the plan | Phillips Exeter Academy](#)

