# NAAUC HRC Formal Dinner – University of Melbourne

# 2 December 2019

## *Planting seeds and ideas for something better*: a reflection on leadership in university residential communities

I am delighted to be at this year’s NAAUC Conference, both representing University Colleges Australia (UCA) and in response to President Jonty Boshier’s invitation to speak at this evening’s HRC formal dinner. This is my 25th year working in university colleges and halls, and I think in that time I have worked with some forty-seven student Presidents!

We had a lovely opening dinner last night at International House, and tonight we are dining in the magnificent ‘Karagheusian Room’ of University House, formerly one of the houses built for professors of the University of Melbourne and first occupied by Professor Edward Nanson, Professor of Mathematics 1885-1922. I have just finished a paper on the first Heads of the first residences at the ANU, and the first residence at ANU was University House, opened in 1954. It was described as a place where *“a ‘collegiate* *spirit*’ *was to be nurtured by an aesthetically pleasing environment, by interesting residents and visitors engaging in erudite, witty conversations, and by good food and wine.”[[1]](#footnote-1)* As we are doing now!

It wasn’t always that way in university residences! The first recorded student protest in America took place in a residence Hall dining room at Harvard University in 1766, a decade before the American Revolution, when students protested about a particularly bad meal with butter that *“stanketh”*, and, although required to eat in Hall, they staged a ‘strike’ the next day by having breakfast in Boston! It was referred to as the ‘Great Butter Rebellion’, and although accused by Harvard ‘Heads’ of the *“sin of insubordination”*, and with what has been referred to as *“a rising curve of collective student disorder”[[2]](#footnote-2),* there would later be the ‘Bread and Butter Rebellion’ of 1805, and the ‘Cabbage Rebellion’ of 1807!

On the 31st August this year, the date of the ANU Open Day, *The* *Canberra Times* published an article under the heading: ‘ANU student leaders burning out as halls go on strike’! The article was accompanied by a photo of student leaders across the halls and colleges. Much centred on the concern of resident committee Presidents and Senior Residents (RAs) about the removal of deputy heads of some of the ANU managed halls and the consequent impact on the work of the Heads as well as on increased demands and pressures on student leaders. This was at a time when the ANU’s independent review of its residences, following the Human Rights Commission Report, had recommended more, not less, support for student leaders. In a very conciliatory way at a subsequent forum, the Acting PVC (University Experience) commented that *“we tried an experiment, didn’t we, about the pastoral care … and I don’t think there is anyone in the room who doesn’t think that experiment was a failure.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

An Open Day ‘strike’ had also been held in 2014 over some different issues in the Halls, again with a photo in *The Canberra Times* of the Student Presidents of the Halls, lined up in their respective coloured jerseys and looking angrily determined!

Canberra is, of course, in many ways a ‘political bubble’, but student leaders have been responsibly and irresponsibly ‘bursting bubbles’ in halls and colleges across our universities for decades, even, as indicated at Harvard, for centuries.

After being Dean at New College UNSW for eight years, the University Registrar asked me if I would take on a new role of oversight of the University’s own colleges, The Kensington Colleges (Basser, Goldstein and Philip Baxter Colleges). There had been a range of issues that the Chancellery was concerned about and wanted a more ‘on the ground’ review and recommendations made. I agreed and it was announced that I was appointed ‘Principal Fellow’ (later Principal) of the Colleges. Before I moved from New College, I had a visit from one of the Baxter College tutors to let me know that, with nothing against me personally, some two hundred and forty TKC residents had signed and sent a petition to the University Council protesting against my appointment on the basis that they were ‘fed up’ with the University muscling-in, as it were, on the management of its own colleges!

There were part-time ‘Senior Fellows’ of each college – university staff who lived-in – but there was, I was told, an over-riding principle of ‘responsible self-management’ by the residents! I was aware that one of the colleges at that time was referred to as ‘Animal House’; that there were clearly some activities that could only be attributed to irresponsible mismanagement; and that there was also a fear that with me coming from the ‘dry’, and faith-based, New College, I would e.g. impose an alcohol ban on The Kensington Colleges!

I obviously appreciated the ‘heads up’ about all this protest at TKC! As a result of the petition, as well as the continuing concerns about the colleges, the University Council set up a Working Committee of which I was a part and was given the particular task of bringing student leaders together and drafting a report and recommendations, which I did at the end of 2002.

Of course, tensions and issues between student leaders and staff leaders are not new. When, for example, in 1964 it was announced by the Master at a formal dinner at Basser College UNSW that women would be admitted the following year, the all-male student House Committee got up and walked out of the Dining Hall in protest! The Committee President resigned, and the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* reported that the “college inmates almost rioted”! [[4]](#footnote-4)

Times were, of course, changing then. The 60s and 70s was a period of student leaders seeking more independence and involvement in the determination of student affairs, of challenge to traditional practice and authority. This was demonstrated, for example, in a student occupation of the Council Room of the ANU Chancelry in 1974 that included some of the first residents of Toad Hall which had been opened that year as a result of student pressure to have a different style of residence to the halls and colleges on the western edge of the campus. Indeed, it’s in many ways how Toad got its name. One of the first residents described the new occupants as full of *“extreme left wing students, anarchists, and other malcontents*”[[5]](#footnote-5) who would have nothing of the University naming the new Hall, as had been proposed, after Prime Minister Robert Menzies or a previous Vice-Chancellor. With willows along the creek at the back, they painted the name ‘Toad Hall’ from the children’s novel ‘The Wind in the Willows’ on the construction site sign!; with the then Vice-Chancellor and Council agreeing that *“if they want to call it Toad Hall, it can be Toad Hall”!* [[6]](#footnote-6)Thus it remains – a testament to protest and to the student voice!

Just nearby here, on the other side of Grattan Street, is the Grattan Institute. The Director of its Health Program is Dr Stephen Duckett, a former Head of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Pro-Vice-Chancellor at La Trobe University. In 1972 he was Chair of the New College Students’ Association at UNSW and gave strong support to protests by some residents next door in the all-male Warrane College which had been opened the previous year by the conservative Catholic *Opus Dei* Prelature. There had been rules imposed about visitors (especially about women) and some students had been expelled for opposing them. In a Sydney Morning Herald article, Stephen Duckett wrote: *“How can students at a university adequately pursue their course if they cannot discuss it with their friends ... the rule is completely unreasonable and out of touch with contemporary university life.” [[7]](#footnote-7)*

This was all part of a much larger student protest movement at that time about the College and especially its operation by *Opus Dei.*  Large protests had been held in the Roundhouse; there had been a student march and ‘invasion’ of Warrane College, with police called, 7 arrests made, and 21 police cars lined up outside the College along Anzac Parade. The then new Vice-Chancellor, Sir Rupert Myers, who died only earlier this year at the age of 98, was called-up to speak at a more incensed gathering in the Roundhouse the next day with some 3,000 students protesting the police action and other issues they believed associated with Warrane College. He told me *“it was a dreadful day … I learned a lot about myself … I learned what it took to have the guts to be a Vice-Chancellor on the day of that turmoil in the Roundhouse.” “It was”*, he said, *“a sort of blooding of the Vice-Chancellor... I wasn’t prepared for it. My knees were knocking; it was a terrifying experience.”[[8]](#footnote-8)*

Professor Myers was someone known to get alongside students and their leaders, as he did with staff, to reason, to explain, to seek understanding but also to draw lines when needed. I got to know and admire him later in my time at UNSW, and he once said: *“Ethics, integrity and professionalism aren’t things you learn from lectures; you learn them by seeing them in action.”[[9]](#footnote-9)* It was very much what people saw in him. So, in front of this throng of students, he blasted a referee’s whistle into the microphone which stunned everyone, including himself!! He gained immediate attention and spoke about a university being a place of free speech and where there is freedom to study, and that his job was to make sure that students could come and learn, and people could come and teach and do research; and that while he hadn’t called the police, the College had the right to do so. If he thought it necessary to ensure both the rights of students and of the College, he wouldn’t hesitate to call the police. He said *“I got thunderous applause.”* [[10]](#footnote-10)

The protest settled for a time, though the Council in 1974 set up a Committee of Inquiry into Warrane College which found that the University had a duty to tolerate intellectual pluralism and the expression of disparate views – up to a point, but did not believe the College had come to that; but that the College also should observe the same principles in its dealings with its residents. Turbulent times!

Melbourne University’s first College, Trinity College, founded in 1872, experienced what was referred to as the ‘Student Rebellion’ of 1890, when 41 of the 50 residents objected to a decision by the Warden and burnt an effigy of him outside his residence! The Warden was the College’s first, Alexander Leeper, who was to be Warden for 42 years, along with the equally long-serving first Master of Ormond College, Sir John MacFarland[[11]](#footnote-11), and of Queen’s College, the Reverend Edward Sugden. The three were known as ‘The Three Rulers’, with Leeper passing away in 1934, one year before MacFarland and Sugden died on the same day in 1935! I guess that is the ultimate collegial collaboration!

As a result of the resident protest in 1890, three students were expelled, with a consequent further protest being organised by the students. Twenty four hansom cabs took some 36 students, cheered on by students from other colleges, out of Trinity College and down Elizabeth Street, with flags having been hoisted at half-mast and some upside down! One of the three expelled students was Stanley Argyle[[12]](#footnote-12), later Premier of Victoria from 1932 to 1935, whose deputy for a time was Robert Menzies before he later entered the Federal Parliament.

Why all this account of some student leaders, conflict, rebellion and protests?

At one level, of course, it has been the nature of student life and leadership. Young, intelligent, emerging adults testing boundaries; asserting independence; exposed to new ideas; seeking meaning in who they are and where they are going; seeing bits of their world ‘stuffed’ by older generations; many struggling with issues of identity and recognition; a desire for both change and yet a certain and secure future; to stand out from the crowd, and yet to belong; to be noticed, accepted, appreciated and affirmed; to be different, yet the same.

In what a recent Harvard Medical School report referred to as *“the age of feeling in between” [[13]](#footnote-13)*, our ‘teens into twenties’ wrestle with the competing challenges of ambition and ambivalence; of invincibility and vulnerability; of vision and disillusion; of knowing it all, yet not knowing at all! It is a time of transition from adolescence to adulthood, that can be marked by what Cecil Rhodes referred to as a criteria for the Scholarship he bequeathed – the *“exhibition”* of *“instincts to lead”*; but also by what is reflected in the title of a biography of Alexander Leeper written by a former Dean of Trinity College and Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, John Poynter – ‘Doubts and Certainties’. And, of course, we all have those!

We are ALL vulnerable in our leadership!

These historical examples also show that we can get it wrong, and the importance of admitting it and modelling how we deal with failure and mistakes; they show the need for genuine consultation before significant decisions are made; to meaningfully get alongside, to engage, to listen, and to encourage a sense of trust and ownership of decisions; yet, also, as demonstrated by Sir Rupert Myers, blowing a whistle (as it were)! Taking courage and taking a stand can be exactly what the community wants, as much as the need to ‘whistle blow’ and to expose what is wrong – whoever does that. It is what can be the complexity and challenge, yet a compelling and constructive ‘contract of collaboration’ in our leadership of college communities.

This, of course, will involve risk as well as reward; trust as well as talk; responsibility as well as ‘rescue’ when things don’t quite go the way they are planned! As Brenda Holt, Principal of St Hilda’s College (Melbourne), recently blogged, whether staff or student, title or position doesn’t make you a leader; it’s how we engage, how we enable others, how we encourage and enthuse, how we enhance – or in Brenda’s words, perhaps somewhat reflective of ‘servant leadership’, *“how we lead from the side so that others shine”.[[14]](#footnote-14)*

We learn and grow in our leadership as students learn and grow in theirs.

In this sense, we very much need more ‘leaders’, not more ‘bosses’!

The NAAUC Conference represents much of the character and content of an ever-increasing array of student leadership programs across our universities, with sets of topics and speakers that will inspire and benefit students for their current tasks as well as their future life and careers.

What, however, I think is special in our context – what in a sense sets us apart in adding real value to the student experience - is leadership in living and learning communities that are more than just places of accommodation transaction; far more than rental rules and regulations. They are more than the provision of beds, bolts, benches and bathrooms, as important as they are, and, of course, with all the recognition of cost pressures in our tertiary sector; but rather scholarly and relational communities of engagement across genders, disciplines, cultures and beliefs, between students and students as well as between students and staff both within and beyond the residence – the latter a relationship that I think is being overlooked or neglected by much of many centralised university administrations and commercial providers.

Our leadership in our residential communities is indeed even more than just about ‘wellbeing’ provision, as important and significant as the increased focus on this provision is. Leadership of scholarly residential communities more profoundly reflects what Cardinal Newman called “*the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge.”* [[15]](#footnote-15)

Of course, we need people with good management skills, which turn leadership ideas into action. A former colleague at the ANU has written: *“Leadership plants seeds and ideas into our minds for something better without necessarily expecting something in return.”[[16]](#footnote-16)* More than transactional management, albeit with its much needed processes and defined outcomes, we have the privilege of being engaged in collaborative leadership in transitional and transformational communities; as Professors Tim Burt & Martyn Evans of Durham University express it: *“In collegiate life … we can actually meet and converse with exponents of almost every form of scholarly interest in the wider world, ambassadors for every province in the republic of the mind.”[[17]](#footnote-17)* It is somewhat akin to what Professor Glyn Davis, the former Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne University and a former resident of the ANU Bruce Hall, refers to in his 2010 Boyer Lectures as ‘The Republic of Learning’.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Perhaps the staff and student leaders involved in the Great Butter Rebellion of 1766, in the Trinity Rebellion of 1890, in the ‘invasion’ of Warrane College and among the 3000 who assembled in the UNSW Roundhouse in 1972, in the occupation of the ANU Chancelry and in the naming of Toad Hall in 1974, in the petition to Council by residents of the Kensington Colleges in 2002, and in the ANU Open Day strikes of 2014 and 2019, did not necessarily see their ‘collision’ in the rather lofty ideals of the ‘republic of the mind’, or of learning! But that is who and where we are as staff and student leaders of scholarly residential communities. As I have often referred to - and most appropriately here at the University of Melbourne - it is what another former Master of Ormond College, a former Deputy Chancellor of this University, a founder of La Trobe University, a former Governor of Victoria, and a help to me in my PhD work, the late Dr Davis McCaughey, once said of residential colleges: *“they are part of the academic enterprise, part of the business of learning”. [[19]](#footnote-19)*

Albeit ‘mind’ and ‘knowledge’, as I saw it put the other day, *“leadership is not about knowing, it is about learning”.*[[20]](#footnote-20) And like students in their leadership – we should never stop learning!

## Dr Ian Walker[[21]](#footnote-21)

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1. Jill Waterhouse *University House As They Experienced It: A History 1954-2004* The Australian National University , November 2004, p.51 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2012/04/harvards-long-ago-student-risings/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-13/anu-suicide-support-students-on-campus-canberra/11505138> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Claire Scobie *‘Baxter, Philip Baxter and Goldstein: The Kensington Colleges’* UNSW Press, Sydney, 2015 p.41 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Richard Hines – email to Ian Walker 28 February 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Comment to Ian Walker by former ANU Vice-Chancellor, the late Emeritus Professor Anthony Low, at the opening of ‘Lena Karmel Lodge’, May 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. SMH *‘Students Criticise Expulsions’* 5 June 1972 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ian Walker interview with Emeritus Professor Sir Rupert Myers, New College UNSW, 13 May 1997 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sue Knights interview with Rupert Horace Myers, UNSW Archives, 1990, p.19 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ian Walker interview *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Sir John MacFarland was Chancellor of Melbourne University 1918-1935 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/argyle-sir-stanley-seymour-5049> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://scholar.harvard.edu/johnfkelly/publications/%E2%80%9C-age-feeling-between%E2%80%9D-addressing-challenges-treatment-emerging-adults> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <https://hildas.unimelb.edu.au/Blog~2905> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. John Henry Cardinal Newman *What is a University* Historical Sketches Vol.III, Longmans, Green & Co., London 1887, p.16 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Dr Damien Hughes *‘Leadership v’s Management: What is the difference?’* Article on Linkedin 27 Nov 2019, Enlighten Leadership [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. T. P. Burt & H. M. Evans *Building Characters, Sharpening Minds* Ch.7 in ‘The Collegiate Way: University Education in a Collegiate Context’ Sense Publishers, Rotterdam 2016, p.77 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Professor Davis is now a Distinguished Professor with the Crawford School of Public Policy at the ANU [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Address to the Association of Heads of Australian University Colleges & Halls Inc. (AHAUCHI – now UCA), Annual Conference, University of Queensland 1979. It was a somewhat prophetic statement as universities increasingly became more corporate in structure and approach. Scholarly residential communities are an integral part of the university sector rather than of an accommodation ‘industry’. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Tracey Macdonald, Global Head, Macquarie Group Business Services – St Catherine’s School, Waverley NSW Professional Women’s Networking Breakfast, 7 November 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Head, Toad Hall ANU (2010-); Dean, New College UNSW (1994-2002); Principal, The Kensington Colleges UNSW (2002-2009); Head, Ursula Hall ANU (2011-2014); Vice-President UCA (2012-2014); President UCA (2014-2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)