



Letter from the Principal's Office

Response to student protests and related incidents

St Andrew's College

28 May 2020

To all members of the community,

It has been a challenging fortnight for St Andrew's College and the university college sector at large. We have witnessed acts of graffiti, calls to 'burn down the colleges' and protests contending that colleges should be 'dismantled'.

Needless to say, St Andrew's College respects the right of individuals to conduct peaceful protests; indeed, a central tenet of the College's Enlightenment tradition is an expectation that our students will challenge authority when it refuses to explain itself. However, we are concerned that Monday's protest was founded on – and has the capacity to entrench – misconceptions about cultural renewal undertaken by colleges and this college in particular, and the value of collegiate education. My impression is that protesters seeking to 'dismantle' colleges believe that these institutions are resistant to change and offer very little value to society. This is untrue.

St Andrew's College has embraced cultural change with tremendous energy. Our uniquely collaborative approach to addressing the challenges of cultural renewal, where we harness the enthusiastic assistance of many brave and committed students who are working actively with the full support of staff and Council to identify and call out any problems, has seen a reduction of instances of all categories of misconduct since the Broderick Review. I hasten to add that we await the opportunity to re-run the Broderick survey, that we have banned high-risk activities such as 'Walkabout', that we take a zero tolerance approach to misconduct such as hazing, and that we run all licensed College events in accordance with Responsible Service of Alcohol laws (that is, to the standard of all licenced venues in NSW). These measures were not implemented by an institution resistant to change, but one committed to maximising the safety and well-being of all students. More information about our cultural renewal journey can be accessed [here](#).

It is equally important to recognise the significant value of Australian collegiate education. Colleges are responsible for educating – in partnership with affiliated universities – individuals who have gone on to become Australia's leading artists, educators, researchers, doctors, athletes, lawyers,

businesspeople, and so on. Students whose adult formation has been shaped by college life – through offerings such as small group tutorials, conversation and other engagement in the full spectrum of the social dynamic, debating, music, extra-curricular engagement and deep friendships – have served as prime ministers, Australia’s only President of the UN General Assembly, the designer and chief engineer of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Australia’s leading human rights lawyers, Rhodes Scholars, Olympians, and innumerable other contributors to the building of our nation and the world. And the larger our universities become (some have reached 70,000 students), the more important and obvious is the role that small-scale colleges fulfil; if colleges ceased to exist, the intimate-scale academic, extra-curricular and social engagement so desired by Australian students would be unobtainable. Perhaps this desire explains the sustained and significant demand for collegiate education (which, incidentally, seems to be an argument for the expansion, not destruction, of colleges).

The past week has also caused me to reflect upon matters that colleges need to be more vocal about in the future. We must strive to correct the errors in articles that spread misinformation about colleges, to articulate what a contemporary college experience is really like, and to explain what it means to undertake ‘cultural renewal’. I have touched on these matters below.

Reliance on unverified, problematic or false claims, and without a proper opportunity for the College to comment prior to publication, is an alarming trend of student journalism. Among recent allegations made with no basis whatsoever include that the College removed Broderick Review reports from its website, that the College has not been in contact with Elizabeth Broderick since her review ended, and that male students ejaculated into shampoo bottles. Equally alarming is the tendency to draw broad conclusions from little or no evidence. Asserting that a college is ‘plagued by white nationalist sentiment’ on the basis of a foolish and juvenile comment on social media (which was promptly deleted by the offending student) and an incident that has not been attributed to a College student (graffiti on a memorial) is an example of characterising colleges by reference to the exception, not the rule.

I am also disappointed by the widespread misinformation about what colleges offer students. Colleges are not sandstone nightclubs, but institutions that provide life-changing educational experiences, supportive communities and, of course, a healthy dose of fun. Over the past six months, in the midst of a pandemic that has shaken the foundations of Australia’s higher education model, our Education & Student Life Department has offered an extraordinarily rich array of online programs designed to maintain and indeed enhance the strong sense of belonging and connection to community which is the hallmark of the collegiate way. Our students have recorded remarkable engagement levels in programs such as:

- Leadership training
- Academic mentoring activities
- Academic tutorials and skills workshops
- Professional development forum events

- Community-building events
- Music rehearsals
- Online fitness classes
- Well-being programs
- Writing competitions
- 24/7 pastoral care

We are proud of these programs and the significant impact they have on our students, and clearly need to draw more attention to their existence.

The same can be said of our outreach and access initiatives: it is seldom reported that we offer many full scholarships, means-tested bursaries of up to 95% of full fees, and a total of \$1.6m in fee relief annually. These scholarships serve the dual purpose of ensuring that meritorious students are not precluded from attending College for financial reasons and enabling the College to promote diversity; many scholarships exist for specific purposes, such as supporting First Nations Peoples, growing artistic culture, ensuring that rural Australians do not experience educational disadvantage, and successfully engaging with government schools to increase the diversity of educational background in our student community.

It is also seldom reported that college students achieve extraordinary university results. Each student is required to obtain a credit average *at minimum*, which we help them to accomplish through the provision of a range of academic programs. Importantly, many College students achieving high university marks did not necessarily demonstrate their intellectual prowess at high school; they were awarded places to College on the basis of potential, often in the absence of opportunity. Even lesser known facts about St Andrew's College are that principles of gender equity are enshrined in the Students' Club Constitution, and that in some instances 8 out of 11 elected student leaders (including all executive student leaders) have been women. Facts like these should have a prominent place in the contemporary story of collegiate education, yet are frequently and deliberately ignored.

The notion that imperfect institutions should be dismantled is, like other trends mentioned, deeply concerning; cultural change will never culminate in immunity from problems, let alone perfection. It is an ongoing process of examination, reflection and revision; and most importantly, it is a process of changing minds. Approaching change in this way entails working *with* students rather than curtailing all of their freedoms (banning alcohol, requiring staff to monitor social media groups, and so on). This approach is consistent with the College's view that young adults develop when they are given the opportunity to exercise adult agency and that, as a corollary, true cultural change cannot occur unless responsibility for that change is vested in *both* staff and students. It is through dialogue and compromise that long-lasting, impactful change is achieved. And yes, this approach invites a degree of reasonable risk; but I care about the decisions our students will make in 20 years when they are sitting in staff

rooms, boardrooms, cabinet rooms, and family lounge rooms, not just how the *symptoms* of negative attitudes manifest while they are living at College.

Regarding Honi Soit's recent allegations: We do not seek to defend the indefensible, and acknowledge that some students have acted inappropriately within St Andrew's College, from posting unacceptable social media content to becoming excessively intoxicated. No institution will ever achieve the complete eradication of problems, especially when that institution exists for the benefit of young people transitioning from the constraints of high school into adult life. But what we *can* do is minimise unacceptable risks, apply our "best practice" policies and procedures, and respond proportionately to all incidents that we are aware of. In line with this commitment, all incidents brought to our attention recently are under investigation and will be dealt with firmly and fairly.

If I were the Principal of an institution that was resistant to change, I would consider reaching for a banner and joining a protest. But the fact is that we are open to dialogue with concerned parties (such as Honi Soit and the Women's Collective), and whilst we share with them the same goal of cultural renewal, we disagree strongly with the dangerous tactics and unrealistic timings they have chosen in pursuit of change. It is clear to me that we need to do more to help these concerned parties navigate the line between fact and fiction.

I hope that students and other members of the community distressed by recent events choose to reach out to the College for support. I also hope that those with questions and issues choose to engage in conversation; after all, the mark of an enlightened, civilised society is that progress is pursued through dialogue, not criminal acts and the spread of misinformation.

With warm regards,

Wayne Erickson

Principal

St Andrew's College

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