



Thursday 9 March 2023  
Academic Dinner & Alumnae Awards

# Guest Speaker's Address

Emeritus Professor Fred D'Agostino  
Fellow of The Women's College  
College Council Member, 2012 – 2022

Thanks to the President, the Principal, and the Council of The Women's College for the chance to become a Fellow of the College. I hope this will provide me with further opportunities to contribute to the mission of the College. I am grateful for the opportunities I've already had.

The College's tagline is *Ready to Lead*. Here's how this is explicated on the College website:

There are no courses in life that a student can take, and as a result, become a 'leader'. While leaders can be studied and leadership defined into characteristics and qualities, the evolution into someone to whom others look for guidance is a personal journey. Yet it is one that Women's College residents have taken for a century, either knowingly or subconsciously.

I want to talk for a few minutes about what it means to be a leader and why getting ready to lead might make sense for you.

First of all, being a leader is something you may be familiar with. Many of you have already played leadership roles in school, clubs, teams and here in the College.

The leader, typically, is someone with high levels of enthusiasm and skill and, perhaps most importantly, commitment. She is the one who takes responsibility for organising things and for the quality of the work done by and in the team. The buck stops where the leader is. That's the deal.

Where there is a leader, there is always a team, however, or at least a group. A leader is not a loner; she is not a solitary high achiever. Leaders help others to become contributors, to become better contributors. They do so by mentoring, by delegating, by trusting their delegates, and by recognising the achievements of others. A leader, therefore, has to be good at dealing with other people, including people who are very different from her ... not least in their levels of enthusiasm, skill and commitment.

Indeed, a leader needs to recognise that not everyone can or wants to be a contributor, let alone a collaborator. (I'll come back to that point.) Furthermore, a leader needs to recognise and negotiate the fact that not everyone wants to be led, even in situations where nothing's going to happen unless people are led.

A leader, in other words, has to be able to mobilise others, including people who really would rather be left alone but still want to enjoy the fruits of victory or accomplishment. In game theory, these people are called 'free riders' and dealing with them, motivating them to 'pay' for the ride, is one of the key problems for any leader.



And how do you mobilise people? This is a problem whose importance we see all around us in the public events of the day.

Indeed, we've just seen it in the various campaigns associated with Australia's COVID-19 response, which required mobilising large numbers of people to do unaccustomed and inconvenient things to protect the vulnerable.

Without mobilisation, there is no change, no accomplishment, but mobilisation, as reflection on this example shows, can be hard work and takes place in a space of disagreement.

There is, therefore, no room in situations like this for leaders who are thin-skinned.

Nor is there much room for the uncompromising, for to mobilise people who are different from you and from each other, you need to be able to find common ground and that sort of ground is usually where nobody's entirely comfortable standing, at least initially. You have to be able to move people off their various and sometimes opposed initial positions if you're going to get them working together. And you need to be prepared to move off your own initial position too. Indeed, this is one of the trickiest aspects of leadership. Compromise doesn't mean 'giving in' but it can't mean 'holding out' either, so the leader needs to have good judgment about where to stand firm and where to yield for the larger good. In any event, the leader will know how to broker compromises between the various parties whose recruitment is vital to collective achievement.

A leader is, therefore, a listener. She needs to understand 'where people are coming from' if she's going to have any chance of getting them to some other place, where collective goals can be achieved. And a leader is also a talker. She needs to be able to synthesise what various people tell her into some sort of coherent narrative about the future that people will find appealing.

In the sort of toy examples of leadership that we see in sport, constructing a narrative is already taken care of. Everyone knows what the goal is – winning this game or winning lots of games during the course of a season. What the leader does in these cases is identify means towards an already agreed end, but that is not the sort of narrative construction that, say, a political or business leader needs to be able to do.

In politics or business, leadership isn't just about identifying and motivating people to adopt and execute the right means (to an already agreed end). It's about getting people onto the same page about what the end itself is. And this is especially difficult because people are different and value different things and, crucially, because we can't pursue all the things we value.

Perhaps this is the most difficult thing the leader has to deal with – the fact that we need to make choices about what goals to pursue and that every choice will make someone unhappy whose preferred goals aren't the chosen goals for the team or the college or the nation.

You can see this in our everyday political debates. Maybe it would be good to pursue CO<sub>2</sub> reduction strategies (because that might help ameliorate the effects of climate change) but that might take resources away from other projects that are also worthy of pursuit and might impose extra costs on some familiar activities.

Everything that is worth pursuing can be pursued only by not pursuing or making more expensive other things that are also worth pursuing. Economists talk about this under the heading of 'opportunity costs' and the leader is good at understanding what these are for the projects she's recruiting and steering a team to engage with.



The Women's College

within The University of Queensland

ready to lead

There are examples of this, I'm sure, all around us here tonight. In the organisation of the College's many academic, cultural, sporting and social activities, there are limited resources – time, money and people with the right skills and, compared to these limited resources, there are lots of great ideas and worthy projects. Inevitably, some of these projects will never be attempted, let alone completed. To accomplish anything, we need to forego pursuing other goals that are perfectly respectable and the leader has to be able to make the case, develop the narrative for pursuing some goals rather than others.

Leadership, then, is about commitment, but it's also about listening and, crucially, it's about narrating a story of potential achievement that can mobilise people to common action despite their differences.

Why should you care about being a leader? Well, what's the alternative to being a leader? If you don't participate to some extent in developing the narrative that sets the goals that will be pursued, then you're just along for the ride, and not usually for free either. That may be comfortable for some of you, some of the time, with respect to some of the issues of the day, private and public. But there's presumably, for each of you, something that you care about enough so that you do want to participate in the development of the narrative about that.

Take, for example, your own life. It used to be common that some people didn't have a lot to say about the narrative of their own lives. Traditional systems of social relations gave them an identity and they enacted that – in the cartoon version, you were a serf or a noble and although the noble had nicer clothes and food and some other privileges, both serf and noble were enacting scripts that neither had written.

That's not our modern idea of what it means to have a life, to be a person. Our idea is that each person, should she want to anyway, gets to be the — or at least a leading — figure in developing the narrative about her life and its meaning. Of course, even in narrating our own lives, we have to acknowledge the roles of others – our parents, children, friends, partners, employers or employees. We don't get a free hit even in modern times and even with respect to our own lives. So, as with more obviously collective activities, we need to be able to listen and to talk and to compromise and, especially, to accept that every choice means something is foregone that might also have been good to pursue.

Even if you're not particularly attracted to the idea of being a leader of others, each of you will want, I think, to be a leader in your own life, to have moral rights over your own life story.

Or will you? Certainly, there are times and situations where the complexity and obscurity of our circumstances can get on top of us. And, for some of us, what we think we want in these circumstances is for someone else to tell us what to do, for someone else to be our leader. Lots of people have been willing, in these kinds of situations, to surrender control over their lives. This is an ever-present alternative to being a leader in and of your own life, and it shows itself at a larger scale in the increasing interest in authoritarian approaches to national governance that we increasingly read about.

A word of caution. There are toxic leaders and, before you give over to another the leadership of your own life, consider whether that person might be a bad leader, so that even your own persistent bewilderment at life's complexities might be a better alternative than following them. And how can you tell? Well, as implied already, bad leaders don't listen, they don't broker compromises, they don't acknowledge opportunity costs. Bad leaders are my-way-or-the-highway leaders. Stay away from them!



**The Women's College**

within The University of Queensland

**ready to lead**

Aside from being a leader in and for your own life, and even if you don't aspire to be the kind of leader that we read about in our Twitter feeds, at least some of you are going to want to be leaders within family or professional or civic communities. If you want to (help) narrate the story of your volunteer organisation or your profession, not just be someone who follows the story told by others, then there will be chances for you to do so. In these situations, a leader is not necessarily someone who becomes famous in the wider world. She may work quietly and behind the scenes, but she's always listening, and talking, and compromising, and mobilising, and accomplishing something (at the expense of other things) rather than nothing (because she can't commit to choice).

This is what it means, really, to participate actively in your life, in our collective life. All of us have a leadership role somewhere, whether we like it or not.

I end with a question: What do you need to be doing here and now to become a leader, or at least have the option? What do you need to do to acquire the skills of leadership? Whatever the domain – sport, drama and music, College politics, wider concerns, your own future? What are you going to do to make that possibility of leadership happen for you? Whatever it is, good luck with it.

Thanks again to the College for this opportunity.