

Occasional Address to University of Canberra
Faculty of Business, Government & Law Graduation Ceremony, March 2022
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Today marks a wonderful milestone in your lives. It is the culmination of years, in some cases, many years, of curiosity, research, study, thinking, writing and collaborating. The swathes of assignments, the group work, the (sometimes lonely) task of writing a thesis, you have all kept up the relentless tempo of work to keep you on track in pursuit of your goal. At last, it is your time to enjoy the deep sense of pride and gratitude from the achievement of that goal, with the heartfelt congratulations of your family, friends, teachers and the whole academic community.

For my part, when I was growing up, I was not sure that a university education was something I wanted. Until one day, when I was in year 12 and I happened to voice this to my mother. Now I have to give you some context – this was in 1977. In 1974, the Whitlam Government had abolished university and technical college tuition fees, making tertiary education free for the first time in Australia. My mother, a single, working parent, had been studying while working full time, to complete first her HSC and then a Bachelor of Arts. She was the first in her family to go to university and this was a long-held dream of hers.

So let us just say that my dear mum, upon hearing me say that I just wasn't sure that I wanted to do a university degree, just about flipped. Here I was, faced with such an opportunity as free education – there was no way that while she drew breath that I was NOT going to university. I complied, going straight from school to university and then out into the workforce with my newly minted Bachelor of Economics.

My Masters study was a very different experience. After working for just on 20 years I decided to go back to study. As many of you here will know, studying later in life often brings with it a greater sense of purpose, efficiency and focus. Mind you, as I was working full time in my own consulting business, it took me nearly 10 years to complete my degree. I was also regularly called out by lecturers at the beginning of a unit, asking if there was a mistake as someone (aka, me) had a student number which was (seemingly) impossibly old. Despite this, I found formal learning at this stage was also richer, as it was incubated in my more extensive lived experience. The other big difference for me, was the cost; sadly, long gone are the days of free tertiary education.

The point is, that there is no right or wrong way to undertake learning, and it is possible – and necessary – to keep learning all through our lives.

So today is also an opportunity to muse on the next phase of your journey. Whether that be launching into a career for the first time, or continuing on, with a new degree firmly tucked into your kit bag. This is a time to contemplate and review your intention. For no matter what you do, your purpose, your intent is the north star that guides your actions and ultimately your impact on the world. Your sense of purpose starts with knowing and connecting with your deep values that you will have honed while here at UC, as well as the personal learnings gained from the struggles and successes and the challenges and hard-

won achievements that have got you to this point. These experiences have shaped you and your leadership.

By purpose, I mean that sense of why you do what you do. In the words of Simon Sinek, while we work to make a living, our work cannot be just about making money or having power and influence for their own sake. It is the reason you CARE about what you do and what gives you a sense of pride and accomplishment. It is your unique contribution to the world.

Whatever your purpose or your work or your role, never forget to lead. We cannot and should not wait for others to lead in response to the challenges we are facing in the world, in our communities, in our workplaces and in our homes. We need everyone, in all sectors to do their part, to work with others and deliver change. In particular, we cannot wait for governments or CEOs alone to deliver the change we need. We are seeing examples of this daily. For example, over the past few years we have witnessed the business community showing leadership across a wide range of issues that would normally just be the preserve of government. These include committing to significant, voluntary reductions in carbon emissions, promoting paid parental leave for all parents, and genuine workplace flexibility and inclusive practices. The Business Council of Australia has committed to a vision of 50% of women in senior executive roles – a goal near and dear to my heart and to that of the 50/50 Foundation here at UC. They are not waiting for government or “someone else” to lead, they are committing to manifest change.

Leadership is all about change. It connects our individual and collective purpose and values (the why and the how), with vision (the what). Leadership defines how each of us can contribute to creating a future of shared well-being. As graduates of the Faculty of Business, Government and Law, we need you, we need your capabilities! These include your ability to manage business risk and ensure long-term returns on investment to address global environmental and other challenges; we need your skills and business acumen to optimise resource use, to streamline operations and increase efficiency and we need your innovation and entrepreneurialism. For those of you heading into the public sector, we need your keen understanding of societal challenges to help frame public policy, programs and services. And we need to do this in a way that strengthens the social fabric and our overall equality.

If there has been an upside to the current context of the pandemic, it is surely that it has shaken us all awake to the opportunities for change to move us closer to a life more centred on well-being. It has disrupted our notions of “the way we do things” in how we live, work, learn and connect, and also our sense of value that we place on people who do the work of supporting our economy – carers, health workers, teachers and those in our grocery supply chain, to name a few.

In fact, we are seeing this play out across the world and here in Australia as waves of people are leaving long term careers to find a better balance – the “Great Resignation” as it is being termed. This phenomenon is being fuelled by the experience that people have had during the pandemic, where their usual work routines have been thrown into disarray and new challenges and possibilities, including working from home, no long commutes, no interstate

or overseas work travel, have emerged. This has led many people to reject the notion of a return to long hours away from home and loved ones and to seek a more compatible lifestyle. And in an economy such as ours where we have chronic labour shortages across all industries, we need to listen to what our employees want.

Years ago when I first went to work for a small Australian consulting company, I learned a valuable lesson. I had always thought that in business, one chased the money – revenue and profit first, by chasing potential clients. Employees, I thought, were then recruited to fulfil the service to clients. However, I quickly learned that it is in fact the opposite that is the key to long-term success. That is, you need to always focus on your people first. In selecting people, make sure that they share your sense of purpose and importantly your core values. Engage them in the business and give them a voice to be able to amplify what opportunities and challenges they observe. Do what is possible to support them as whole people who have families, dreams and needs.

When your people are engaged, productive and happy, they will look after your clients. And when this happens, your clients look after the money – they deliver the revenue and profit. Or in the public sector, policies and programs truly meet the needs of the target communities.

So my ask, my plea, to you all is that you take all that you have learned in the course of your degree and apply it wholeheartedly and vigorously in the pursuit of your purpose. Be in the arena, get real in throwing your weight behind that which is important to you. Lead, from whatever position you are in, value your team and those who you work with and for, and continue to be curious.

And listen to your mum, whatever her, or your age.