

TOP 50 VOICES IN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT



St Hilda's College, University of Melbourne
Principal

James is the Principal at St Hilda's College, a residential college at the University of Melbourne. He has had a non-traditional career entry into tertiary education and finds motivation every day in the opportunity to make a positive impact on students' lives.



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Can you share a bit about your background and the journey that led you to your current role?

I stumbled into an engineering degree at UNSW and was lucky enough to receive a scholarship. This scholarship opened up the opportunity for me to live on campus at the residential colleges, which was something I had never heard of, much less thought would be attainable for me. This really was the accidental start of a lifelong passion for student enrichment, engagement, and leadership. I took on a few leadership roles during my undergraduate studies and loved the growth I was able to see in myself, thanks to the great people and mentors within the college system.

When my three years at college wrapped up, I assumed that was it for me and student life. I thought I would walk into a graduate engineering role and pave a long career in this field, as someone who always thought they liked everything STEM.



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In the following years, opportunities to re-engage with the colleges as a residential mentor and advisor emerged. I decided to get back involved, motivated by the chance to support and guide younger students just as many had done for me during my own journey. I kept telling myself that every year would be my last, but over time, I took on more senior roles. Eventually, I had the unique opportunity to challenge myself as a Dean of College, part-time, while also maintaining my engineering career.

I had imagined that my engineering skills and experiences would spill over into my role at the college (which they did), but I did not expect that my passion for supporting young adults, developed in my college role, would also influence my engineering world. I became involved and motivated by recruiting and working with graduate engineers. Additionally, I helped grow a non-profit organization with some colleagues that focused on transferring knowledge between young and experienced engineers, providing early-career professionals with a platform to develop and support each other.

It wasn't that I didn't enjoy engineering; rather, I discovered that I loved working with people, specifically developing them and giving them opportunities to become the best versions of themselves. I found myself most invigorated professionally as I headed home from my engineering job and back into the college communities that had become my own home. At some point, the arrival of my first child presented a crossroads between college life and engineering life. Ultimately, I chose to stay with what gave me the most joy: working in education, with young people, and creating communities where they can thrive and be celebrated as they navigate a major milestone in their lives.

What achievement in your role related to student engagement and retention are you most proud of, and why does it stand out to you?

As much as we would all rather forget the COVID years, **I have to say I'm most proud of living in college and working hard to maintain a sense of community and engagement despite the incredibly difficult circumstances we faced here in Melbourne.** It was actually Campus Consultancy that I worked alongside at the time to build an online leadership and personal development program. **This effort aimed to provide our students, who were stuck inside due to harsh lockdowns, with something to engage with to keep motivation and spirits high.**

The crown jewel of this program was a social enterprise sprint where students formed teams and spent six weeks creating a social enterprise focused on a real-world problem. Not only were the outcomes impressive (with a few I genuinely thought had amazing business potential!), but the students also learned a lot about the broader ecosystem of complex and wicked problems. What I value most about this experience and initiative is that it created the scaffolding for us to continually build on and formed the basis of our employability and development program that we offer to all our students to this day.

While we no longer offer the social enterprise sprint, the rapid prototyping and experimenting during the COVID period gave us permission to make quick decisions and try new things every single week. While some didn't work, others really did, and I'm pleased to see that this experience has launched our Hilda's Head Start program into its current-day offering. **There's now something on each and every week for our students to engage with, ranging from panel discussions to assessment centres to public speaking workshops.** It all started out of a necessity to think creatively and quickly during the lockdowns of 2020. I think this example really stands out as a reminder that trying new things is always worth it in the long run!

What motivates you to continue working in student engagement?

For me, it comes down to the joy I get from creating opportunities for students to learn more about their true selves and explore possible futures they may not have even imagined. Most people enter their university journey with a medium or long-term plan, and I take great joy in watching students engage more intentionally with activities, events, or opportunities that open up what I call the "spaghetti career path."

These are the unintended consequences (or realizations!) that emerge when students take time to be intentional about the opportunities they seek out. Whether it's a networking event (where they might unexpectedly meet their next boss or connect with a company they'd never heard of), a party (where they might discover a passion for event planning or music... or perhaps meet their life partner!), a theatrical performance (where they might find a new passion for performing or designing), or taking on a leadership position (where they might get a chance to introduce positive change or experience genuine failure for the first time), these experiences represent openness to change and genuine curiosity about the world around them.

This openness can lead to discovering an entirely new passion and an unexpected career pathway. As long as I can play any role, no matter how small, in helping students discover their true passion or purpose, I will always be motivated to work in this field.

