



THE IDEA OF A
**RESIDENTIAL
COLLEGE**

IMAGE & REALITY

— FROM —

John Henry Newman

— TO —

Harry Potter

— AND —

'THE SOCIAL NETWORK'

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YOU MIGHT CALL IT the Hogwarts Effect or perhaps it can be termed The Harry Potter Experience.

At the residential college to which I am attached, whenever we are trying to describe to a prospective student or a parent what a formal dinner is like, we only have to refer to the fantasy world of Harry Potter and instantly an image is conveyed of academic gowns, formal dining, high table and ancient ritual, all of which does much to conjure the collegiate atmosphere.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is not based on any actual university residential college, though it is worth noting that the actors playing the main student characters in the film franchise have over the course of the last decade entered their early twenties, and thus belong to the same age group as the typical undergraduate student resident.

It seems to me while J.K. Rowling's saga is an occult fantasy set in a fancifully imagined boarding school, it is also true in a crucial way to lived experience for so many of our student residents. I believe the secret to the appeal of Harry Potter goes beyond the sorcery and involves something very simple, universal and precious in everyday life. In capturing that truth, the fantasy of Harry Potter also gets to the heart of what a residential college is all about—in a word, collegiality.

A former student resident at one of the Oxford colleges puts it this way:

A residential college has a culture, a cohesion, a sense of collective identity that a hall of residence or student dorm does not. Much of this is imparted by dining together and is not achieved by cafeteria-style coming-and-going from a dining hall, but more formal dining, organised with the purpose of eating together. The Harry Potter feeling comes most obviously through formal college meals: the role and ritual of food is an important one.

The wearing of gowns at formal dinner is perhaps the aspect of residential college life most likely to strike a visitor as quaint and/or evocative of Harry Potter. One obvious indication of the divergence in academic tradition between the university and its affiliated residential colleges, a topic to which I shall return, is in the institutional attitude to the wearing of this form of dress, which originates in medieval times. At the modern university, gowns are generally only worn at graduation ceremonies. At residential colleges, gowns typically are the required dress at formal dinner and other regular college functions.

Gowns are regarded as an honorific, egalitarian in that everyone in the residential college community is dressed the same regardless of academic rank and also add to a sense of occasion.

In addition to providing escapist entertainment, fantasy worlds in fiction and film can offer a powerful approximation of real life. Indeed the more “realistic” a representation may appear, the more misleading it can be.

I suggest that Harry Potter is actually closer to the truth of life at a residential college for the majority of student residents than a film like *The Social Network* (2010), which was adapted from a non-fiction book and is thus, in the familiar movie producers’ phrase, “based on a true story”.

We tend to think of institutions and individuals in terms that are simplistic, susceptible as we are to the countless images made up of myths, generalisations and stereotypes communicated or reinforced through the media. Such malformed cultural images only seem to solidify through repetition. In exploring the relationship between the reality and the image of the residential college, we can begin by looking at the philosophical foundation of a modern residential college.

NEWMAN'S IDEAL

So much of what a residential college stands for is expressed in the nineteenth century educational philosophy of John Henry Newman, whose best known published work on the subject is *The Idea of a University*. While the modern university may be moving away from the notion of direct face-to-face interaction between lecturers and students in classrooms (see Maslen, Steinberg) that was at the heart of Newman's vision, Newman's spirit abides with us. We just need to be clear in our minds as to where precisely on the modern campus dwells that spirit of Newman.

Newman grasped a profound and universal truth about the vital importance of human agency in education, and that idea has greater force in a world seemingly growing ever more virtual. Newman's collegiate vision seems to me to endure in that part of the academic world where a sense of community is embedded—the residential college.

In *The Idea of a University* Newman talks about the type of institution that today I believe we recognise as a residential college rather than a university, but only once, near the end of Discourse VI, does he do so in express terms. It is worth quoting the passage, to settle, as I would argue it does, the question of the relationship between universities and residential colleges:

If I had to choose between a so-called University, which dispensed with residence and tutorial superintendence, and gave its degrees to any person who passed an examination in a wide range of subjects, and a University which had no professors or examinations at all, but merely brought a number of young men together for three or four years, and then sent them away as the University of Oxford is said to have done some sixty years since, if I were asked which of these two methods was the better discipline of the intellect,—mind, I do not say which is *morally* the better, for it is plain that compulsory study must be a good and idleness an intolerable mischief,—but if I must determine which of the two courses was the more successful in training, moulding, enlarging the mind, which sent out men more fitted for their secular duties, which produced better public men, men of the world, men whose names would descend to posterity, I have no hesitation in giving the preference to the University which did nothing, over that which exacted of its members an acquaintance with every science under the sun. (Newman 129)

While ostensibly taking the view that residential colleges teach more that is worthwhile than universities providing formal awards, Newman concedes that “it is plain that compulsory study must be a good and idleness an intolerable mischief”. In other words, the connection with the larger institution prevents

the college from becoming insular and self-regarding even as the college provides the human dimension to higher education that the university is not in a position to match. Universities and residential colleges are thus institutions that are complementary rather than competing. A student experience of higher education that includes both residential college and university is greater than the sum of its parts.

THE CHANGING UNIVERSITY

There were moves afoot in Newman's time to provide an alternative to a university education defined purely in terms of collegiality. The University of London, founded in 1827, had by 1849 made provision, as Gordon Graham describes in *Universities: The Recovery of an Idea*, "for 'external' as well as 'internal' students, that is to say, students who could study for London degrees at home and at a distance, rather than be resident in a constituent college". Graham notes that "the fact that it was possible to study for a degree at London University while continuing to live elsewhere broke the traditional residential pattern of the ancient universities of England and thus extended higher education to a far wider section of the population" (Graham 11).

The idea of a residential college dates back to the Middle Ages and its expression is with us still, even as the number of universities has multiplied and higher education has become more accessible in terms of student numbers and less Newman-like in the institutional arrangements made to provide campuses and deliver courses. Clark Kerr, who was the first Chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley wrote in the early 1960s that Newman envisioned an ideal type of academic institution that was dedicated to knowledge rather than discovery, or to put it another way, was all teaching and no research:

This beautiful world was being shattered forever even as it was being so beautifully portrayed. By 1852, when Newman wrote, the German universities were becoming the new model. The democratic and industrial and scientific revolutions were all well underway in the western world. The gentleman "at home in any society" was soon to be at home in none. Science was beginning to take the place of moral philosophy, research the place of teaching. (Kerr 3-4)

In Kerr's outline of the history of universities in the West, the German model of a "research organism" — as defined by Abraham Flexner in 1930 — that had supplanted Newman's "academic cloister" was itself superseded by an institution

he dubbed the multiversity, with which we by and large live today. But there are those people within universities, Kerr acknowledges, who cling to one or other of the models:

Newman's "Idea of a University" still has its devotees—chiefly the humanists and the generalists and the undergraduates. Flexner's "*Idea of a Modern University*" still has its supporters—chiefly the scientists and the specialists and the graduate students. "The Idea of the Multiversity" has its practitioners—chiefly the administrators, who now number many of the faculty among them, and the leadership groups in society at large. (8)

Thus, Kerr argues, the modern university has been enlarged and, by incorporating and absorbing its institutional antecedents, become more complex:

These several competing visions of the true purpose, each relating to a different layer of history, a different web of forces, cause much of the malaise in the university communities of today. The university is so many things to so many different people that it must, of necessity, be partially at war with itself. (8-9)

As leading university administrators evidently appreciate, there need be no such conflict between the contemporary university and the residential college, the true purpose of which is to align with the mission articulated by Newman. Indeed having affiliated residential colleges the mission of which is to provide close academic support, pastoral care and opportunities for leadership and personal development, actually relieves the university of the burden of being Newman-like in its organisational culture or operations.

The beatification of Newman by Pope Benedict XVI in September 2010 was the occasion for some regret about the lack of collegiality in the multiversity. Writing in the *American Spectator*, prominent conservative philosopher Roger Scruton praised *The Idea of a University* as "surely the most serene and beautiful vindication we have of the *old* ideal of the scholarly life" (emphasis added). For Newman, Scruton writes, the university "was not simply a repository of knowledge. It was a place where work and leisure occurred side by side, shaping each other, and each playing its part in producing the well-formed and graceful personality" (Scruton).

Scruton's evocation of Newman's *Idea* serves as the launching pad for an attack on what he views as the depredations of political correctness in the humanities and the denial of academic freedom on campus. Scruton sees a solution in the move towards online teaching, a method that removes the requirement

for physical classrooms and could not be further removed from Newman's philosophy of education. Nowhere in his critique does Scruton talk about student housing, much less residential colleges.

It seems to me that anyone who has had a meaningful association with well-run residential colleges will most likely reject Scruton's pessimism. Like others inclined to deprecate the modern university by invoking Newman, Scruton looks for the modern expression of Newman's ideal in the wrong place on campus.

THE PLACE OF THE RESIDENTIAL COLLEGE

Nowadays it is a residential college, the membership of which typically numbers no more than a few hundred in any given academic year (though it can be many hundreds), and not a university, the annual student enrolment of which usually reaches the tens of thousands, that can hope to know its students and its alumni personally.

A very positive statement of the contribution to the modern university made by the residential college, and specifically by the denominational residential college that Newman envisaged, is provided by Donald Markwell, who served as Warden of Trinity College, The University of Melbourne, from 1997 until 2007. Markwell, one of the most eloquent Australian advocates of the idea of a residential college, notes that far from indulging in nostalgia, "the finest universities in the world regard living in a residential academic community—sharing the college experience—as an essential part of an undergraduate education":

At the heart of the college ideal has traditionally been the idea of studying with tutors who quickly come to know students as individuals and to be both friends and respected mentors, combining academic guidance with pastoral or personal concern and support. This experience of close personal attention offers something far beyond the impersonal experience of the mass university. (Markwell 101-102)

Markwell declares the "highest ideals of collegiate education" to be "the cultivation of all-round excellence; commitment to service; and enriching friendship in an educational community, that, however imperfectly, broadens, nurtures, challenges, and supports every individual" (109).

Colleges can attend to all these things in close detail and with compassion because they are institutions that by their very nature operate on a human scale. Discipline can be maintained on a personal basis without undue reliance on a complicated bureaucratic process.

Social functions and in-house or public academic events may be organised by and discipline-administered in co-operation with the students themselves through the Junior Common Room or its equivalent, which co-exists with the tradition of the College Fellows and the Senior Common Room for academic staff, senior students, visiting speakers and others who become respected members of the college community without necessarily having any formal affiliation, much less being paid for their time. There are so many non-commercial aspects to life in a residential college community that add value—this is all part of the unique atmosphere, the collegiate spirit generated by a small academic community.

LESSONS FOR LIFE

While the university is where you gain your degree, a residential college provides the best opportunity while you are an undergraduate to make friends for life. These lifelong friends may be people about whom you might not otherwise have cared, or even met. College friendships extend throughout the college alumni network, which tends to be more close-knit and less formal than the university's much larger equivalent.

Our era of online social networking enables a “community” where members never actually meet in person, allowing someone to instantly become a “friend” on a social networking website without the sometimes long and uncertain, but ultimately profoundly rewarding process of forming the lasting bond of friendship. In a residential college, these ties are made through college-based activities such as sport, music, drama, debating, having a room on the same floor or corridor, or eating together. It is thus an education that is genuinely social.

A university aims in a general way to contribute to the greater good of humanity. A residential college is concerned with knowing its members individually through the academic, social and domestic transactions of daily student life.

Living together requires student residents to develop and practise tolerance for others whose attitudes and opinions they may have been inclined to reject out of hand. Moreover students realise that there are certain standards of conduct that must be maintained for the community to function and flourish, and this constitutes one of the most valuable understandings gained by living at a residential college.

Students who come to college with the ability to do well in exams though perhaps a little lacking in basic social skills are obliged to reside with others similarly self-centred or awkward, as well as those students who already know how to get on with others. Thus examples are set and opportunities provided for vital lessons to be learned. For many undergraduates, who during their school years may have been cosseted by parents from any sense of personal responsibility beyond attaining the high grades required to gain a place in their desired course of study at university or otherwise shielded from the sometimes uncomfortable realities of living with other people, such simple lessons in life may be a revelation.

The thoughtlessness sometimes associated with late adolescence and early adulthood will not in every case be overcome simply by living in a residential college though anti-social tendencies will inevitably be challenged, even if it is just by having to respect the rights of others to sleep uninterrupted after a certain hour at night or by the requirement to maintain quiet in the college library. While universities tend to concentrate their campus-based activities within business hours, partly it seems out of security concerns, residential colleges operate at all hours.

Undergraduate students obliged for the first time to live with others to whom they are not related, who do not have the same personal interests or social or family background and are not studying the same courses, and whose company they may not have chosen, will face the consequences of their actions and maintain a possibly hitherto unaccustomed level of civility, just as they will have to do in order to succeed in later life.

The process of maturing from adolescence to adulthood may not be completed by living in a residential college—indeed a herd mentality among undergrads is not unknown—but it is the best setting, among all the accommodation

options normally available to people in that age group, in which to begin or further that process. Increasingly, universities are in the business of promoting “life-long learning”, and education in life similarly has recognised stages but no fixed timetable or endpoint. As Markwell points out, the college is well placed to provide lessons in life-skills:

Whether a college is a religious foundation or not, or has any religious purpose or effect, it will, as a residential community, be well placed to encourage, perhaps instil, values in its students. If in state and secular institutions there is a shying away from the discussion and deliberate transmission of values, then perhaps one of the benefits of autonomous colleges affiliated with public universities is that they can unashamedly proclaim certain values. (129)

Indeed, Markwell goes on to assert that having a religious foundation actually impels the college to promote those values:

It seems to me that the religious basis of a college means that it cannot be a values-free zone. The religious, and specifically denominational, foundation of the college gives it the freedom, the self-confidence, and indeed responsibility to proclaim core values — such as those of service, respect for individuals, and integrity, and to uphold them. (139)

In the secular media, church founded institutions have often, it seems, been viewed in a negative light. But as Newman understood, such institutions have been at the centre of civilisation in the West for two millennia. Universities themselves, for the greater part of their history, have been institutions founded and run by religious orders.

Having a variety of denominations represented among the colleges affiliated with any given university creates a kind of collegiate ecumenism and a sense of the diversity of belief found in the wider society. Students and staff may or may not have a particular religious belief, but by being a member of a residential college, and especially in the case of students who assume a leadership role within the college, they can share the vision of life that led to the establishment of the institution.

By their nature residential colleges are inclusive. Selectivity in admission to a residential college is a natural function of supply and demand but not in the courses offered by the university. Entry to high status professions such as medicine and law is limited by the university and ultimately by the professions themselves, while a residential college may admit on an equal basis students

studying any course offered by the university. A residential college thus may be as representative a sample of the wider student population, and as fully formed a microcosm of the wider society, as space allows and its leaders wish it to be.

There is always the possibility that any small community will develop a sense of exclusivity and hence become a breeding ground for narrow-mindedness. It is incumbent upon college leaders to make sure the college connects with the wider community. A residential institution that operates on a human scale is equipped to make the necessary connections and adjustments to offset parochial tendencies, sometimes by sub-dividing its own community by buildings, floors or other such groupings, and by organising community service such as charity work, fund-raising and meals-on-wheels, and thus carrying on the charitable mission of the church that founded it.

Residential colleges, by virtue of being affiliated with a university, are in any case largely spared the negative effects of institutional entropy. They also benefit from the fact that there is a regular renewing of the student population, which means that cultural change can occur relatively quickly while college traditions do not become stultifying.

CONTROVERSIES AND NEGATIVE PUBLIC IMAGES

For all their virtues—which may seem obvious to anyone who has lived or worked at a well-run residential college, has seen the friendships it nurtures, and watched students grow in confidence and critical awareness as they benefit from activities such as debating, sport, theatre, music and leadership opportunities and the imperative to attend to personal and social values in theory and practice—the popular perception of residential colleges is not always positive.

In Australia, the most sustained negative representation in the media in recent decades has centred on certain colleges at the nation's two oldest universities and is based on a perception of gender discrimination. Although segregation on the basis of gender, to say nothing of other forms of exclusion, has largely disappeared from the Australian residential college system, a perception to the contrary appears to have lingered in the minds of some critics.

St Andrew's College, established in 1867 at The University of Sydney, provided the backdrop to *Finishing School for Blokes*, a memoir published in 1997 by Peter Cameron, the former Principal of the College. He complained that

Sydney University is pretty well unique in the world in having the majority of its colleges (five out of six) single-sex. All the colleges at Melbourne University, for example, are co-residential, as are almost all at Oxford and Cambridge. In such a situation the onus is perhaps on the single-sex college to justify itself, and halfway through my five years as Principal of St Andrew's College I came to the conclusion that it was impossible to discharge that onus. (Cameron ix)

A few years after his resignation, Cameron's desire for change was met. St Andrew's College, according to its website, began accepting female undergraduates in 2002. Among the six residential colleges at The University of Sydney, two—St Paul's College and The Women's College—remain single-sex, while Sancta Sophia College states on its website that it admits undergraduate women and postgraduate men and women.

Despite the efforts at modernisation, rumblings about University of Sydney colleges have not ceased. In September 2009, the *Sydney Morning Herald* ran an article by Alexis Carey in which the writer complained of the treatment she had received at an unnamed residential college: "I attended a residential college from 2006 to 2007, and I experienced very real sexism and disrespect as a woman during this time." Carey writes that "I do not intend to speak for all colleges and collegians, and I know many people may not have been as disappointed by their experiences as I have been." Her account of her own experience included sexual violence, vandalism and anti-intellectualism:

The university years are supposed to challenge students by opening up their world view and allowing a multitude of opinions and ideas to be expressed and discovered. The college experience I had taught us to conform and accept the prevailing (often negative) attitudes, or else leave. If you were a man, you had to be a brainless jock, and if you were a woman, you had to put up with sexism and public humiliation. (Carey)

Carey's article prompted responses from present and past students and from college heads. Mez Nuthall, who identified herself as having attended a University of Sydney residential college at the same time as Carey, wrote:

I also believe that sexism is a part of college life. However, I do not believe that such attitudes are "thoroughly ingrained" in the culture, or that residential colleges

are not a positive environment for “Australia’s best and brightest to spend the formative years of their adult lives”. In fact, I believe the opposite.

College life, while it may be speckled with wild parties and very occasional behavioural misdemeanours by a small few, encourages a well-rounded individual. While sport may be a large part of college life, the author has failed to address the importance of cultural, academic and social development within these communities. (Nuthall)

Wayne Erikson, the Principal of St Andrew’s College, made a similar plea for a fuller understanding of what life in a residential college means for most of its student residents:

College life is mostly about young adults living and learning in a relatively less constrained environment than they have previously experienced. The potential for volatility in such circumstances is obvious, and it requires constant vigilance to keep such volatility as a positive and not negative force, but this is understood to be a necessary part of an individual, interpersonal and group dynamic, which is at the heart of a college. It is true that there is sometimes only a small margin for error, and student and staff leadership must constantly monitor a college’s ‘health’ in this regard, but there is magic in that moment when students acquire an empathetic imagination of the lives of others enriched as it is by their collegial experience. (Erickson)

There has also been scandal at residential colleges in Victoria. The so-called Ormond College affair began at the largest college at The University of Melbourne. The controversy sprang from allegations of sexual harassment made by two female students against the master of Ormond College in 1991, allegations that had serious consequences for all involved and provoked much controversy notwithstanding that the subsequent court proceedings ended with the defendant, who denied the allegations, being acquitted on all of the criminal charges that were brought against him.

Among many other publications and commentaries (see Tregear), the Ormond College affair was the subject of *The First Stone*, a widely discussed book by Helen Garner, who as an undergraduate at The University of Melbourne in the 1960s had been a member of Janet Clarke Hall, a women’s college that became co-residential in 1973. For Garner, apparently, the grass is greener at a university without the kind of residential college that, by her own account, she enjoyed attending:

What always impresses me about Monash, coming as I do from the older University of Melbourne with its elms and dank courtyards and buildings made of stone, is how Australian it looks. In winter the wind charges across its open spaces, fiercely jostling

the eucalypts and making their leaves sparkle in the cold sun. From out here, Ormond College might seem a century away—a distant, forbidding, old-world fantasy.

‘Monash made the decision not to have colleges,’ one of its senior administrators told me. ‘We’ve got halls of residence. It’s much cheaper. You get a better mix of people, you get Asians—and it breaks down all that funny cultural stuff.’ (Garner 203)

This passage contains incorrect and possibly prejudicial material. To begin with, Monash University does have an affiliated denominational residential college that functions in the same way as the dozen or so residential colleges at The University of Melbourne. The statement that there is “a better mix of people” at the University-owned and operated halls of residence than at the residential college once again was and is demonstrably false and appears to be based on the ignorance and/or prejudice of the “senior administrator” interviewed in the 1990s by Garner.

Another point, that halls of residence are “much cheaper”, requires clarification. The cost difference, such as it is, reflects the fact that accommodation in halls of residence does not include all of the residential services such as full service catering (a major cost), pastoral care, sporting and cultural activities as well as the academic support offered by the library and tutorial programs that feature in a fully fledged residential college.

Indeed the additional cost, which is not great in percentage terms and reflects favourably on the efficiency with which the additional services and facilities are delivered, may be justified on academic grounds alone. Recent independent research carried out by the Australian Council for Education Research clearly shows that students who attend a residential college perform better in their studies than other students (see Coates).

THE IMAGE AND THE REALITY

The controversies which centred on certain of the colleges affiliated with the Universities of Sydney and Melbourne may serve to remind us how easily we can get the news back-to-front. The popular media tends to highlight sensational stories *because* they can be given a lurid treatment. What is reported in the daily news is mostly what does *not* happen in everyday life.

Wider social problems may find expression at residential colleges, but they are not peculiar to them. For instance, the boorish male behaviour complained

about by critics of residential colleges is often fuelled or caused by the consumption of alcohol that the law allows young people to purchase and consume once they attain the legal drinking age. There is no evidence to suggest that binge drinking, drug-taking, vandalism and theft are social problems confined to or worse at residential colleges than in the wider society.

Inevitably, the first taste of freedom from parental control for many people in their late teens and early twenties will lead to some bad, even dangerous choices. For many undergraduates, living in a residential college for a few years helps make the transition to adulthood as smooth and safe as possible. Because of the essential closeness of members of the college community, anti-social behaviour, so often fuelled by alcohol, is in practice easier to identify and address, and so such conduct is less tolerated than it may be elsewhere. In a well-run residential college counselling is readily available, and serious offenders may with efficiency be disciplined and, where necessary, excluded for the sake of the college community as a whole.

Furthermore, the students themselves on a daily basis look out for each other, whether or not they occupy a formal leadership position, to a degree that can be quite impressive. In addition to the move to eliminate discrimination on the basis of gender, one of the notable reforms in recent decades has been the increasing participation of student representatives who are members of residential college councils and who participate at all levels of college governance.

Because of the living arrangements, there is a strong element of domesticity. In addition to the work of the college management team, staff who do the housekeeping, perform maintenance tasks and those who work in the dining hall play a vital role, as they interact with the students on a daily basis and may offer immediate pastoral care. They can report any matters of concern to them—indeed some of the most meaningful relationships in the college form between those staff and the students. Students in turn may learn to respect people who work in occupations which they may never contemplate joining, thus enhancing their sense of community. People working in an office environment may be all but invisible at the normal workplace but in a residential college setting they have a real presence, and provide valuable input into the community beyond the tasks they perform routinely.

THE RESIDENTIAL COLLEGE IN THE MOVIES

For the purposes of satire, the image of life at a residential college in popular culture tends to be negative, and this is an international phenomenon. Films and television series such as *Animal House* (1980) and *Porterhouse Blue* (1987) satirise boorish male behaviour in distinct American and British cultural contexts, but with the common themes of males behaving badly. The humour extracted from the situation depends on the male and female characters being segregated.

Like the collegiate system in England in Newman's era, the American fraternity/sorority style of student housing has traditionally segregated the sexes. Films such as *Legally Blonde* (2001) and *The House Bunny* (2008) recreate the student housing experience from the perspective of female characters. Many of the same issues, clichés and stereotypes arise, however, such as sexism, social and aesthetic apartheid, substance abuse, corruption and anti-authoritarianism.

Gordon Graham discusses how satirical representations of British universities in fiction have helped to promote a negative cultural (and in turn political) perception of higher education. While university insiders can enjoy seeing their colleagues and workplace being lampooned, “the effect of satire is likely to be different upon those less well acquainted with and hence less attached to the object of scorn” (Graham 24–25).

Not every negative representation of residential college living is satirical or comic. Anti-social male behaviour of a nerdish kind has been depicted with disturbing force in the film *The Social Network* which is not presented as a satire or a comedy even as it echoes some of the clichés mentioned above. One of those clichés is the preservation of a certain kind of college aristocracy. As *New York Times* columnist David Brooks points out, the cliché about Harvard being a bastion of White Anglo Saxon Protestant privilege is given dubious licence once again:

In *The Social Network*, the director David Fincher and the screenwriter Aaron Sorkin imagine that these two Harvards still exist side by side. On top, there is the old WASP Harvard of Mayflower families, regatta blazers and Anglo-Saxon cheekbones. Underneath, there is the largely Jewish and Asian Harvard of brilliant but geeky young strivers.

This social structure will be familiar to moviegoers. From *Animal House* through *Revenge of the Nerds*, it has provided the basic plotline for most collegiate movies. But as sociology, of course, it's completely fanciful. (Brooks)

The Social Network is about an undergraduate computer whiz who sets out to create a virtual community in reaction to a real one. The invention of online social networking is depicted as being the negative consequence of an inability on the part of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg to engage meaningfully with fellow members of the residential college community in which he lived at Harvard.

The film shows how a group of friends sharing rooms collaborated on or contributed to the project. Although their project to create an online social network was, you could say, at odds with the residential college idea, it did begin in that context among a group of students (all male) who were not accepted by the jocks or, apparently, anyone else. *The Social Network* takes a largely negative view in its portrayal of residential college life at a prestigious university in its effort to explain why Facebook flourished first among the Ivy League and Oxbridge colleges, places where we might assume it to be inimical, before it spread throughout the wider world.

The Mark Zuckerberg character at least had the opportunity to meet someone good-natured and well-adjusted like Erica Albright. In one scene Erica (played in the film by Rooney Mara) sits with friends from different backgrounds, one of whom is ready to assist when Mark aggressively attempts to intervene—a positive, if brief, image of collegiality. Erica, who is a student at Boston University and would thus if this were occurring in real life not actually be a member of a traditional residential college, evidently has found support and friendship among a diverse group of students that Mark has signally failed to find.

Not every contemporary representation of college life is so dark. Harry Potter's Hogwarts may seem to be mainly concerned with its own arcane system of magic, but essential to its appeal, I would argue, is the fact that the underlying theme is friendship. It is friendship, moreover, that develops in a recognisably collegiate setting among three people of mixed gender and social background. Here, fantasy and reality overlap. Friendship in the collegiate sense may only be glimpsed in *The Social Network* in the above-mentioned scene with Erica but

is made manifest at Hogwarts. Here, it seems to me, Newman's ideal is being fulfilled. Whatever else happens to Harry, Hermione and Ron during their adventures, their friendship deepens throughout their years at Hogwarts.

LIVING THE NEWMAN IDEAL

If we read Newman's *Idea of a University* in the spirit in which he wrote it, then it quickly emerges that what he envisioned above all was an academic community on a human scale. Residential colleges embody Newman's idea not only in what they aim to do but in the way they do it, which to Newman's way of thinking as I understand it, is equally, if not more important.

The fact that residential colleges have stood the test of time for many centuries, and are still being built, is due to qualities that are not specific to higher educational institutions. Residential colleges will doubtless continue to move with the times as society develops while still fulfilling their primary purpose, which is to answer an unchanging need for meaningful human contact within a community.

In one of his essays on Christian doctrine, Newman described how continuity can be achieved, in part at least, through discontinuity. The philosopher Anthony O'Hear comments that in this essay "Newman shows that the success of a tradition is related to its ability to assimilate new data, while conserving its past principles and achievements, and also its ability to develop complex sequences of thought and practice while anticipating future development." (O'Hear) Newman himself once observed: "To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often."

One of the most significant reforms among residential colleges in recent decades has been the general move towards eliminating sex discrimination in the admission of students, thus making colleges more representative of the wider society. Clearly in this regard the reality of a residential college is changing, even if the image in popular culture may lag behind.

We make images that by their very nature distort reality, and those images in turn influence our perception to a degree to which we may not be aware. Could it be that Harry Potter provides an image strong enough to change the way students and their parents view the prospect of attending a residential college? The image of Harry Potter, in conjunction with Newman's concept,

may guide us in understanding and appreciating the reality of a residential college. Each could be considered old-fashioned yet they are not outdated since both, I believe, strike a resonant chord in the contemporary context.

Whatever the provenance and cultural status of Newman and Harry Potter, between them they capture the positive essence of the idea of a residential college. In different ways, both image and reality show us that having an affiliated residential college at a university performs an invaluable transfer function in higher education of lasting value.

Residential colleges have a vital role to play in the university experience. A residential college that is denominational, co-residential and progressive in outlook while maintaining the best in its traditions is especially attractive to prospective students and their parents as the established form of student housing best equipped to help develop the whole person.

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SIR MICHAEL CHAMBERLIN LIBRARY

A mission of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne, Mannix College began admitting student residents in 1969. A library for use by students and staff of Mannix College was established in October 1971.

The Library is named in honour of Sir Michael Chamberlin (1891–1972), Melbourne-born businessman, philanthropist and Catholic layman. In the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Cecily Close writes that Sir Michael was a member of “the interim council and council of Monash University (deputy-chancellor 1961–68)” and that he “took particular interest in the university’s proposed religious centre and in Mannix College, of which he was made first fellow. His books formed the nucleus of its library, which was named after him. In 1969 the university bestowed on him an honorary doctorate of laws. He had also joined the La Trobe University committee in 1964, but retired when the council was formed. In 1955 Chamberlin was appointed OBE; in 1964 he was knighted; in 1969 he was appointed knight of the Order of Pius.”

The fortieth anniversary of the establishment of The Sir Michael Chamberlin Library at Mannix College is due to be celebrated at a special formal dinner on 5th October 2011. A portrait of Sir Michael unveiled by Lady Vera Chamberlin in 1969 hangs in the Mannix College dining room. The College Library holds the Monash University Honorary Doctorate of Laws and Mannix College Fellow certificates presented to Sir Michael.

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to Harry Potter and 'The Social Network'

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