

st mary's women

FIONA HARRIS ('77) Non-Executive Director



"St Mary's has established itself as a school that is well positioned to prepare young women for ever expanding roles in our ever changing society."

As the first member of my family to attend university, I was determined to be successful within the business community.

Upon completion of my Bachelor of Commerce degree from UWA, I began my career with chartered accountants KPMG and was a partner in their Sydney office when I left that organisation in December 1994. During my 14 years with KPMG, I worked in Perth, San Francisco and Sydney specialising in financial services and superannuation.

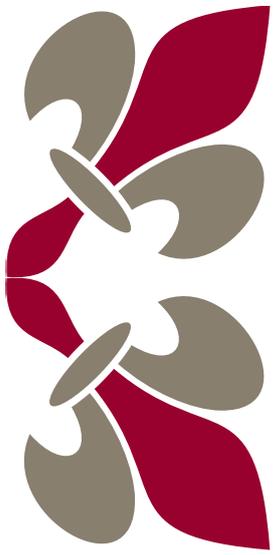
After returning to Perth in December 1994 my husband and I established Barrington Consulting Group Pty Ltd, a company providing consulting services in the areas of strategic and business planning, and I embarked upon a career as a professional non-executive director.

Since that time I have served on the boards of over 25 companies in the listed, private, public and not-for-profit sectors, and played a significant role in my contributions to directorship through the Australian Institute of Company Directors at state and national level.

My St Mary's experience was a little different from most. I did not go to St Mary's until Year 11, and then it was as a boarder. By this stage I had already experienced 15 years of relatively carefree existence living in the comfort of my own home and attending the local school at Cunderdin. Certainly, there were some challenges in the limited curriculum offered at such a place, but I had managed to make the most of things, and had experienced some degree of academic and social success in that smaller pond, being both Dux and Head Girl (winning prizes in both Maths and English). But the school did not offer Years 11 and 12, so out of necessity the arrangements had to change.

In enrolling at St Mary's I was keen to maximise my options for a future career, so the careers counsellors interpreted that as requiring Maths II and III, Physics, Chemistry and English (which was compulsory). We worked out that I could do English Literature and English as an overload, but this did not leave great scope for additional subjects. In fact, only one, so the scene was set for a showdown between the Headmistress (who was also the French Mistress and was keen to recruit another capable student to her class), my parents (who were





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keen to follow the Headmistress's advice, but were unable to provide me with any plausible examples of where I would use French – except maybe if a French customer came into the bank where my parents imagined I would be working as a teller), and me, with a love of History and a desire to keep studying it.

All my life I had been a 'pleaser', keen to seek approval of those in authority by doing as was asked and expected. But the teenage hormonal rebellion had also swung into action pretty strongly in the last couple of years, and the tense situation at hand was to be a testing ground.

For the first time in my life I consciously went against the wishes of my parents and the Headmistress, and politely but firmly said that I would like to study History.

Once I started at St Mary's I was very grateful for the help that I received from all the teachers, and from the wonderful maths teacher, Mrs Deeks, in particular. Mrs Deeks was the most calm, kind and competent teacher and I was thrilled at the end of Year 12 to be awarded the Maths III Prize. Ironically, the prize itself was a book called *Men of Mathematics*! I love reading, and I am a finisher/completer, but have to say that is not a book I have actually read to this day...

I confess that I also struggled under the boarding house regime. Whether it was the fact that my prior experience of the St Mary's boarding house had been at fun-filled summer tennis camps, or whether it was that I was a bit older and had experienced more freedom before coming to board, or whether it was the sense that you were able to

find yourself in trouble merely by being in a particular place or being part of a particular cohort. Whatever it was, I found my sense of fairness being regularly offended. It was a commonly held and discussed view that St Mary's had the strictest boarding rules at that time, and presumably those rules had served the school well in the past. But the student experience was probably not a Key Performance Indicator!

It was a different time. I also greatly admired (then) Deaconess Polson with her wonderfully pragmatic approach, her sense of humour, and also her cricket-playing abilities. However, I always thought the limited role she was allowed to play in our church proceedings was most unfair. Fortunately, the Anglican Church has been moving in the right direction so that we can now see women playing a greater role in this area, as well as in society generally.

The positives to come out of my St Mary's experience were resilience in the face of adversity, stoicism, and caring about the impact of your actions on others. Above all, my St Mary's experience gave me a heightened individual value of fairness.

My experiences and comments above all refer to a time that is now consigned to history. St Mary's, through its talented leaders since this time, has established itself as a school that is well positioned to prepare young women for ever expanding roles in our ever changing society. And that is as it should be.

