

2-24-2014

Signals and reputation

Michael Hemesath

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, mhemesath@csbsju.edu

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Recommended Citation

Hemesath M. 2014 Feb 24. Signals and reputation [blog]. Quad 136. [Accessed 2017 Feb 23]. <http://blogs.csbsju.edu/mhemesath/2014/02/24/signals-and-reputation/>.

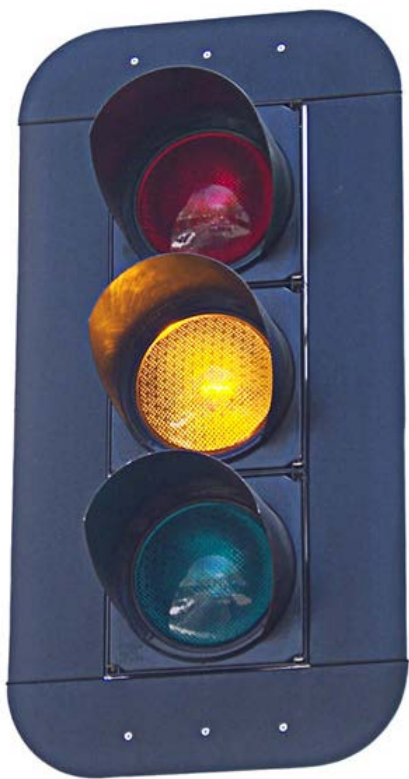
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Quad 136

Signals and Reputation

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Signals and Reputation



At the separate recommendations of my wife and a good friend, I recently read a book by Kevin Roose called *The Unlikely Disciple: A Sinner's Semester at America's Holiest University*.

The book recounts the author's semester at Liberty University, founded by Jerry Falwell as an evangelical Christian school in Lynchburg, Virginia. Roose was a student at Brown University and a budding journalist/author when he decided to pursue an undercover semester at Liberty. He did seem to have a genuine, open-minded interest in the evangelical experience, though one could debate the ethics of basically living a lie for the whole semester.

Regardless, the book is balanced and the outcome is probably not surprising: Roose found Liberty to be a genuinely welcoming community and a more nuanced place than he had imagined. He came to truly like many of the students he met, including a co-ed that piqued his romantic interest, and he found they were complex, thoughtful and truly empathetic toward each other and non-evangelicals. So, no big news: two-dimensional stereotypes of those who view the world differently than we do are often not very accurate.

One section I found particularly interesting was an encounter where the author talked to a student leader on campus who was making ambitious plans for his future, including law school. The student worried that his degree from Liberty University would hold him back somehow. Not because of the quality of his education but because of the signal that a Liberty bachelor's degree might send to admissions committees or employers about his worldview or open-mindedness, etc.

This issue is what economists refer to as signaling—in which one piece of information about a person is used as a proxy for other characteristics or traits that are harder to gather information about. So a level of education or a degree from a particular institution is often used as a proxy for intelligence or diligence or ambition. (Economists are very interested in this topic, and Michael Spence won a Nobel Prize in 2001 for his seminal work in this area.)

That section of the book got me thinking about the signals that a bachelor's degree from Saint John's sends to those outside the community, be they employers, grad schools or prospective students. I think we have a good academic reputation and are also known for great extra-curricular activities, especially in athletics. These are good signals to send and many people have worked hard for many years to establish our reputation in these areas, but Minnesota and the upper Midwest are very lucky to have many residential liberal arts schools who send these same signals. So what makes us different than our peer institutions? What differentiates us?

At a recent admissions event I tried to get an answer. I asked students and parents who had no previous experience with Saint John's or Saint Ben's why they were considering us. (Of course many of our prospective students are legacies and have inside information about the CSB/SJU experience.) These newbie parents and students consistently said three things:

1. They had heard that the communities on our campuses were supportive, friendly and welcoming.
2. They had heard about the professional Johnnie and Bennie network—"You guys are loyal and help each other out long after you leave school."
3. They had met our graduates, through school or church or work or as neighbors, and admired them. They admired their professional success but even more importantly they admired their character and values.

Needless to say, these were nice conversations to have with prospective families.

In the competitive world of higher education with many great options for students to choose from, it is heartening that our students and alumni are helping make the case for us. They are fabulous signals about the CSB and SJU experience—just by being who they are.

February 24th, 2014 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | | [0 Comments](#)

About the
Author:
Michael
Hemesath



Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).