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## Admissions: now and then

Michael Hemesath

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

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## Quad 136

### Admissions: Now and Then

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### Admissions: Now and Then



This is the middle of admissions season at colleges and universities. Some schools let all their students know of the admissions decision on a set date, often in March, but most places, like the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, have a rolling process where we typically give students an answer within a few weeks of receiving their completed applications.

For schools with a rolling admissions process, the courting begins in earnest after the students are admitted. In bigger metro areas, events are held for admitted students and their parents to give them more detailed information about the

educational experience they can expect. I attended a couple such events in the Twin Cities recently. In one case, General Mills was our host and, at the other, Best Buy generously let us use space at their headquarters. At both events there were several hundred guests, counting admitted students and their parents. Our admissions team had also invited faculty members, staff, coaches, recent alumni and current students to meet with prospective students and their parents. There was a welcome from both presidents, a panel in which current students talked about their educational experience at CSB and SJU, and a session on financing a liberal arts education. There was also plenty of informal time for the admitted students to talk to faculty, coaches, staff and alumni, as well as meet some of their potential classmates, an especially important consideration for many students.

At smaller institutions, like CSB and SJU, our admissions staff also work diligently one-on-one to stay in touch with the students they have recruited and shepherded through the application process, especially students who for geographic reasons might not have access to events like those described above. Often using the most current social media, our counselors regularly reach out to admitted students to answer questions and share news for our campuses. This process requires a sensitivity and deft touch that balances our desire to let students know of our ongoing interest – without making them feel like they are being stalked.

There is a retail aspect to the process that is quite different from when I was a student in the late 70s and early 80s. At that time, you chose a few schools to apply to, likely based on some mailings you got after taking the ACT or SAT. Then you sent in a paper application to maybe half a dozen places, if that, and you visited some schools, if they were in driving distance. Then you got an answer. If the news was good, you got the proverbial "fat envelope" with information about costs and

financial aid, how to apply for housing and maybe some information about registering for classes. That tended to be the last you would hear from a college until you committed to attending by sending a deposit check. You (and your parents) were left to sort out the decision on your own, with the limited information you had been sent.



Part of the change is simple demographics. For the baby-boomer generation, college was a sellers' market. There were plenty of students seeking places and without too much effort most schools filled their classes with the growing numbers of high school graduates attending college. For millennials, especially in the upper Midwest, higher education is now a buyers' market. The population of high school students has trended downward, bottoming out in MN in the last couple years, while the number of seats at college and universities has been stable or even grown.

A second change is in the technology of admissions. Communicating through the mail in the 1970s and 1980s was just more expensive than email or a text. A wealth of information that is easily put on a website now had to be culled down to a few pages when putting it into a slick, glossy admissions view book in the past. Retail admissions was just not affordable in the snail mail and long distance phone call era.

Finally, and most importantly, there has been a change in how students and their parents view the college search process. Rather than tending to view a college degree and the attendant experience as a homogeneous product, as most baby boomers did, there is an increasing belief, grounded in reality, that the four year undergraduate experience can and does vary widely. A four year residential, liberal arts experience is not the same as earning even the same bachelor's degree in the identical major at a big research university or a comprehensive mid-size school. As a result, parents, students and often high school counselors are spending more time seeking the right "fit" for the bachelor's degree experience. The typical entering first year college student has visited (sometimes starting in the sophomore year of high school) and applied to more schools (about 5 schools on average in the case of CSB and SJU) than they did in the past. They also have greater access to information about the experience they will have at each school. They come to us as better informed consumers—even if they

chose not to use this information fully or may, possibly, focus on the wrong things.



So the question that educators, parents and students might well ask is whether the current admissions process generates better outcomes for students and/or colleges. A [recent article](#) in the *New Yorker* calls the current process “poisonous,” though laments such as these tend to focus on admission to the most highly selective institutions in the country and they often come from the rarified world of the upper, upper middle class on the coasts.

My observation, which is shared by most of my colleagues at Saint John’s and Saint Ben’s, is that the outcomes are better than in the past. Student know more about the wide range of options available to them and are encouraged to think carefully about their choices during the admission process. The resulting applicant pool includes a more geographically, economically and ethnically diverse mix than in the past, resulting in a more diverse entering class and a better learning experience for all students. Fewer students come into our institutions and are surprised by the expectations we have of them and the experiences they will encounter, which helps retention. The more complicated admission process results in better information for applicants, which results in a better “fit.”

For those who regret the time, energy, expense and occasional pressure that can be part of this new admission world, to object is like complaining about weather or gravity: it is simply part of the world in which we live.

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## About the Author: [Michael Hemesath](#)

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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](#).