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Colleges Help Encourage Social Mixing*

The importance of a college education to the economic prospects of individual students has been well documented by social scientists. A college degree has been the ticket to the middle class for millions of Americans in recent generations. As a result, there is a natural tendency to focus on the personal benefits of a college education that accrue to the individual student. Colleges and universities certainly encourage this thinking by providing data on how well their students do in the job market and their return on investment from a college degree.

It is equally important to remember that colleges serve a vital social function that extends far beyond the economic returns to individual graduates. Through social mixing and exposure of students to different ideas and experiences, society benefits from the existence of institutions of higher education.

Economists refer to such benefits as positive externalities — ways in which an educated citizenry benefits others beyond the individual graduate. Specifically, an important positive externality of a college-educated person is their exposure to ideas, people and experiences that are different from what they have previously known.

Educators believe this rich and varied educational experience will make students better people, employees and citizens. The ways in which a residential college experience broadens a person are especially important given the political moment in which we find ourselves.



We are living in an increasingly segregated society.

In the United States we have historically tended to focus on racial segregation, but segregation comes in many varieties. Social scientists are finding empirical evidence that we are becoming more economically segregated, which is leading to unintentional resegregation in primary and secondary education.

The election map from 2016 shows significant political segregation by states and within states. This political and policy segregation is mirrored in the electronic world where many individuals choose to engage only with those who share their political views, furthering political polarization.

Obviously, as Americans, one of our important political rights is the freedom of association, the ability to choose whom we wish to engage with and on what terms. Yet few would argue that our ability to engage with fellow citizens in civil and meaningful ways is important personally, professionally and politically.

How do we balance our important individual rights and choices with the need to interact with others in community — local, statewide and nationally — for the good of all?

Colleges and universities are among the most important institutions for encouraging the important social mixing that can be an antidote to our increasingly segregated lives.

At Saint John's University and the College of Saint Benedict, as well as at most schools across the country, we take it as part of our mission for generations to bring together students from different backgrounds. On our campuses today we actively seek students from the Western suburbs of the Twin Cities to live and learn with Iron Rangers. We devote significant financial aid so students from north Minneapolis will be studying with their peers from other parts of the country.

A college campus continues to be where many students have their first meaningful encounters with someone of a different race or religion or ethnic group.



This social mixing is not always smooth or easy, as we have observed political and racial tensions on campuses in recent years, but colleges and universities have long emphasized the need for uncomfortable learning by asking students to stretch themselves intellectually, politically and socially. We actively encourage new students to seek ideas, subjects, people and experiences that are new to them and might even make them uncomfortable.

We remind students that there are real personal benefits of such learning because, once they graduate from college, these encounters with difference will serve them well in their personal and professional lives where they will meet and work with many others who are not like themselves. These benefits are mostly individual as graduates will find themselves rewarded economically because of their ability to understand and work with those from different backgrounds and to embrace and use new and unfamiliar ideas. But equally important, society also benefits from such individuals as we learn to legislate, govern and live together. Our ability to understand and engage difference makes compromise, understanding and civility more likely and our public life more productive and successful.

Colleges and universities are not the only places social mixing takes place and certainly one does not have to be a college graduate to be thoughtful, generous and broad-minded.

We are not perfect institutions, and, like individuals, we sometimes fail to live up to our stated principles and missions, as recent incidents at the University of California Berkeley, Middlebury College and Evergreen State College in Washington have revealed.

But in our increasingly polarized and contentious world, colleges and universities continue to be among the essential institutions that encourage individuals to understand other perspectives and to put themselves in the shoes of another, which will make a better society for all of us and our children.

*A version of this op-ed was recently published in the *St. Cloud Times* column, "To a Higher

Degree” which is published the fourth Sunday of the month and rotates among the presidents of the four largest Central Minnesota higher education institutions.

<http://www.sctimes.com/story/opinion/2017/06/24/colleges-help-teach-social-mixing/421573001/>

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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](#).