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Welcome to Saint John's—now get a little uncomfortable*

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Welcome to Saint John's—Now Get a Little Uncomfortable*



Welcome to Saint John's University, Gentlemen of the Class of 2021. We know that as academically focused, athletically and artistically talented, and service-oriented young men, you had many options when it came to choosing a college. We are delighted that you chose to become Johnnies.

Each year we survey seniors and ask them to describe their experience at CSB and SJU. The most common words they use are community, friendly, fun and comfortable. These are great attributes for any college to have, and it is especially nice that seniors feel warmly toward SJU as they graduate—especially as we will soon be asking them to share their time and treasure with us as alumni!!

Seriously, I have no doubt that many of you chose Saint John's, at least in part, because of these attributes. And these are great characteristics for a college to have. To spend your college years in a fun, friendly community provides the grounding for a great educational experience. I know ... because I am a Johnnie too.

Forty years ago this fall—yes 4-0—I was in your place: starting my freshman year at Saint John's, meeting new friends on 3rd Mary, playing name games at orientation and feeling a little nervous about how well my high school education had prepared me for the rigors of college.

On this anniversary of my matriculation and as I prepared to meet you, I have been reflecting on

how the education of the class of 2021 at Saint John's will compare to that of the Class of 1981.

Many things will be similar, despite the passing of 40 years. You will still get a great grounding in the classic liberal arts—humanities, social sciences and natural sciences—that will give you writing, communication and analytical skills, and a breadth of knowledge that will serve you well for a lifetime. You will get a depth of knowledge in whatever academic area you choose to major in—economics in my case—that will serve you in your professional career or graduate school. You will have all manner of extra-curricular experiences from athletics to student government to volunteer activities to international experiences to spiritual opportunities—all of which will develop your social skills, provide leadership experiences and build your character. You will make friends—Johnnies and Bennies—that will last a lifetime. As one mother told her son, perhaps a little hyperbolically, at his graduation from SJU, “These will be the guys who will be carrying your casket.”

There are also ways in which the Class of 2021 will get an unambiguously better education than the Class of 1981. First, and most obviously, the knowledge in the world has grown by leaps and bounds. You will know more than I and my classmates did in May of 1981. Furthermore, technology, which you have been bathed in since birth, will give you access to more of that knowledge, easily and quickly. You will get to enjoy some of the fabulous new facilities on our campus, from residential opportunities that were non-existent for my classmates (OK—Mary and Tommy are pretty much the same!), to great new athletic facilities (for us the Palaestra was a big deal), including a three-season dome, to a gorgeous renovated Alcuin Library and new Learning Commons.



Our faculty has grown significantly since the 1980s, making class sizes smaller and mentoring opportunities greater. Our staff has grown too, and they will help support your learning and personal development in ways that did not occur in my era. Finally, the range of academic and extra-curricular activities has also grown dramatically with over 100 clubs and organizations, 19 of our own semester-long international programs, entrepreneurial activities, political organizations and various arts and music organizations.

The comparisons described above are based on differences in the wider world and changes at Saint John's itself over the last 40

years, but there are also important choices that you have as individuals that will also significantly impact your educational experience.

There was one very important choice you control that will give you the best possible experience at Saint John's. It is a choice that I have some regrets about from my own time at Saint John's.

Choose to get uncomfortable.

I wish that I had stretched myself more during my undergraduate years at Saint John's. I stayed a little too much in my comfort zone. I would have gotten an even better education if I had gotten more uncomfortable more often.

Some observers of your generation are not quite sure you are prepared to be uncomfortable. Incidents on various college campuses have suggested that students today are not interested in engaging in the occasionally uncomfortable free exchange of ideas or in hearing alternative views. Some have called your generation snowflakes—too delicate and easily melted. Not long ago the *Atlantic Monthly* had a cover story entitled, "[The Coddling of the American Mind](#)." (It is an interesting article and worth your time to read as you start your college education.)

The basic thesis of the article is that many students are coming to college today uninterested in being challenged. They have their view of the world and are not interested in having it tested. They are comfortable with their ideas, opinions and understandings. They do not want to be made to feel uncomfortable or challenged.

The problem with this attitude is that it seriously gets in the way of a real education and does little to prepare you for life beyond Collegeville. And I think Johnnies are made of sterner stuff than these observers are suggesting.

So my fondest wish for you, the Class of 2021, is to engage in some uncomfortable learning while you are here.

In your academic life—take some classes that are new and that you might not be sure you will do well in. Plan to go abroad to a place you've never been. It's not high school anymore, so there are new subjects to explore, ideas to test and meanings to find. These



won't happen if you strive to stay comfortable.

In your extra-curricular life—try some new activity that you've never done before. Join a group where you don't know anyone. Take a risk and run for the student Senate. Start a club with some friends. Volunteer for a good cause.

In your social life—get to know some Johnnies and Bennies who aren't from a Twin Cities suburb. Find out what it is like to grow up in Newark or the Bahamas or Los Angeles or China. Learn about someone else's religious beliefs. Talk to someone who doesn't vote like you or your family do. Have a cup of coffee with that guy on your floor that seems to have had to most unique experience growing up. It will be uncomfortable at times, but you'll learn some interesting things about them; you'll strengthen our Benedictine community by showing hospitality, and you might be surprised at what you learn about yourself, too.

In short—get out of your comfort zone. As warm and welcoming as our Benedictine community is, you can find yourself too comfortable. If that is the case, you are short-changing yourself and your education.

Welcome to Saint John's. Now go out there and get a little uncomfortable in order to get the best education possible.

*Remarks from the President's Dinner welcoming the Class of 2021. I was inspired to post these remarks, somewhat belatedly, after three recent conversations with Johnnies of very different generations, each of whom observed that the best thing Saint John's did for them was to take them out of their comfort zones, which helped prepare them for the success they have had in their professional and personal lives.

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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](#).