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## You are our brand

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### You Are Our Brand

I regularly tell students that in many of the circles they will travel after they graduate, and even during their undergraduate years, that when someone learns they are a Johnnie that this knowledge will bring with it assumptions and expectations.

Almost always those expectations will be positive and prove helpful to the Johnnie. The specifics vary by individual and situation but non-alums or parents have told me on different occasions that Johnnies are smart, hard-working, creative, modest, loyal, thoughtful, ethical, fun, spiritual, kind and just..good..guys, among other things.

I don't tell young Johnnies this to swell their heads or pump them up, but to remind them of two things:

- 1. The many graduates that have gone before them have established a reputation for Saint John's and Johnnies that they benefit from, and they owe these previous generations a debt of gratitude.*
- 2. They, the young men in my audience, are, or soon will be, the Johnnies in the world that must live up to that reputation and maintain it as a sacred trust for the generations to come.*

I was reminded of this first point



when I received an email that was making the rounds on campus recently.

A friend of a Johnnie had written a touching tribute to his Johnnie friend on why he loved and respected him and on how the Johnnie had come to help the writer appreciate what happens at Saint John's (and Saint Ben's.)

I have taken the liberty of hiding the writer's identity and editing his words slightly to preserve his anonymity. I have also called his friend simply "Johnnie," as I know that the true Johnnie in question would modestly prefer to remain anonymous.

I also think that the writer could be virtually any Johnnie's friend and the subject could be any of thousands of Johnnies.

*Advice For College Students: Who you are Speaks Louder Than What you Do  
by A Friend of a Johnnie*

*I received the list and it looked impressive.*

*It contained the topics being offered to student leaders at the upcoming Saint John's University/College of Saint Benedict Student Leadership Seminar.*

*The voice at the other end of the phone was confident and articulate, crisp and engaged. It was the President of the Saint John's University student body.*

*"We've had a speaker who had to cancel last minute (the conference is in one week) and we wondered if you might be able to speak in his place? Here are some of the topics we have so far: Goal setting and project management. Leveraging your leadership. Business leadership. Innovation. Managing a team.*

*Building and marketing a brand. What do you think?"*

Wow.

*Knowing that this opportunity was in the works for a few days, I had the chance to rough out a speech in my mind. But it was quite different from the topics this bright young man was proposing. Oh, I think I could give a decent twenty to thirty minute talk on most of them, but these were more pragmatic, tactical topics. My sense of what young college leaders needed to hear was a bit more visionary.*

*So here is what I would like to say:*

*Saint John's University in Collegeville, MN is barely an hour away from my home in Minneapolis. For years, my family has driven by it (largely unaware of the towering Abbey Church amidst distant forest) en route to a lake resort by Detroit Lakes or (years later) on my way home from college or my wife's North Dakota family home. That was about as much as I knew of Saint John's, until I met Johnnie.*

*Johnnie is my senior by about fifteen years. He is the physician who recruited me to my current clinical position, is one of the closest friends I have ever had, and is one of the wisest people I have ever known. He is a Saint John's graduate. For seventeen years, I have known Johnnie, had lunch with him, gone out for beers, taught with him, exchanged towel-snapping humor and plumbed topics ranging from faith and politics, history and literature. And over the years, Johnnie has taught me a great deal about Saint John's. When Johnnie begins reflecting on the university, it's as if he just left the campus yesterday. The landscape in his language brings Saint John's to life. From the cavernous Abbey Church and the buzzing Refectory to the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library and woodworking shop, from the Great Hall and the quadrangle to the Abbey guesthouse and the Stella Maris chapel on the lake. In Johnnie's telling, these are sites of great fun and a little maturity, raw buffoonery and intense spiritual growth. I've heard gut-busting stories where close friends secretly removed the passenger seat from his car as he returned to it on a first date. And I've learned from how moved he was seeing a solitary twelve-year-old boy enter the empty Abbey Church at mid-day,*

*pray for ten minutes, sign himself, then go about his day.*

*But the thing that has always stuck with me about Saint John's University (and by extension, its sister College of Saint Benedict) is that culture matters. Clearly, different colleges draw different people to themselves, so there is a skewed (if I may say, impressively skewed) population of students who are choosing to go to Saint John's. Notwithstanding the type of people who have chosen to attend Saint John's, a college, if it is doing its job, is not simply meant to educate. It is supposed to form. And formation is not a matter of bestowing knowledge, but engendering wisdom. Even more than fostering skills and employability, college should forge character. Beyond offering facts that populate the mind, college should offer lessons that cultivate the soul. Saint John's did that for Johnnie. Granted, his antennae (more than most of his contemporaries) were out for spiritual mentors, wise professors and enduring friendships. And he found them. My flaw was that I was a bit too stressed and utilitarian about getting into medical school to pay close attention to culture in college. While I had an excellent college experience, I will admit that at times superficialities eclipsed the transcendent. But for Johnnie, something in him incessantly looked for this substance and he found it. He found it at Saint John's.*

*Since I met Johnnie, I have been to Saint John's campus twice, my wife has participated in a spiritual retreat there and we have brought my young daughters to campus. I own a Saint John's baseball cap and T-shirt and shamelessly plug the College of St. Benedict to my young daughters. And to this day, upon finding out that a person of particularly impressive and intriguing character (bright, witty, religious, deep, grounded) went to Saint John's (or Saint Ben's), I simply nod my head and say to myself, "Well, that makes sense."*

*When I first encountered Johnnie (and ever since we have been friends), I have been impressed with what he has done, but I am moved by who he is.*

*The degrees, awards and accolades that will be granted to graduates from Saint John's and Saint Benedict's will be noteworthy and useful, but they will matter far less than the character into which each graduate has been formed. And the tactics by which you lead (while important) will matter far less than the integrity*

*by which you live.*

*Who you are speaks louder than what you do.*

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Each and every alumnus is our living and breathing brand, each and every day, in each and every interaction and a powerful example of our mission to the world. Thank you, Johnnie.

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By [Michael Hemesath](#) | November 14th, 2017 | Categories: [Alumni](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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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](#).