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The case for residential liberal arts, Part I: Empathy and the liberal arts

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The Case for Residential Liberal Arts, Part I: Empathy and the Liberal Arts

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The Case for Residential Liberal Arts, Part I: Empathy and the Liberal Arts

A recent *New York Times* [blog post](#) entitled, “Rich People Just Care Less,” has been one of the most commonly e-mailed to others. The author Daniel Goleman, citing a variety of social science research, argues that the rich are less empathetic than the less well-off. I am not sure I find the arguments presented all that persuasive when focused on economic differences, but there is certainly plenty of evidence for animosity or tensions between groups and individuals based on race, ethnicity, religion etc. If a liberal arts education really does offer the possibility of increasing empathy in our students, it provides social benefits (positive externalities) beyond the private benefits that accrue to the individual student. These kinds of positive externalities provide a classic rationale for public support of such an education.

Additionally, a *New York Times* [blog post](#) by Pam Belluck examines research from social psychologists at the New School. The post, titled “For Better Social Skills, Scientists Recommend a Little Chekov,” reports that researchers found “that after reading literary fiction, as opposed to popular fiction or serious nonfiction, people performed better on tests measuring empathy, social perception and emotional intelligence.” The results were published in the journal *Science*.

The reported outcomes were the result of reading for only a few minutes. Imagine how one’s social skills might develop from a four year bachelor’s degree in the liberal arts, where reading literary fiction is a required part of the curriculum?!!

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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](#).