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## Why a liberal arts education really is the finest undergraduate experience

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## Quad 136

Finest Undergraduate Experience

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### Why a Liberal Arts Education Really is the Finest Undergraduate Experience



Students at February 2014 McCarthy Center Politics and a Pint event.

There was a nice bit of press for the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University recently. The *Star Tribune* published an editorial on immigration reform co-authored by three students (Sarah Evans, Hunter Huntoon and Michael Macken) and classics professor Jason Schlude. This kind of co-authored publication by undergraduates and a professor is a little unusual to be sure, but the back story is even rarer in higher education and reveals some important truths about a residential liberal arts experience.

The editorial, entitled, "Ted Cruz, Cicero and the Classics,"

began in a classics course, and each subsequent step reveals a little more about the educational experience at the small number of schools like CSB and SJU.

1. **Engaged Pedagogy.** Schlude, like many good professors, seeks to engage his students in the material they are learning and looks to find examples that make his subject relevant for millennial students. This task can be a bit more challenging for a classicist than an economist but when Senator Ted Cruz made a reference to Cicero, Schlude decided to use it in his class. This creativity is not that rare among good professors, but it is not automatic.
2. **Group work.** In the professional world, working in groups, especially in creative settings, has become more common. The best faculty think about how to respond to such demands, even if it requires them to modify their previous teaching methods. Schlude, in this case, thought it useful to have the students work together on a project that might traditionally have been an individual assignment. In this setting, students learn valuable listening and collaborative skills.
3. **Campus outreach.** When the class project went well, Schlude and his student thought it might be good to share what they had learned with the broader community. Through the McCarthy Center at Saint John's, they put on a **public presentation** on the use of rhetoric in the immigration debate that enhanced the liberal arts experience of the students who did not happen to be in this course. In addition, the students got to hone their public presentation skills. While this obviously took additional time and energy on the part of the professor and the students, they provided a great learning experience for the campus community.
4. **Public outreach.** While even the effort to reach out to the campus community is was a bit rare, Schlude and the students took their project one step further. They decided to share their efforts with the public. They recast their work

into a written form that was appropriate for public consumption and then submitted it to the *Star Tribune*, which wisely accepted it, as noted above. Faculty occasionally participate in such public intellectual discussions (faculty members like Louis Johnston, Nick Hayes and Annette Atkins are regulars on Minnesota Public Radio), but these are typically solo efforts. When students are involved, they are typically working as research assistants and more often than not they are graduate students. In this rare case, Schlude made undergraduates his collaborators and co-authors, a generous act for any professor but especially for an assistant professor who might naturally be focused on his own publication record.

A fortuitous public event, a creative faculty member and engaged students provided our students with a series of invaluable learning experiences that they will remember for years after they have graduated.

This kind of learning does not occur only at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, but I can say with great confidence that it happens most often at small, residential, liberal arts schools because of our unique and rare (only 5% of undergraduates attend such institutions) educational model and the kinds of faculty and students we attract.

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By [Michael Hemesath](#) | December 15th, 2014 | Categories: [Higher Education](#), [History](#) | [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](#).