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3-23-2015

## Minnesota's hot

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### Recommended Citation

Hemesath M. 2015 Mar 23. Minnesota's hot [blog]. Quad 136. [Accessed 2017 June 12].  
<http://blogs.csbsju.edu/mhemesath/2015/03/23/minnesotas-hot/>.

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### Minnesota's Hot



Geography plays an important part in the college choice of most undergraduates. Students understandably care about where they will spend their college years. Urban, rural or suburban? North, south, east or west? Climate? Culture? Amenities and activities near campus? All these matter. What may matter most to many students (and parents) is the distance from, or maybe nearness to, home. According to our institutional research staff, over half of college students travel less than 100 miles to go to college and less than 20% travel more than 500 miles.

Most colleges can draw a circle with a radius of 500 miles around the campus and know where the vast majority of their students come from. They can also know from which areas they will find it hard to recruit. And schools will naturally have a great interest in the demographics of their “admissions circle.”

At the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, in central Minnesota, we tend to think of geography as at least a little bit of a challenge. There are great students in Minnesota, but other than the Twin Cities our “admissions circle” has no major metropolitan areas (sorry, Fargo and Duluth, we love you but you don't fit the definition of “major metro” area). Chicago is an hour away by plane and just 500 miles from Collegetown, but for undergraduates outside of New England, crossing two state borders is a rarity.

The other issue for Minnesota schools is, of course, climate. For much of the country, Minnesota is best known from storms featured on the Weather Channel and for often having the lowest winter temperatures in the country in places like Embarrass or International Falls. The typical undergraduate does not envision romance blooming while cross country skiing on a frozen lake or delight in pulling on mukluks and a parka to hit the library.

I could go on about the highly underrated charms of the upper Midwest in winter, but there is another aspect of geography that is even less appreciated by the typical undergraduate: the economic climate.

Most students and their parents rightly think about college as an investment that will pay rewards over a lifetime. Their implicit, or sometimes explicit, calculus considers the costs of the investment and the professional rewards that will come from a degree and sometimes even from a specific major, if the student has a clear academic and vocational focus.

But there is another economic variable that is often ignored: what kind of job market will the student graduate into? Obviously this depends on the macroeconomic conditions, specifically where we are in the business cycle, but it also will often depend on the economic environment of the geographic region in which the student is seeking employment. And while the overall state of the economy matters, different geographic regions often have widely variable economic prospects.

Why does this matter in the choice of one's undergraduate institution? Well, just as students often don't travel very far to study, they will often not travel very far to seek their first jobs. With their friends tending to stay nearby or still being in college, students will often seek work in the areas around their alma maters. Employers from that same region will tend to recruit at their alma maters. Most importantly for schools like CSB and SJU that have very loyal and committed alumni, the professional networks are strongest in the geographic area near the educational institutions.

All of this is simply to suggest that when students believe they are choosing a college for four years, they might actually be committing to a geographic region for longer than that and at least considering that possibility might be wise. If, on the margin, students include the surrounding, long-term economic environment in their calculations, it might argue for being willing to look farther afield for their undergraduate education. It might even get them to consider the upper Midwest more carefully, meteorological considerations notwithstanding.

Regularly, there are stories that examine “best places to live” or economic conditions in different regions. Minnesota has done well historically in such rankings and the state has been getting particularly good press lately. A recent [Money magazine](#) story had three Twin Cities suburbs in the top 15 on its “Best Places to Live 2014” list. An article in the March [Atlantic magazine](#) touted “The Miracle of Minneapolis” for combining good white collar jobs with above average wages and affordable housing, unlike job markets on the two coasts.

*The Minneapolis–St. Paul metro area is richer by median household income than Pittsburgh or Salt Lake City (or New York, or Chicago, or Los Angeles). Among residents under 35, the Twin Cities place in the top 10 for highest college-graduation rate, highest median earnings, and lowest poverty rate, according to the most recent census figures. And yet, according to the Center for Housing Policy, low-income families can rent a home and commute to work more affordably in Minneapolis–St. Paul than in all but one other major metro area (Washington, D.C.). Perhaps most impressive, the Twin Cities have the highest employment rate for 18-to-34-year-olds in the country.*

In [Politico](#), the State of the States feature that examines the economic health of individual states found that, “Minnesota—with improvements in employment, infant mortality and the obesity rate—has nudged its way into a tie for the top spot, giving the Midwest a share of New Hampshire's repeat No. 1 showing.”

Obviously lots of factors should go into a thoughtful college decision. I would simply encourage students to think about the role of geography broadly. Who knows, you might find romance on a frozen lake and economic bliss for both of you nearby.

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By [Michael Hemesath](#) | March 23rd, 2015 | Categories: [Economics](#), [Higher Education](#) | [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](#).