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Product differentiation in the higher education market

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Product Differentiation in the Higher Education Market



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Conferences are a central part of academic life. Faculty members each know when the important national conferences are held in their disciplines, at which academic research is shared, a job market is often held and graduate school/professional friendships are renewed. Administrators have their own calendar of conferences that address administrative concerns: mentoring and staff development, the pressing challenges in higher education, legal or regulatory or re-accreditation issues, student life topics, etc.

As important and substantive as the formal sessions at conferences can be, I have always found the informal conversations with colleagues to be most helpful. They provide an opportunity to probe more deeply into topics and learn about the specifics of the challenges and issues facing other colleagues, departments or institutions. Invariably and unsurprisingly, I find myself comparing life at Saint John's and Saint Ben's to that being described (of course only imperfectly) by my conversation partner. They are undoubtedly doing the same.

I recently attended a conference sponsored by the Lilly Foundation for colleges and universities that are sponsored by religious orders or affiliated with various Christian denominations. The topic was "leadership for mission:" how do different schools encourage and mentor faculty and staff to include a focus on the religious mission (however defined) of the institution? While these conversations and presentations were helpful and engaging, what I found most interesting were the ways in which different schools were choosing to approach the very competitive higher education market.

A common approach of the particular schools at this conference was to use their religious tradition and history as a point of differentiation and even uniqueness. A number of the Protestant institutions were clearly seeking to attract primarily students (and presumably their parents) from their own traditions. This was done either through curriculum, where a number of required courses were taught with doctrinally determined syllabi, or through faculty hiring, with an explicit eye toward religious beliefs in addition to disciplinary training. In some cases all faculty have to be active members of the denomination sponsoring the institution.

There are a number of Catholic institutions that are part of the Lilly network and several of them were represented at this conference. What was striking, though probably a statistical aberration, was the different approach they took to

differentiation. They tended to present themselves as Catholic with an emphasis on their founding order: Jesuit or Franciscan or Sisters of Mercy, etc. But there was also an explicit openness to other faith traditions, both for students and faculty. They were Catholic and catholic—making diversity, ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue selling points.

These observations simply suggest that the diversity in American higher education is rich and deep and more complicated than most outside observers understand. The hundred or so schools that are part of the Lilly Network of Church-Related Institutions might, at first glance, appear to be very similar, but they are not, despite a commitment to a religious tradition. And what is even more interesting is that when exploring institutional subtleties of the differences, they do not follow expected patterns, say along Catholic and Protestant lines.

Plenty of Protestant schools emphasize their small “c” catholic mission. In Minnesota alone, places like St. Olaf, Augsburg, Gustavus Adolphus and Concordia—Moorhead have a lot more in common with many of their ecumenical Catholic peers, like the college of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University, than they do with some of their more traditional Lutheran co-religionists, at least in how they position themselves in higher education.

At the same time, there are, of course, Catholic institutions that emphasize their **capital “C” Catholicism**—Ave Maria in Florida, Franciscan University of Steubenville, University of Dallas, Benedictine College, among others. While none of these schools happened to be at this Lilly Conference, Catholic schools approach their mission and differentiation in the marketplace in the same fashion as some of their more traditional Protestant peer schools do.

There is no right way to approach the market, though both of these broadly described approaches have their obvious downsides. If the pool is too narrow or changes for some reason, institutions with a more focused approach could find themselves without a sustainable market. Those who have a broader mission could be so expansive as to have no clear identity—trying to be all things to all students could result in being nothing to any.

While deciding among and living out these significant differences requires thought, nuance and hard work on the part of the individual schools, they are a great thing for students. Product differentiation results in an incredible range of choices and the ability of higher education to meet the needs of a wide range of students. Choice among so many excellent options is arguably the greatest glory of American higher education. It explains why we continue to attract **nearly a million international** students to our shores for their undergraduate and graduate education.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | November 5th, 2015 | Categories: [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](#).