Product differentiation in the higher education market

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Product Differentiation in the Higher Education Market

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
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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.