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Assessment: the parent test

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Quad 136

Assessment: The Parent Test

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Assessment: The Parent Test



In recent years there has been a growing focus on assessment in higher education. The basic question is, “Are colleges and universities providing students the education they purport to?”

A whole industry has grown up around this complicated topic, with **professional associations**, conferences and the inevitable **pushback**. A common methodology in educational assessment is to look at outcomes. What does the student know after a particular educational experience? How do graduates perform in professional settings after earning their degrees? It is certainly understandable that students and parents want to know what to expect for their investment in education. While I certainly care about many of the metrics used in assessment —

graduate school acceptances, professional successes, income etc.—I have developed my own informal assessment tool which I call, “The Parent Test.”



I am very happy when students on campus tell me how much they love being at Saint John’s or when recent alumni tell me how much they miss the time in Collegeville, but the proof of the educational pudding for me is what parents say about their sons’ experience. Not only have they typically footed much of the bill, but, more importantly, they have the distance and wisdom to make a thoughtful assessment.

Parents each have a vision for the kind of person they want their son to become, the kind of life they hope he will lead and the happiness they hope he will enjoy. So I often ask parents when I meet them on

campus how they think their son’s education is going and how we are doing. But it is also quite common that a parent will communicate to me or someone else at Saint John’s to offer an unsolicited “thank you” for what we did for their son. These stories are more powerful and meaningful than any quantitative assessment measure could ever be.

1. From a parent of two Johnnies who came from a very rural setting and a different cultural milieu:

Scott and Sam are my sons. They are non-majority students, who are from a tiny, remote village. They were not raised Catholic. They graduated with honors from their small high school, where they were good athletes. At times they occasionally got into a little mischief. With deepest gratitude, I wish to thank St. John's University for their enrollment, education, guidance provided, forbearance offered, and the molding of their character. Your professional and Christian endeavors goes not without notice. I shall be forever grateful and shall remain a stalwart ambassador promoting the superior educational experience of St. John's University.

Deepest Regards,

A grateful father

2. I got a recent call from the president of another university. He had been talking to a local parent who happened to have a first year son at Saint John's. The son was thinking about transferring (there was a girlfriend involved), much to the deep chagrin of his parents who had come to believe that Saint John's was just the right place for their son, even though it was some distance from their home. They were struggling with the desire to let their son make his own decisions and their own belief that the educational experience at SJU was superior to anything he would find elsewhere. The president was calling to see if there was anything we might do to encourage the young man to stay.
3. An alum told me the story of his college decision. His older brother was a Johnnie, and he was looking at Saint John's along with a number of other schools. He had an inkling that his parents were not indifferent about his choices, but they were being very careful not influence him. When he finally told his father of his decision to come to Saint John's, his dad said, "Your brother had a great experience there, and you will, too. If I had to do it all over again, I would have gone to Saint John's, too."
4. At a conference, when another college president from the east coast found out I was from Saint John's, told me his son was a Johnnie alum. He said his son was living in the Twin Cities, loving his teaching career, was happily married to a Bennie from Minnesota and his first child had just been born. I smiled and asked if he thought his son might ever return east to be closer to home. With some certainty he said, "No, he is a Minnesotan now." I asked if this made him or his wife a little sad, especially with their first grandchild now in Minnesota. He said, "Absolutely not. Saint John's was the perfect place for our son, and we are delighted he went there and had the experiences he did and met his wife. We can always travel to Minnesota."
5. At a charity event in the Twin Cities, a father approached me and said, "I want to thank you and Saint John's for what you did for our son. He had a great academic experience that has led to a job he loves. He has a great group of friends he sees often—even having a second Thanksgiving with them after our family gathering. But most importantly, he has grown into a young man of character and substance that his mother and I are exceptionally proud of."
6. At a conference of Catholic college presidents, yet another college president approached me. She said,

I have two sons that are Johnnies. Both are doing great, but my younger son struggled early in college. He followed his older brother to Saint John's because of the great experience Joe was having. But Jacob was not Joe. He was not as strong a student and did not have the same focus. Soon Jacob was floundering emotionally, struggling academically and was considering dropping out. Then Professor X reached out to Jacob and showed an interest in him. With regular conversations Professor X soon became a mentor to Jacob, who quickly found an academic focus in Professor X's department, developed

new friendships through his major and went on to have as good an experience as his older brother. When I think about what would have happened to Jacob if he had left Saint John's, I have come to believe that Saint John's saved my son.

I'd love to find a way to quantify The Parent Test. I think we are an elite school by this measure.

Michael Hemesath | February 16th, 2016 | Categories: [Alumni](#), [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](#).