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## Social capital and first-generation students

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## Quad 136

### Social Capital and First-Generation Students

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## Social Capital and First-Generation Students



I recently had a conversation with an alumnus who was generously sharing his time and treasure to help underserved first-generation high school students in his area make their way to and through college. He told me that he had generally been recommending that students go to mid-tier public institutions because of the lower cost and debt burden. I was a bit surprised at this advice coming from a Johnnie who had had a very good experience at SJU that had contributed to his significant

professional success.

While certainly there is a place in higher education for a full range of public institutions—flagship research 1 schools, like the University of Minnesota, mid-sized publics, like St. Cloud State University, public liberal arts schools such as the University of Minnesota-Morris, and many two-year community and technical colleges—but private institutions like CSB and SJU can be especially good places for first-generation students.

We are much more affordable than many people – even our alumni – understand. At Saint John's and Saint Ben's, we work very hard to provide financial aid packages to make our education as affordable as possible to all students. With the generous help of our donors, we package scholarships, work-study awards and loans so students graduate with manageable debts that do not limit their job choices.

But beyond the financial issues, small private liberal arts institutions offer an additional and under-appreciated benefit to first-generation students: mentoring. As the [Gallup-Purdue Survey](#) reported,

having a good mentor in college was the key to “thriving” personally and professionally after college. This mentoring can be especially important to first-generation students who often do not have the social capital that comes with growing up in a middle class, college educated household.

This issue of social capital is discussed in higher education but has recently been talked about more widely because of the memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* written by J.D. Vance, a Yale law school graduate from a dysfunctional family in Appalachia. The **story** describes his life as a Marine who deployed to Iraq, then returned to go to college at Ohio State and then on to law school at Yale, where his lack of social capital became more apparent and presented challenges. Among the things he did not know prior to going to Yale Law School: sparkling water is just carbonated water, which fork to use at a formal dinner, that his belt and shoes should match, that finance was an industry. More importantly, he did not know the rules and processes for networking to get summer internships and eventually full-time jobs.



Richard Feynman, The Nobel Foundation

This kind of social capital is taken for granted by most students from middle class backgrounds but needs to be addressed directly and openly with all students. At Saint John’s and Saint Ben’s we offer Etiquette Dinners for students who will soon be partaking in job interview dinners. Career Services educates students about how to dress for interviews. We have a great alumni network that helps students of all backgrounds prepare for internships and the job market. But most importantly we have staff and faculty who take issues of mentoring and social capital seriously from day one and are especially attentive to the needs of our many first-generation students. Our staff and faculty understand that a holistic education is about more than classroom learning. Openly addressing the disparities in social capital does not make them go away, but it is the first step in eliminating these often unspoken norms that can be a barrier to students’ success in the classroom and beyond.

Writing about this topic reminded me of an **amusing story** told by Nobel Laureate Richard Feynman:

*Feynman had attended MIT as an undergraduate, where social etiquette was not high on the value scale. He went to Princeton University for his master’s degree in physics. The new students were invited to tea at the Dean’s house. Feynman was told to wear a jacket and act properly. He was worried a bit, because the Dean’s wife had the*

*reputation as being a starched-pants dragon lady.*

*She appeared with a tea pot in her white-gloved hands. She poured. He thanked her, thinking he had passed a test. But it was only the beginning.*

*“And how do you take your tea, Mr. Feynman?” she asked.*

*“How do I take it?” he asked, probably thinking, I’m from Far Rockaway, New York. We don’t take our tea anywhere, because we never drink the stuff back home.*

*“Do you take your tea with milk or lemon?” she asked.*

*He had to think about this a moment, and answered bravely, “Both!”*

*The society smile froze on her face in a horrified rictus. “Surely you’re joking, Mr. Feynman!”*

The story led to a book of amusing Feynman stories entitled *Surely You’re Joking, Mr. Feynman!* Readers can laugh with Feynman years later with his Nobel Prize in hand, but I suspect Feynman was not laughing the day of the tea. For first-generation students, the lack of social capital can be painful, as well as a real barrier to their academic and professional success.

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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](#).