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To speak for Saint John's—or not*

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Quad 136

To Speak for Saint John's—Or Not

[◻ Previous](#) [Next ◻](#)

To Speak for Saint John's—Or Not*



Saint John's
UNIVERSITY

Rarely does a week go by when I am not asked, as the President of Saint John's, to commit the University to a position on some public issue beyond Collegeville. The requests come from alumni, parents, students, faculty and outside organizations. Each wants the public support of Saint John's on a particular issue. These issues typically have two characteristics. They are complicated and multidimensional—no one asks Saint John's to support motherhood and apple pie—and they are emotional—the individuals requesting the University's support typically feel very strongly about the issue, as do those on the other side. The most recent request was to take a position on President Trump's executive order on immigration.

As these requests started coming more often, I decided it was important to have some general guidelines and not respond on a case by case basis. I am in an incredibly privileged position to be able to make, with input from colleagues, such judgments, but it is also a position that I approach with great care. I very rarely want others to speak for me, and I assume that is true of others in the Saint John's community as well.

I now approach these issues by asking three questions:

The first question I ask is, "Who is Saint John's?" As an institution, we represent many constituencies and between monks, employees, students and alumni, Saint John's is more than 25,000 individuals. If you include parents and friends, the number approaches 40,000. We are

a very diverse community, which is a tremendous strength, but does not lend itself to homogeneity of thought.

As such, I am very, very hesitant to offer an “institutional” position on any political or social issue because in virtually every case there will be significant disagreement within the community. Institutions don't normally have opinions or positions, individuals do, and I do not feel it is my right or the University's right to speak for those individuals on political or social issues where they naturally have their own views and where thoughtful, well-intentioned Johnnies are likely to disagree.

The second question I consider is about exceptions to this general guideline above. Does the issue at hand have a direct and significant effect on our students and our educational mission? For example, there is an ongoing debate around Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a law that, under certain conditions, prevents the deportation of undocumented students who came to the United States as children. This issue clearly has a direct impact on some of our students, and Saint John's took a public stance this fall in support of the continuation of DACA. Because the law has a direct impact on some students and our goal of educating them, I felt it was appropriate to express and defend an institutional position, even as I know there are some in the Saint John's community who would disagree.



The third question I consider when asked to take a position is that of the educational impact. Is the issue at hand likely to come up in classrooms, dormitories or other public settings? If the political or social issue is part of an active public debate and is not directly about educational policy, no institutional position is usually the right choice for the education of our students.

I believe that when Saint John's takes an institutional position on any issue, we run the real risk of stifling debate on campus and within our community. If there is the perception that there is an orthodox or “correct” view on an issue, faculty, staff and especially students may feel they are not able to express their disagreement or even debate the merits of differing positions. This is particularly relevant in the classroom and is a position I have come to from over twenty-five years as a professor. There can be no more harmful action at an educational institution than to do something that limits, or even risks limiting, the freedom of expression and the free exchange

of ideas. That, of course, is what academic freedom and education are all about.

Saint John's University, as an institution, will certainly help our students in almost any way we can to pursue and achieve their educational dreams, but only in rare circumstances does this include taking a public and official university stance on a matter of policy or politics. Sometimes no position is truly the best position.

A version of this post will appear in CSB/SJU's student newspaper, [The Record](#), on February 10, 2017.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | February 9th, 2017 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | [16 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](#).