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What will you be? Who will you be?

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Quad 136



What Will You Be? Who Will You Be?

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What Will You Be? Who Will You Be?

We are in the midst of the college recruiting season, when schools are working hard to convince high school seniors to come to their institutions, students are weighing multiple offers and parents are just hoping it will all end happily and soon.

Typically—and understandably—at the top of a student’s list of concerns when they are looking at colleges is the question of how this investment will help them in their professional life: “*What* will I become after going to college?”

College is an important and possibly even necessary stepping stone to professional success. As such, students should look carefully at a college’s specific fields of study, as well as their general education program. Institutions offer specific programs designed to be attractive to students and to meet the expected needs of the job market in the years ahead. Colleges also emphasize the broad-based skills that will serve students not only in their first position but over a lifelong career that is likely to include multiple different jobs. Schools emphasize critical thinking, good written and oral communication skills, the ability to work well with others, information literacy, and exposure to diverse cultures and ideas—all skills and experiences that employers report being important to professional success.

Students should also explore the learning opportunities outside the classroom. The multitude of extra-curricular offerings on most college campuses are not only an enjoyable diversion from academic responsibilities but contribute significantly to professional success for college graduates. Teamwork, time management and leadership skills are all necessary for student-athletes, student government leaders, service volunteers or writers on the school newspaper.

These experiences are directly transferable to the job market, both at the entry level and as a young person moves up in an organization.



It is obvious why a thoughtful student should be asking, “*What* will this college prepare me to be?” but in my role as president of Saint John’s, based on conversation with dozens of alumni, I have come to appreciate the importance of a second question wise prospective college students should ask as they consider their choices: “*Who* will I become by attending this institution?”

The years between the late teens and early twenties are very important for the personal development and growth of young people. When a student chooses a college, they are not only selecting an academic program, but they are joining a community. That community will help mold and shape the young person for four years and develop relationships what will often last a lifetime. What are the values of that community? Are they consistent with the developing world view and morals of that young person? How are individuals treated in the community? Are the faculty, staff and especially graduates from this institution respected, admirable and worthy of emulation? These are essential questions because they help answer the question of who the young person will become at an educational institution.

Understanding *who* an educational institution develops is certainly harder to determine than *what* graduates they produce. Character is subtler and more nuanced than a job title. But high school

students (and their parents) should spend some time exploring both the “What?” and “Who?” questions as they contemplate their higher education path.

Choosing wisely will bring not only economic and professional success but personal growth and meaning for a lifetime.



Naturally, my thoughts here are influenced by the experiences of Saint John’s alumni.

Alumni certainly appreciate, and their successes attest to, how well the Saint John’s experience prepared them for professional leadership in business, the academy, the arts, politics, health care, public service, and many other areas, but just as often they have noted that Saint John’s made them *who* they are.

I have often heard our alumni say, sometimes with surprise, they did not fully realize how important their SJU experience was in forming their character until they were some years beyond graduation.

It often struck them when making a decision about their personal or professional lives or when facing an ethical dilemma: “I am relying on the things I learned at Saint John’s, those years ago.” Sometimes it was their Catholic Benedictine experience. Other times it was a friend’s counsel. Often it was their relationship with a monk that had continued long past graduation.

For every Johnnie, you are part of Saint John’s and Saint John’s is part of you.

As our alumni succinctly put it, “I am because Saint John’s is.”

*A version of this column appeared in the St. Cloud Times

(<https://www.sctimes.com/story/opinion/2019/02/23/what-you-be-who-you-be/2930707002/>)

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