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7-31-2019

## Saint John's: ready for the next generation?

Michael Hemesath

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, mhemesath@csbsju.edu*

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### Recommended Citation

Hemesath M. 2019 July 31. Saint John's: ready for the next generation? [blog]. Quad 136. [Accessed 2020 April 3]. <https://blogs.csbsju.edu/mhemesath/2019/07/31/saint-johns-ready-for-the-next-generation/>.

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## Quad 136

### Saint John's: Ready for the Next Generation?

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[Previous](#)

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## Saint John's: Ready for the Next Generation?

Like every parent, my wife and I reflect on and sometimes worry about our sons' futures. On the one hand our boys were born into a family with extraordinary blessings. They were born in a country with unrivaled freedoms and opportunities. They were born in an era that is by far the richest in human history, with incredible scientific, technological and health care advances being made almost daily. The future could hardly be brighter for Cameron, Sebastian and Alexander.

And yet, as is true in every generation, there are challenges, hurdles and uncertainties that weigh on the minds of their parents, who also happen to be educators.

So as I reflect on the future of my sons, I also naturally think about the future for the next generation of Johnnies, those **iGen** or **Gen Z** (roughly the generation born after 1995) students who entered college in recent years and their younger siblings who will be the classmates of my sons.

While certainly not exhaustive and probably biased toward educational issues given my world view, the following are among the issues that I think about when I consider the future for Johnnies and my sons.

**Economic uncertainty.** While the **current economy** is very strong and unemployment rates are at their lowest levels in 60 years, the long run future is still uncertain. Uncertainty about the economic future has been part of the world since the Industrial Revolution and is mostly a good thing, at least compared to being tied to the land as a peasant or serf. A dynamic economy, however, requires new skills and talents of every generation. A globalizing and technologically

vibrant economy also seems to change even more quickly than in past decades. What will the job market need in ten years, to say nothing of 25 or 50 years? What skills and experiences will an educated employee need? What do those demands mean for educational institutions? That future is both exciting and unclear.



**Artificial Intelligence.** Related to the general economic uncertainty, but a 21st century phenomenon, is the rise of artificial intelligence (AI). The Luddites of the early Industrial Revolution worried that power looms and the steam engines would decrease the demand for textile workers because of the enhanced productivity these innovations brought. What is new, however, is the possibility that whole industries will cease to need humans. Will truck drivers still be needed in a world of self-driving vehicles? Will radiologists be needed to read x-rays? Will accountants be needed to reconcile and review financial transactions? What about lawyers? Could even counselors be **replaced by robots**? What work will require humans in this brave new world—work that will continue to provide meaning and callings and not just jobs?



**Digital natives and social media.** One thing is certainly clear: iGen students and my sons are digital natives. They have been swimming in technology from birth and live a screen-mediated existence. My 5 years-olds swipe, navigate and click with the best of them (which may be a reflection of their dad's parenting skills or lack thereof). Obviously facility with technology has benefits in education and in the job market. Such skills will be assumed in every educated adult. But, as is typically the case, there are tradeoffs, in part because digital natives are often deeply immersed in the social media world.

While social media can broaden kids' worlds and allow them to connect electronically with others, there is also preliminary evidence that **social media** may be **linked to stress**, depression and even suicide in kids.

Saint John's graduate Joe Cavanaugh '81, the founder of **Youth Frontiers** and a 30 year veteran of working with kids, reports seeing more socially challenged, stressed and anxious kids in his programs. How will this generation navigate through these choppy social waters? Will growing up screen focused harm children's ability to relate in person? What kinds of social skills will our children bring into adulthood? Will my sons grow up to be empathetic and socially engaged?



**Political and social climate.** Another unique aspect of the lives of iGeners is that they have come to political maturity in a time of heightened political and social tension. While maybe **not quite as fraught as the 1960s**, this generation's political and social experiences have often been either sharp, tense, emotional disagreement or cocooning, often on social media, **with like minded souls**. Will iGen Johnnies be able to listen and learn from each other? Will they be open to challenging their own world views and thoughtfully and modestly share their beliefs with others? Will they seek political and social engagement or simply withdraw into their family and private lives?



**Boys.** Finally, I think about the future of boys. Growing up presents its own issues and difficulties

for both boys and girls, but in recent years there has been increasing attention paid to the challenges faced by boys, with some observers even calling the school environment a “war against boys.” That description may be too strong, but it is certainly the case that by many measures boys are under-performing their sisters ([here](#) and [here](#)).

When [Title IX was passed in 1972](#),

*there was little doubt that the nation's colleges and universities failed to afford equality of opportunity to young women. Back then, only 42 percent of the students enrolled in American colleges were female. Forty-five years later, the reality is quite different. Gender ratios for college enrollment have flipped 180 degrees, with males comprising the 42 percent minority.*

*That's not the only major change in the last 45 years. Women now earn the majority of post- secondary degrees at every level. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, 52 percent of doctorates, 57 percent of master's degrees, 57 percent of bachelor's degrees, and 61 percent of associate degrees are awarded to women.*

Boys are also struggling in more personal ways. Boys are three times as likely to be diagnosed with emotional disturbances than girls and also three times as likely to be expelled from elementary and secondary schools. [Teenaged boys](#) are five times as likely to commit suicide and eight times as likely to be behind bars.

Behind these numbers is surely immeasurable personal pain and private challenges for individual boys and tremendous untapped potential for our country and the world. How can we help boys to realize all they can be for themselves, their families and our communities?



**Hope.** Despite the real challenges noted above for iGen Johnnies and my three sons, I look to the future with great hope for young men, in part because I have met hundreds of our graduates who are now parenting their sons (and daughters) with an eye and heart toward helping them reach their full potential. **Parental support** is certainly among the **most important factors** for thriving children.

I also am hopeful, with all due Benedictine modesty, because of what I have experienced and seen Saint John's University do for young men from the earliest Baby Boomers of the 1960s and continuing today for the earliest iGen graduates of recent years.

**Liberal Arts and Sciences.** The broad-based education the monks of Saint John's provided Baby Boomers certainly served them well judging by the personal and professional successes of our Johnnie alumni. In a far different economy, I believe iGeners will be served equally well. The classic arts and sciences have certainly not remained unchanged over the past 60 years, as every discipline has seen tremendous additions to knowledge, most of which have been incorporated into Saint John's syllabi and classrooms. It is not your father's philosophy or psychology or chemistry degree.

Furthermore, in addition to traditional skills like clear writing, analytical reasoning and quantitative analysis, the faculty now also emphasize oral communication, group work, cultural competencies and information literacy. Whether a student majors in an art or science field or a more vocationally oriented major like accounting or nursing, he leaves Collegeville with a breadth of knowledge and exposure to different ideas and ways of thinking that will serve him well over a career in an ever-changing job market. Saint John's graduates are lifetime learners because of their liberal arts and sciences orientation to the world.

These same graduates will also be prepared for the challenges artificial intelligence might offer. Robots are especially adept at rote tasks and responsibilities that require speed. What they are less good at are tasks that require being truly human. The things that make us most human—handling uncertainty, being empathetic, making ethical judgments, considering nuance—are all at the heart of a great liberal arts and sciences education, even as content and subjects change over time.

**The Residential Experience.** While there will certainly be a place in higher education for distance learning and the asynchronous delivery of content, living and learning on campus provided Baby Boomers the opportunity to interact with each other and with monks in and out of the classroom. Saint John's alums report that such experiences both stretched their world views and provided mentoring that helped them grow emotionally, socially, spiritually and intellectually.

These same experiences now benefit iGeners, though they have a much more diverse group of classmates, including women from Saint Ben's, and a far wider range of extra-curricular offerings to explore on campus and off. In addition, if the current generation of students comes to Saint John's less socially experienced, adept and comfortable than the Baby Boomers, the residential experience may well provide even more value-added than for earlier generations.

The residential setting also provides a needed antidote to the political and social balkanization of this historic moment. The political, ethnic, racial, religious, sexual orientation and geographic diversity currently found among Johnnies encourages and even requires that students get a little uncomfortable in their social and academic lives. They are living and learning in a world not unlike the one they will soon inhabit as adults, and they and the world are better for it.

**Men Only.** The single sex experience for both Baby Boomers and iGen lets men experience

authentic male relationships without the enticing but distracting presence of women on campus. At its best, when young men are truly committing to their peers and the Saint John's community, the unique single sex experience creates a brotherhood of relationships that often lasts a lifetime.

I remain deeply confident that the exceptional faculty and staff at Saint John's will continue to provide iGen Johnnies the transformative education that is the hallmark of the Johnnie experience.

Current Johnnies, of course, have women in their classes, but they also get more intentional programming on campus designed for men, around spiritual, emotional, academic and professional issues, among other topics. This explicit focus on men can counter some of the social and emotional challenges that iGen students face growing up.

**The Catholic and Benedictine Ethos.** The whole Johnnie experience is leavened by the unique Catholic and Benedictine ethos. This 1500-year tradition builds a moral foundation built on respect for individuals and self, builds commitment to the greater community, provides hospitality for all, and encourages the exploration of ultimate questions about meaning and values, all in an open and non-proselytizing manner.

At its best, the Johnnie experience remains transformative. A Saint John's education continues to feed intellectual hunger, support emotional needs, build social relationships, foster professional aspirations, and nurture the desire for meaning that every young man has.

I trust my sons will be able to have that experience too, once they get through the hurdles of elementary school, the angst of middle school and drama of high school!



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By [Michael Hemesath](#) | July 31st, 2019 | Categories: [Uncategorized](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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## About the Author: **Michael Hemesath**

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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**.