

3-3-2014

Challenges in higher ed: law school and the liberal arts college

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Recommended Citation

Hemesath M. 2014 Mar 3. Challenges in higher ed: law school and the liberal arts college [blog]. Quad 136. [Accessed 2017 June 1]. <http://blogs.csbsju.edu/mhemesath/2014/03/03/challenges-in-higher-ed-law-school-and-the-liberal-arts-college/>.

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Quad 136



Liberal Arts College

[Previous](#) [Next](#)

Challenges in Higher Ed: Law School and the Liberal Arts College



There has been plenty of news in recent years about the challenges in higher education. While undergraduate institutions are often the subject of these stories, and their challenges are very real (see [this](#) article in *The Gazette* and [this](#) article in the *Sentinel Source*), no part of higher ed has faced the travails that [law schools and law students](#) have.

Young lawyers graduate into an exceptionally challenging job market where many cannot find employment that uses the degree they worked hard, and, in many cases, borrowed significantly, to earn. A recent *New York Times* [article](#) profiled a very successful New York lawyer who was bankrupt (though of course a single data point, an anecdote, does not tell us much). These outcomes over the past few years suggest that there

maybe a downsizing occurring in the legal profession, though the US economy is not operating at full employment, so it is hard to know exactly what the long run equilibrium will look like in the market for lawyers.

Regardless of the long run outcome, law schools have seen a sharp decline in the number of applicants. With significant fixed costs in the form of faculty, especially tenured faculty, law schools have responded primarily by lowering tuition to attract applicants away from competitors and, ideally, increase the total number of applicants. This price cutting behavior was evident in the extreme with the recent [news](#) that Villanova's law school was offering three years of free tuition for students with good but not exceptional credentials.

Clearly this is not a viable long run strategy for Villanova or any other school that is lowering tuition so significantly that they cannot cover costs. The hope is, presumably, that competitors will drop out of the market and/or student demand will increase before financial reserves or endowments are depleted.

While those of us in the liberal arts world might breath a sigh of relief to not (currently) face the issues that law schools deans do, it is important for us to ask whether there are lessons to be learned from what is happening to law schools. I actually believe there are fewer lessons for residential liberal arts colleges than one might think. These two sectors of the higher education world simply do not have all that much in common. First, a law degree is a vocational degree, useful primarily in a specific, narrow range of markets, while an undergraduate liberal arts degree is a much broader education that is intentionally not vocation in the sense law school is. Second, the job market for lawyers and BAs is quite different. While the future of the legal profession is uncertain at present, there is little doubt that the demand for college educated young people will continue to

grow as the return on investment in undergraduate education remains high. Finally, a bachelor's degree is typically a first degree and students rarely come to college with any previous debt, while law school is a graduate degree that must be paid for after a bachelor's degree.

All these factors suggest that undergraduate liberal arts college can look forward to a growing pool of applicants (including a significant number of international students). This does not mean individual schools will not face challenges or that certain regions (the northeast and midwest) don't have worse demographic prospects than others. It also does not mean that undergraduate institutions cannot learn lessons about keeping their costs and staffing under control. But at the end of the day, what is happening in law schools is a sector specific challenge related directly to the changing demand for lawyers in the current economy, while a bachelor's degree, long a good investment, will increasingly be a required ticket for entrance to the middle and upper-middle class.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | March 3rd, 2014 | Categories: [Economics](#), [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](#).