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An institutional research professional on rankings: McGee speaks

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Quad 136

Rankings: McGee Speaks

[◻ Previous](#) [Next ◻](#)

An Institutional Research Professional on Rankings: McGee Speaks

COLLEGE OF
Saint Benedict



Saint John's
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The [last Quad 136](#) was about college rankings. As a follow-up on that post, Jon McGee (Vice President for Planning and Public Affairs at CSB/SJU) has some interesting observations about recent rankings of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University in some recent publications:

Last week, we posted a story on our website announcing our latest ranking in [US News](#). Both CSB (#89) and SJU (#74) moved up slightly this year in that ranking. We have been ranked among the top 100 national liberal arts colleges, between 50th and 100th, for more than a decade. The particular ranking position typically changes very little each year, an indication of both our ability to maintain our quality in relation to the *US News* criteria and the stability of the ranking model (which makes it very difficult to change by more than a few places from year to year). CSB and SJU both are very much like the other

institutions ranked around us (50th to 100th) in terms of financial resources (which are heavily weighted by *US News* and the most significant factor shaping differences in ranked position), student academic characteristics, and student outcomes.

We do not have a “*US News* strategy,” nor would a strategy likely have much influence changing our rank given the way they collect data and derive their lists. Still, we value being recognized among the top 100 national liberal arts colleges in the country; our rank affirms our standing as very high quality liberal arts institutions. Perhaps more important than the recent *US News* rankings, we recently were ranked as a Best Buy by the *Fiske Guide*, the only institutions in Minnesota to receive that recognition, and 2 of only 22 private colleges nationally so honored. Because price and value are particularly important factors in college search and selection today, our *Fiske Guide* rating (*Fiske* is among the oldest of the guidebook rankings) is particularly important and valuable. (*N.B. from Michael: We do not have a Fiske Guide Strategy either. We try to price our education in a way that makes it affordable to our students and families while also generating enough revenue to cover the costs of an excellent liberal arts education. The Fiske recognition is simply a nice byproduct of that philosophy, but we know it could disappear next year, and we don't lose sleep over that.*)

In addition to the “best college” list, *US News* also listed SJU in a tie for sixth on the “Up-and-Coming” list of national liberal arts colleges (last spring, college leaders across the country were asked to nominate institutions that had “made the most promising and innovative changes in the areas of academics, faculty, student life, campus or facilities”). CSB has been named an “Up-and-Coming” school in four of the last six years. CSB and SJU were again recognized by *US News* with 28 other colleges and universities for the quality of our study abroad program (*US News* does not list institutions in this category

in numerical rank). These smaller lists often get closer to evaluating the actual student experience. The central problem with all ranking systems is that they most often don't rank, evaluate, or capture what makes an institution truly distinctive or interesting.

We know from our own research, for example, that the quality of the community here and the deeply personal nature of the student experience here are among our strongest sources of comparative advantage – it's why many students choose us and what most alumnae and alumni point to as most valuable about their experience here. We also know from a recent survey of alumnae and alumni who graduated in the last ten years that their experiences here prepared them very well for the demands and rigors of the contemporary professional workplace. No magazine ranking has ever captured either of these important distinctions.

I'm certain both CSB and SJU will continue to be ranked among the best liberal arts colleges in the country for years to come – not simply because a magazine's algorithm told us so, but mostly because we are deeply committed to providing high quality curricular and co-curricular experiences for our students. Continuing to provide high quality experiences is our central strategy. Rankings follow that strategy, they don't lead it.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | September 25th, 2014 | Categories: [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](#).