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## Access, human potential and administrators

Michael Hemesath

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

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## Quad 136

### Access, Human Potential and Administrators

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## Access, Human Potential and Administrators

One of the most common questions I get asked by alumni, parents and friends of Saint John's is why the rate of increase in tuition over the past few decades has been so much higher than the general rate of inflation. This is an important question that one could write a whole book on and, if you're inclined to read about it, I'd recommend *Why Does College Cost So Much?* by economists Robert Archibald and David Feldman, but one important part of the answer has to do with the changing population of students that higher education now serves.

As college has gone from an optional post-high school path to an almost necessary experience for entry into the middle class, assuring access to the widest range of possible students has become a central part of the mission of most colleges. Furthermore, the related issues of retention and completion have taken on more significance as colleges have both an economic incentive and, arguably, a moral obligation to help the students they admit to graduate.

As a greater percentage of high school graduates enrolling in college has grown from under 50% in 1975 to 66% today, many of the Millennials that schools are enrolling are different in important ways from the Baby Boomers. As a group, they have more learning disabilities, mental health issues and are less prepared academically. This is not to say the current generation of students is less well-educated or less healthy, but, rather, that as schools have increased their enrollments over time, they are admitting students they would not have admitted a generation earlier. If a student had serious dyslexia in the 1970s, college simply would have been an unlikely path. Or, if a student had mental health issues during that era, colleges would not have been prepared to deal with them, and students and parents knew that attending college was not a possibility.

A recent *Wall Street Journal* [article](#) examined this important change. In "Students Flood College Mental-Health Centers," reporter Andrea Petersen writes:

*Ohio State has seen a 43% jump in the past five years in the number of students being treated at the university's counseling center. At the University of Central Florida in Orlando, the increase has been about 12% each year over the past decade. At the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, demand for counseling-center services has increased by 36% in the last seven years. Nationwide, 17% of college students were diagnosed with or treated for anxiety problems during the past year, and 13.9% were diagnosed with or treated for depression.*

Colleges have acknowledged this change in students' needs and are working aggressively to respond, which would not have

been true a generation ago. Left to sink or swim on their own, most students with these issues would not have attempted college and, the few that did, typically dropped out.

The responses to the challenges of student mental health issues and learning disabilities have resulted in at least three significant changes in higher education:

1. **Costs.** The addition of highly educated professionals to support students has undoubtedly increased the costs of education. As the [WSJ article](#) notes, “To handle demand, Ohio State’s counseling center hired 12 additional staff members last year, bringing the total providing clinical services to 65.”
2. **Administrative “Bloat”?** As the number of counseling professionals grows to meet changing student needs, some professors [legitimately wonder](#) if the balance between faculty and administrators is moving in the wrong direction. Some observers of higher education believe the whole professional counseling enterprise is inappropriately coddling students and failing to prepare them for life, as can be seen in many of the comments following the [WSJ article](#).
3. **New Students.** There is no doubt that the availability of support services has increased access for many students who were not considered “college material” a generation ago and, once they enroll, these students are much more likely to graduate than they would be absent these services.



Is it possible that colleges overdo the support services—simultaneously driving up costs and potentially hurting students’ educational experience at the same time? Maybe. But I still recall a poignant conversation with a mother at commencement a few years ago. She said, “I cannot thank Saint John’s enough for helping my manic-depressive son get through college. I was not sure he would even go, and here he is successfully graduating in four years thanks to the support of your staff and faculty.”

It is hard to argue against investing in the human potential that went untapped in previous generations.

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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](#).