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Personal attention, mentoring and the liberal arts

Michael Hemesath

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

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Personal Attention, Mentoring and the Liberal Arts



Saint John's University student Tyler Brown ('15 of Sioux City, IA) recently had the honor of being named a **Truman Scholar for 2014**. This followed College of Saint Benedict student Rachel Mullin ('14 Humboldt, SD) receiving a Truman in 2013. Truman Scholars are honored for their commitment to public service and receive up to \$30,000 for graduate education. The scholarships are very competitive, with approximately 60 being awarded nationwide each year.

As I looked at **profiles of the winners**, I was struck by the colleges where the students came from. There were the usual winners from the Ivies, Stanford and Chicago, but a significant number came from small liberal arts schools, like SJU and CSB.

I did some quick math and found that in 2013, 24.2% (15/62) were from liberal arts schools and in 2014, 18.6% (11/59). Nation-wide, of the 9.4 million student enrolled at four-year schools, approximately 5% are

at liberal arts schools. So in this very competitive national scholarship competition, liberal arts students are over-represented by a factor of four to five. Why is this?

Part is explained by the quality of the students, though the vast majority of liberal arts schools are not as selective as the Ivies or even some of the most selective state institutions like UC-Berkeley, Michigan or Virginia.

So quality of student "input" matters, but I strongly suspect that the over-representation of liberal arts students is a function of the nature of education we provide. The liberal arts model is student-centered in a way large, research schools are not. Classes are small, faculty and staff get to know their students well, there is an emphasis on undergraduate research (often in collaboration with faculty) and mentoring of students is a significant reason why faculty and staff choose to be at these undergraduate oriented institutions.

This student-focused model leads to faculty helping students prepare for careers, volunteer opportunities, graduate school and even national scholarships. When faculty write letters, serve as references and offer personal advice to students, they do it from a position of deep knowledge of their students which makes these students more competitive in whatever endeavor they

want to pursue.

The concerns about the cost of higher education are real for families and students, but you often get what you pay for. Great liberal arts colleges must make serious, good faith attempts to keep costs under control, but they also do not need to apologize for the high-priced education they provide. For talented students who want personal attention and mentoring from great faculty and staff, the benefits exceed the costs, even if you are not a Truman Scholar.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | May 19th, 2014 | Categories: [Economics](#), [Higher Education](#), [Kudos](#) | [0 Comments](#)

About the Author: [Michael Hemesath](#)



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](#).