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Happiness: faith, family, friends and work

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Quad 136



Happiness: Faith, Family, Friends and work

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Happiness: Faith, Family, Friends and Work

Economists and psychologists have been studying happiness for many years. It turns out that due, in part, to twin studies at the University of Minnesota, we know that in some very important ways happiness depends on genetics. So, just like the advice given to world-class marathoners, choose your parents well!

But there are also important ways in which our *choices* affect our happiness. In a recent [New York Times article](#), Arthur Brooks, an economist at the American Enterprise Institute, wrote about how individuals can affect their own happiness.

It turns out that there are four things that affect individual happiness that we have direct control over: faith, family, community/friends and work. A video version of Brooks' summary of the happiness literature can be found [here](#).

As I reflected on the brief review of the happiness literature in the article, I was stuck by how much of our mission at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University lines up with these research results. Brooks' article emphasizes the importance of finding meaning in one's work, which might be described more succinctly as finding a vocation. This is certainly an important part of what we hope our students find and it is emphasized by having Benedictine monastic communities on our campuses.

Every day we see men and women who have thought long and hard about their life's vocation and have made a choice that many of us would find very hard—to live in a religious community and eschew many of the things others take for granted—material possessions, sexual relationships and families. Regardless of what path we choose, at CSB and SJU we have powerful monastic reminders of the importance of finding a vocation—deep meaning in the work we do.

Brooks spends less time on faith, family and friends/community, but of course those are essential to our mission at CSB/SJU. As Catholic Benedictine institutions, we take faith very seriously. Not with the goal of indoctrination in a specific faith (only 60% of our students report themselves to be Catholic), but rather with the goal of finding meaning and purpose in our lives, with the hope that we live for some greater purpose than simply ourselves.

Family is not the typical focus of 18-22 year olds, but we know that coming from stable, loving families plays an important part in our students' success at college and the vast majority of our students report that being part of a family is a long-term life goal.

Finally, community is a core Benedictine value that is central to the experience of our students, faculty and staff at CSB and SJU.

Many students form lifelong friendships here and maintain ties with these communities for decades after they leave.

Now I certainly am not promising happiness simply by coming to the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University. Nor am I claiming that we are the only educational institutions that help our students find happiness and meaning in life. But at a minimum, it is interesting that a 1500 year-old monastic tradition that emphasizes worship and work in a community setting seems to have much in common with a 21st century literature on happiness. Maybe St. Benedict was actually a social scientist long before the term even existed!

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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](#).