

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

Administration Publications

Administration

10-20-2014

Productivity, self-discipline and the residential experience

Michael Hemesath

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

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/admin_pubs



Part of the [Economics Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hemesath M. 2014 Oct 20. Productivity, self-discipline and the residential experience [blog]. Quad 136. [Accessed 2017 June 7]. <http://blogs.csbsju.edu/mhemesath/2014/10/20/productivity-self-discipline-and-the-residential-experience/>.

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Administration Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

Quad 136

Residential Experience

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

Productivity, Self-Discipline and the Residential Experience



Economists (and all the rest of society) care a lot about productivity at the macro level. Getting more output for the same set of inputs leads to higher income for individuals and higher GDP in the overall economy. Most empirical work on productivity is done at the macro level—looking at aggregate labor and capital inputs that produce output measured as GDP. An interesting recent *New York Times* [article](#), however, looks at productivity at the micro, that is, individual, level. Economist Sendhil Mullainathan describes the individual challenge of self-control or self-discipline:

In our own lives...we see a personal struggle. Tomorrow we want to finish that memo, review several files and plan that project. We know that some of the work will be tedious, but benefits like career advancement, fulfillment or just sheer survival outweigh the costs. When tomorrow becomes today, though, we may discover that we have all kinds of pressing problems. The tedium we had anticipated suddenly feels very large. It is tempting to take a break and just let our minds wander. In our own lives self-control is a big problem — yet it is largely absent from high-level discussions about worker productivity.

The article presents two interesting pieces of economic research on self-discipline, one from present-day India and one from the Industrial Revolution. Mullainathan and his colleagues [studied](#) the choices and productivity of data entry workers in India under different incentive schemes. What they discovered was that a significant number of workers opted for contractual arrangements that did not provide the opportunity to earn more than their normal wage but that did enforce the discipline to ensure that they did not slack off and earn less than their normal wage. In other words, the workers knew that they were not very self-disciplined and wanted contractual incentives that provided external discipline.

Reaching a similar conclusion in a very different setting, economic historian Greg Clark [has argued](#) that Industrial Revolution was importantly a revolution in self-discipline, the steam engine and spinning jenny notwithstanding. Textile workers working at home could control their schedules and their own productivity but, Clark argues, most were not very disciplined which affected their output and



standard of living. One of the most important innovations of the Industrial Revolution was the factory system, which, from one perspective, provided the discipline and oversight that allowed workers to overcome their lack of discipline.

In exchange for the external discipline within the factory, workers saw their standard of living rise and allowed the world to move beyond subsistence living which had been mankind's lot theretofore. As Professor Clark puts it, "Workers effectively hired capitalists to make them work harder. They lacked the self-control to achieve higher earnings on their own."

While all of this is fascinating in and of itself, at least if you are an economist, it also has potentially important implications for higher education. If self-discipline is a challenge for many, if not most, individuals, there may be significant benefits to a residential educational experience, beyond those we typically assume.

While there are certainly many benefits to the residential experience beyond the self-discipline it might encourage, this latter benefit may be underappreciated. Will students be more likely to go to class if there are officially scheduled class meetings? Are students more likely to attend class regularly if they have classmates, coaches and faculty that expect them to be there? Do students study harder if their roommate or friends are also studying? Are study groups likely to arise in an environment where studying is the norm? Are students more likely to complete degrees if advisors or the registrar or parents expect them and the rest of the class of 2018 to be done in four years? While not all undergraduates need the kind of discipline a residential setting provides, it is certainly plausible that many do.

If there are clear benefits from being educated in a residential setting, that might explain at least a couple of interesting observations about MOOCs. First, it might explain the very low completion rates we see with MOOCs. **Some studies find as few as 4%** of students that begin such courses actually complete them. This empirical observation may say less about the educational quality of the experience than about the challenges of self-discipline for the students enrolled.

Second, a number of observers, including some of our alumni, have reported great experiences with MOOCs and other kinds of online learning. They then naturally wonder and worry about how such learning might threaten traditional models such as the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University. The success and staying power of traditional models in the face of new alternatives may be less about the quality of the online experience than it is about how much self-discipline and motivation the typical 18 year old has.

We do not tend to think of educational Institutions as factories, unless you are **Pink Floyd**, but there may be more similarities than we might first think as we reflect on the challenges of self-discipline for individuals.

The factory analogy is probably a bit too simplistic. The educational experience at its best is surely more nuanced than making the proverbial widget, but the residential experience of undergraduates contributes to education in important ways that are more subtle and complex than we normally consider.

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](#).