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Mentors and community

Michael Hemesath

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

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Quad 136

Mentors and Community

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Mentors and Community



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Among the most important policy issues in higher education are the outcome from earning a bachelor's degree. The outcome most often measured is return on investment (ROI). What are the **economic gains** over a lifetime from a college education?

As important as this economic question is, students, parents and educators are rightly interested in broader measures of success too. A study done jointly by the Gallup Organization and Purdue University a couple years ago sought "to study the relationship between the college experience and college graduates' lives." The researchers developed an educational outcome called "**thriving**," which was how they described respondents who reported themselves to be "strong, consistent, and progressing — in all areas of their well-being."

The Gallup-Purdue researchers then attempt to identify specific aspects of the respondents' college experience that were correlated with "thriving." Not surprisingly, respondents noted the importance of their interactions with faculty. Respondents were significantly more likely to be thriving compare to their peers if, "I had at least one professor at

[College] who made me excited about learning" or "My professors at [College] cared about me as a person." These positive experiences are not unexpected, though the fact that only 63% of respondents had the former experience and 27% had the latter doesn't paint the most flattering picture of faculty-student engagement across higher education. (Though I quite confident both those numbers would be close to 100% for graduates of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University.)

As meaningful as faculty relationships are, a third finding of the Gallup-Purdue study is especially important to those of us in small residential liberal arts settings. Respondents in the survey were also significantly more likely to be "thriving" if, "I had a mentor who encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams." This mentor did not have to be a faculty member, yet only 22% of respondents reported having such a person in their life during college.

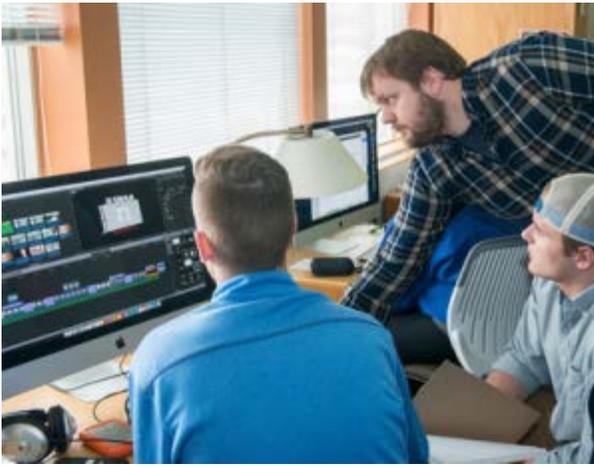


Photo: CSB/SJU Media Services

I was reminded of this study when a faculty member shared the following story with me:

A custodian who works at CSB and SJU was telling the faculty member that her child was about to start school here.

The faculty member emphasized the importance of the custodian's child developing a close relationship with a coach, staff person or faculty member during the first year or two in order to have a mentor to rely on during the inevitable ups and downs of college.

The custodian said she understood the importance of this through her own interactions with students. She went on to describe one of her student workers, whom she met a few years ago. This first generation student was not from Minnesota and came from modest economic circumstances. In the first semester away from home the student struggled mightily to adjust to the academic, social and cultural challenges of college at CSB and SJU. But midway through first semester the student told the custodian that it was not working. The student planned to finish the semester but not return.

The custodian told the student, "We'll get through this. One day at a time." And they did. Since that conversation, the student has spent time with the custodian over breaks, goes to her house to visit often during the semester, and the student's family has visited the custodian's house and family when they come to Minnesota to visit. The student now has a GPA nearly identical to the average of all students, and the student will graduate on time in 2017. By any measure, the student is thriving.

The student and custodian have no doubt that they will remain friends long after graduation.

The Gallup-Purdue research team titled their analysis "Life in College Matters for Life After College." This conclusion is hardly shocking for most educators, especially those of us in the residential liberal arts world, but it is a special tribute to the community at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University that its credo is lived out daily by all who interact with our students.

I and our students thank all those quiet but powerful mentors who generously and selflessly help our students thrive at CSB/SJU – and throughout their lives.

Michael Hemesath | September 12th, 2016 | Categories: [Economics](#), [Higher Education](#) | [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](#).