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Another way to assess the college experience: a caring professor

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Quad 136

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Another Way to Assess the College Experience: A Caring Professor



There has been much debate recently about how to assess the outcomes of a college education. This is naturally an issue of concern to students and parents, especially as the costs of college rise. How do you judge the quality of the experience? Does the value proposition work for students when costs top \$50,000 a year at many private institutions?

The traditional measures tend to focus on economic outcomes: employment, income and professional success. A recent survey takes another tack. A [Gallup Poll](#) sponsored by Purdue University “strives to measure the components of ‘great lives,’ as the report puts it. The study...will assess not only graduates’ financial well-being, but also their well-being related to their sense of purpose, their social lives, their

connectedness to the community, and their physical health.”

The table below summarizes the questions asked about the support students received and the experiences they had on campus.

The Undergraduate Experience: Support and Experiential and Deep Learning

	% Strongly agree
Support	
I had at least one professor at [College] who made me excited about learning.	63%
My professors at [College] cared about me as a person.	27%
I had a mentor who encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams.	22%
Strongly agree with all three support statements	14%
Experiential	
I worked on a project that took a semester or more to complete.	32%
I had an internship or job that allowed me to apply what I was learning in the classroom.	29%
I was extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations while attending [College].	20%
Strongly agree with all three experiential statements	6%
Strongly agree with all six statements	3%

Based on Web surveys of nearly 30,000 college graduates with Internet access from Feb. 4-March 7, 2014.
Gallup-Purdue Index

GALLUP

These results were released May 7th and drew the attention of the *New York Times* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. The key finding of the initial data, as described by the Chronicle:

College graduates, whether they went to a hoity-toity private college or a midtier public, had double the chances of being engaged in their work and were three times as likely to be thriving in their well-being if they connected with a professor on the campus who stimulated them, cared about them, and encouraged their hopes and dreams.

On the one hand, for those of us at residential liberal arts colleges, the response is, “Tell us something we didn’t know.” Our educational model is built on the mission of providing great personal, holistic support for students (“one professor who got me excited about learning” ONE??!! Please...) and engaging students in and out of the classroom.

On the other hand, the fact that this is both “news”* to much of the world and a mere 3% of the respondents could agree with all six statement in the survey is both a challenge and opportunity.

We need to help students and parents better understand what residential liberal arts colleges offer, but this survey (and likely future results) provides us with data that help make the case for the value proposition we offer. The residential liberal arts experience is about well-being for a lifetime; it is about preparing our students to lead great lives.

*This story got lots of play in the media, where the focus seems to be less on the value of an inspiring professor than on taking a slap at “prestigious” colleges and the Ivies, at least based on the headlines:

- Inside Higher Ed, [Gauging Graduates' Well-Being](#)
- Los Angeles Times, [Survey Finds Life Satisfaction Not Linked to Exclusive Colleges](#)
- NPR, [Poll: Prestigious Colleges Won't Make You Happier in Life or Work](#)
- Slate, [Poll Finds Going to that Ivy League College Won't Make You Happier](#)
- Time, [Going to a Top College Won't Make You Happier, Poll Says](#)
- U.S. News & World Report, [Gallup: College Type Has Little to Do With Success](#)
- Vox, [The Formula for a Good Life After College](#)
- Washington Post, [An Ivy League Degree Doesn't Make You Happier at Work. Here's Why.](#)

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | May 12th, 2014 | Categories: [Economics](#), [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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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](#).