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The Illusion of Hard Work

One of the worst things I can imagine is having hard work go in vain. The most prominent example of this in my life is when I study and work vigorously up to early morning at such as 2 AM, and yet only seem to get decent grades on exams. However, the moment I get a 75% on one exam, I have cursed myself into a seemingly endless loop of having to work even harder to catch up. That single test grade could make teachers think that I am slacker for the rest of the semester.

Horror stories like this occur all the time. My brother once told me a story about his friend. He had never received a test score below a 95 on any of the tests in a in one of this classes. Unfortunately, he was only given an 85 average. This difference in grades was only explained by a single comment on his third marking period report card: Lack of class participation. This drop in grades was completely unwarranted as according to my brother, he actively participated in class. Almost ironically, the bard of this story is the largest example of the failure of hard work and sustained effort. I have witnessed my brother working many late nights over the course of the last four years. He had his hopes set for Cornell, but like most humans, he made a couple of mistakes along the way. Many of these mistakes had effects that were amplified by my mother's bouts of rage at his mistakes. By the end of his career as a

student, all that was left was a pile of misfortune. He only got into a college only meant to be a last resort.

Seeing someone as bright as my brother fail this miserably did not exactly make my future prospects seem bright. These thoughts served as the motivation behind formulating my I-search question: Why does hard work and sustained effort not guarantee the desired success?

Research for this topic began when my English class and our teacher, Ms. Schechter was brought to the library to learn about finding reliable sources. To answer why hard work and sustained effort does not guarantee success, I needed to first understand just how much has changed with the effort to success ratio in the past. The librarians suggested the class to use the online databases that the school has paid for. What I found was unsatisfactory. However, the moment I use Google to find my answer, I found "The Effort Delusion" as the very first result. Scott Young's believes that hard work has been replaced with creativity, relationships, and learning(Young). Back in the old days of the agricultural and industrial era, effort was absolutely necessary. To feed yourself, you had to hunt, farm, or work in a factory. Modern technology has severely reduced the workload. He summarizes this shift as a replacement of the labor market with an information economy where ingenuity triumphs over effort (Young).

Creativity can cut workloads greatly. Factory workers have been replaced with robots, farmers are now replaced with more advanced machines, and even solving math problems has become easier with the advent of new software. Computer programs especially make redundant jobs easier in this day and age. I can recall when I spent twenty minutes writing a computer program for Microsoft Word that helped in creating a study guide for art appreciation. I had only spent one hour after that creating the study guide while my classmates spent three to four hours constructing their own.

Relationships have also become increasingly more valuable than effort. After all, why bother with looking for a job when you can ask your friend for a recommendation at his or her workplace. Splitting up work has also become increasingly more effective. While I was working on my art appreciation study guide by myself, there was an even more detailed study guide that was over thirty pages long made specifically for the previous semester. Minimal effort from a single student was put into that study guide, but with the power of editing documents online in real time, that study guide could have been constructed in a manner of weeks and have the potential to be much better than the study guides given by the teacher.

A couple days prior to the lessons in the library, my English teacher arranged for a day for people to suggest sources to answer our questions. Ms. Schechter suggested *Outliers* by Malcom Gladwell, and even offered to lend the book to me. I am not too fond of borrowing straight from the teacher (perhaps out of shyness), but lo and behold, my luck held out as the entire book was online for free. Gladwell writes, "The more he looked, the more Barnsley came to believe that what he was seeing was not a chance occurrence but an iron law of Canadian hockey: in any elite group of hockey players—the very best of the best—40 percent of the players will have been born between January and March, 30 percent between April and June, 20 percent between July and September.." (Gladwell 22-23). One of the influencing factors of success was actually pure luck. Canadian hockey players born in January hold an advantage as they play in the same league as peers born in the same calendar year. They will simply be older, stronger, and more experienced than hockey players born in December.

Before I even knew it, the deadline for the complete draft was looming just around the corner, and I was desperate for an interview. Luckily, I managed to have a brief interview with Kevin "Rymarq" P, a recent college graduate who majored in System Dynamics. I began by asking "What is your line of work?"

"I am unemployed..." Rymarq replied.

Not wanting to make this conversation more awkward, I moved on to the next question: "Are there any mistakes that you wish could be fixed when you applied for college?"

He simply responded " In applying? No idea, I got into basically every school I applied to."

I followed up by asking "How hard did you have to work to apply for those colleges?"

"Writing essays came naturally to me, and I had a broad extracurricular base. I basically lucked out into having a super-idealistic background. I started a few clubs in high school, was in boy scouts, did community service, went on a summer competition in Canada about environmental science and leadership training," he replied.

Hearing this comment was like placing the Sun next to a small lamp that is my life. Seeing something, such as college, be dismissed simply by natural academic talent in writing put my efforts in English to shame. However, the last portion of his statement does provide a clue as where to pour hard work and effort.

Rymarq did say he started a few clubs in high school, did boy scouts, and etc. Of course doing something as important as starting clubs and boy scouts would rack up a lot of points with colleges. My own mother told me that one of her friends had mediocre grades, but practically got into college just because she started some environmentalist club. This led to another question. Based on what criteria do colleges accept students into?

According to college board website, courses taken and grades are the prime factor, with test scores, recommendations, essays, and extracurricular activities. In terms of courses taken, taking courses despite knowing that you will get a lower grade will help and taking college level courses are important. For extracurricular activities, "depth of involvement is more impressive than breadth," (College Board). This means that deep involvement in clubs is valued more than joining multiple clubs. This supports what happened with Rymarq and my mom's coworker starting several jobs. However, the dreaded essays are weighted quite a bit. I say dreaded because juniors/seniors tend to have many college essays to write within a limited time frame. The college board states that colleges in general are looking for writing ability, briefness, and a voice in the essays. These traits may degrade as the junior/seniors pump out one essay after another. This is one place where hard work should end up.

Returning to the suggestion taking harder courses despite knowing that there will be a lower grade, I found an article, "The Effort Effect," by Marina Krakovsky, in the Stanford alumni magazine. It discusses the psychology behind effort in the context of school and the workplace. The article states:

He [Professor Pfeffer] faults businesses for spending too much time in rank-and- yank mode, grading and evaluating people instead of developing their skills...   
 Sternberg, a past president of the American Psychological Association, says that excessive concern with looking smart keeps you from making bold, visionary moves. “If you’re afraid of making mistakes, you’ll never learn on the job, and your whole approach becomes defensive: ‘I have to make sure I don’t screw up.’” (Krakovsky)

Simply put, you can try all you want keeping your grades up. However, placing the same amount of sustained effort into something harder is paradoxically worth more in the eyes of others.

What I gather from all this research is quite a bit. Many times, we are told that we do not work hard enough. Times seem to have changed. Creativity, exploiting relationships, and luck have become increasingly more important than hard work in today's developed society. It is almost depressing in a way knowing that the fruits of your labor could have easily been reached by someone else in a manner of minutes.

Going back to the inspiration for this paper, high school and college, I was also searching for a way for my hard work to be maximized to get into to the college of my choice. I have been giving my best in everything, but I can only produce a limited amount of work. Knowing when and where to focus your efforts is critical to achieve the best results. Exploiting relationships and finding shortcuts will make smooth out the entire process. I guess that famous saying holds true:"Work smart, but don't work hard."

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