

Spiritually Strengthening and Intellectually Enlarging Faculty: What Students Want

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ABSTRACT *What makes for a quality education at a religious university? In this research study, we asked both faculty and students at Brigham Young University to describe the factors that make a difference in an education that is both “spiritually strengthening and intellectually enlarging.” We explore the role that the gospel can play in secular learning and what students consider important in their courses and in their professors. One conclusion we draw from the data is that who the professor is (faculty characteristics) is more important than what the professors does (faculty techniques).*

The founding charge of BYU is to teach every subject with the Spirit of God. As he sent Karl G. Maeser to Provo to lead the fledgling Brigham Young Academy, Brigham Young told him: “Brother Maeser, I want you to remember that you ought not to teach even the alphabet or the multiplication tables without the Spirit of God.”¹ Reflecting on that charge, Elder Spencer W. Kimball explained that it is not intended “that all of the faculty should be categorically teaching religion constantly in their classes, but . . . that every . . . teacher in this institution would keep his subject matter bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel.”²

We have heard faculty across campus who desire to provide educational experiences to their students that are both “spiritually strengthening and intellectually enlarging” (Aims of a BYU Education) in the spirit of Brigham Young’s charge but who wonder how it can be done. Some have asked how they can cover everything necessary in their classes and still have time to incorporate gospel ideas. Others are concerned that praying in class or bringing up gospel topics may lead to less critical thinking and lower expectations for performance (a “Sunday School” approach). Still others are concerned that the

gospel may not fit with or inform course subjects that traditionally have no relationship to religion and therefore feel it may not be realistic to expect that every course in every discipline can be both intellectually enlarging and spiritually strengthening. This article reports on a multi-year, ongoing investigation by the BYU Faculty Center to learn from BYU faculty and students how Brigham Young’s charge is being implemented at the University today. Our hope is that these findings will stimulate more informed discussions and experiments to improve our ability to provide learning opportunities that are both spiritually strengthening and intellectually enlarging for our students.

Is Secular Learning Helped or Hindered by Spiritual/Gospel Integration?

We began our investigation by asking whether, in general, keeping one’s “subject matter bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel” (or seeking to be “spiritually strengthening”) is seen by students as helping rather than hindering their learning of academic subject matter. One data set we used was student ratings. We used the survey item, “I learned a great deal in this course” as a measure of intellectually enlarging. For “spiritually strengthening,” we averaged the ratings from the four relevant student rating items: “contributed to Aims,” “testimony strengthened,” “integrates gospel into subject,” and “spiritually inspiring.” We then looked at the correlation between these two variables using data from courses taught at BYU between fall 2006 and winter 2008.

Figure 1 presents the scatterplot of the correlation between “learned a great deal” and “spiritually strengthening.” The R squared was .48 and the correlation was $r=.693$, indicating a strong positive correlation between these two variables. Of course this result does not suggest causality, i.e., that involving the gospel in the class or being spiritually inspiring, for example, causes

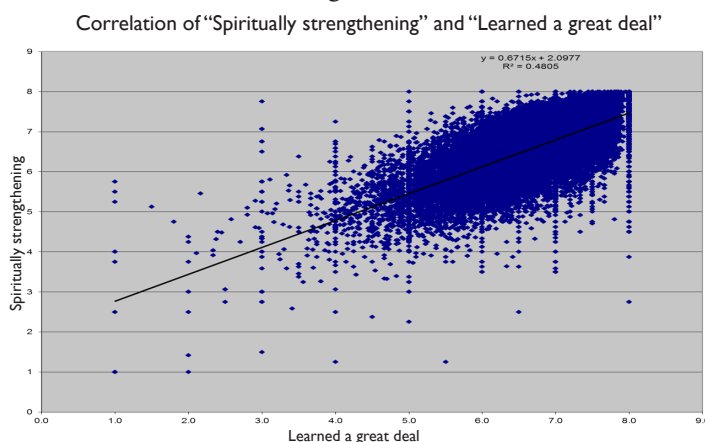
1 Brigham Young, in Reinhard Maeser, Karl G. Maeser: A Biography (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1928), p. 79.

2 Spencer W. Kimball, “Education for Eternity,” Preschool Address to BYU Faculty and Staff, 12 September 1967, p. 11.

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increased intellectual learning. Rather, it suggests that in BYU classes where students feel that they are learning a lot they also often feel that the course is spiritually strengthening in some way. It is important to note that many of the variables in the student ratings are correlated with each other (most correlate with “learned a great deal” at the level of between $r=.5$ and $r=.9$). In fact, these items were selected for inclusion in the instrument because they have been shown to be associated with good learning in a variety of studies. What is interesting to us is that these spiritually strengthening student rating items are associated with good teaching and learning at a level similar to other items included in the student ratings. We also conclude that there does not appear to be a contradiction in general between courses being both spiritually strengthening and helping students to learn a great deal.

Figure 1



Highly-rated Faculty “Hypotheses”

We wanted to understand in greater depth how BYU faculty can be both spiritually strengthening and intellectually enlarging and whether that varied across disciplines. Using the same student rating data, we identified faculty in each college who were in the top 25% of their respective colleges in both “amount learned” and our composite “spiritually strengthening” variables. In March and April of 2009, we invited these professors to participate in 90-minute focus group discussions in groups of 5 to 7. Forty-four professors participated. We filmed and transcribed these discussions and developed themes of common ways they were trying to strengthen their students both intellectually and spiritually. We also developed themes about ways in which they differed and even disagreed in their approaches.

Many of these professors remarked that they had some ideas about what helped students, but they suggested that

we ask students what they thought helped. Following their advice, we decided to distill what we learned from these highly-rated professors into a few preliminary “hypotheses” and survey students to determine their reactions. We will first present the responses of students to the hypotheses and then share the themes and advice from the highly-rated faculty members.

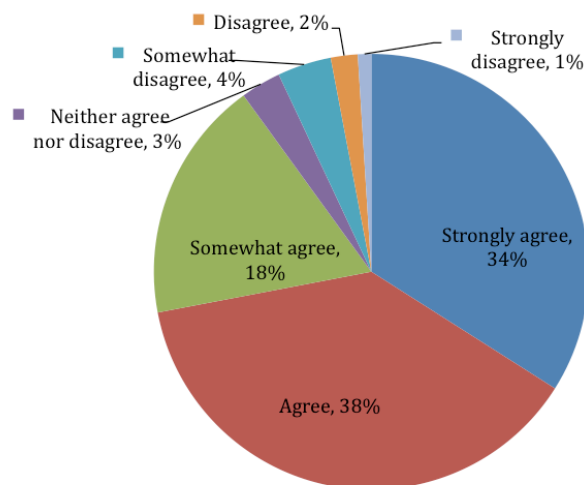
Student Survey

In order to collect data from students, we partnered with an applied-research graduate class under the direction of Professor Robert D. Ridge. In March 2010, the students sent a Qualtrics survey instrument via email to a random sample of 1200 sophomores and juniors at BYU to ask about the hypotheses we had generated, along with some more general questions. They received 451 useable responses (response rate of 28%), resulting in a 95% confidence interval ($\pm 3\%$). Based on their distribution of major, age, membership in the LDS Church, and ethnicity, the participants appeared to be representative of the BYU sophomore and junior student population. We selected this sample because students at this stage of their undergraduate experience are still taking, or can at least remember taking, general education classes and most have started taking major classes.

Students were first asked to what extent they agreed that “every course at BYU should be both spiritually strengthening and intellectually enlarging.” Figure 2 displays their responses in a pie chart. Seventy-two percent of the students “agree” or “agree strongly” with this statement and another 18% “somewhat agree.” Only 3% of the students “disagree” or “disagree strongly.”

Figure 2

Every course should be both spiritually strengthening and intellectually enlarging

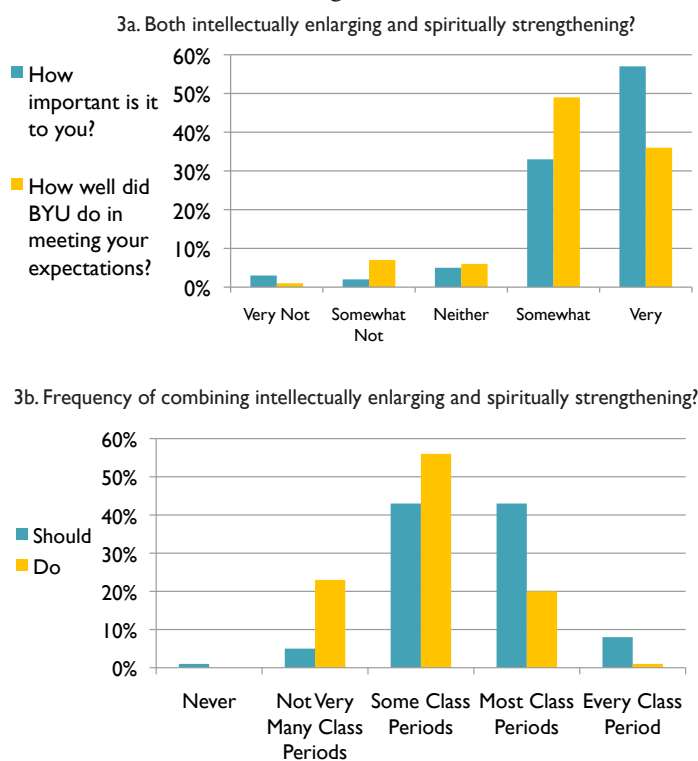


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It appears that only a few students may have questions similar to those raised by some BYU professors about the extent to which every course in every discipline can be both intellectually enlarging and spiritually strengthening. As one student expressed, referring to being spiritually strengthening, “it doesn’t necessarily matter what kind of a class, whether it’s big or small. If the professor wants to and they try, they can create an experience that will uplift the students.”

We next asked students for their assessment of the importance of courses being both spiritually and intellectually strengthening, how well BYU meets their expectations, and how often they have experienced this sort of teaching at BYU. Figure 3 displays their responses.

Figure 3



As can be seen in Figure 3a, almost 60% of our students feel that such courses are “very important” while only 35% believe we are doing “very well” at meeting their expectations. We can note that most of our students are in general expecting that BYU courses will involve some amount of both spiritual and intellectual content. One student put it this way:

The most meaningful classes that I have taken have helped me to understand how the gospel and the course topic are interconnected. The professors actively discuss gospel topics and how they apply to the course,

and they aren’t hesitant to get a little off-topic on a gospel topic if the situation comes up.

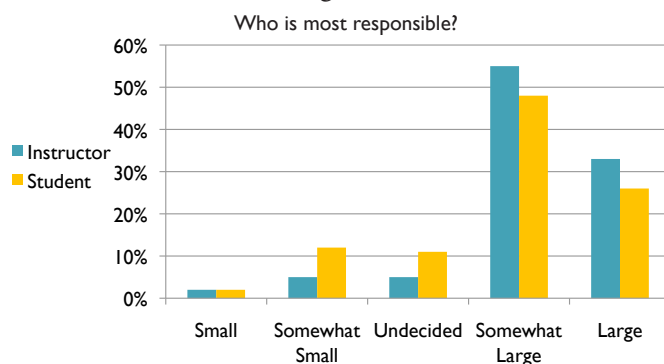
While most students think we are doing at least “somewhat well” in this area, they also suggest that we could do better. This perception of wanting more spiritually strengthening influences is reinforced in Figure 3b. On average, students are expecting to see a combination of spiritual and intellectual strengthening somewhere between “some” and “most class periods,” whereas their experience (on average) is that this occurs in only “some” class periods. However, for the most part they don’t appear to be suggesting that we stretch to make spiritual/gospel ideas fit. One student represented the feeling expressed by many:

I think that teachers and teaching assistants should take advantage of any opportunity they have to share gospel insights and/or connections when it fits in with secular subjects. But I do not feel like it is necessary or even effective if they go out of their way to make a stretched connection. But I definitely appreciate it when they genuinely express how their area of teaching has brought them joy, strengthened their testimony, brought them closer to the Lord, or however it helped them.

We explore in greater detail below the kinds of things students most value as spiritually strengthening elements in their classroom experience.

Rather than assuming that professors need to shoulder the entire responsibility for combining the spiritual and intellectual elements in class, students responded that they also bear a significant responsibility. As may be seen in Figure 4, they believe that the instructor bears the greatest responsibility, but they don’t place their own responsibility far behind.

Figure 4



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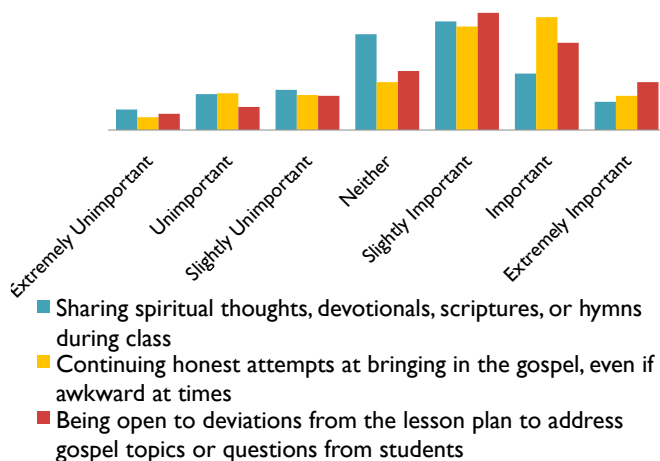
They do hope, however, that faculty will take the lead. For example, one student offered the following comment at the end of the survey:

There is no field of study that cannot help us come closer to God. Teachers need to be more clear though in making it comfortable for students to give spiritual insights. There have been many times when I have been in class or writing a paper and wanted to make a spiritual connection, but I did not know if that was acceptable.

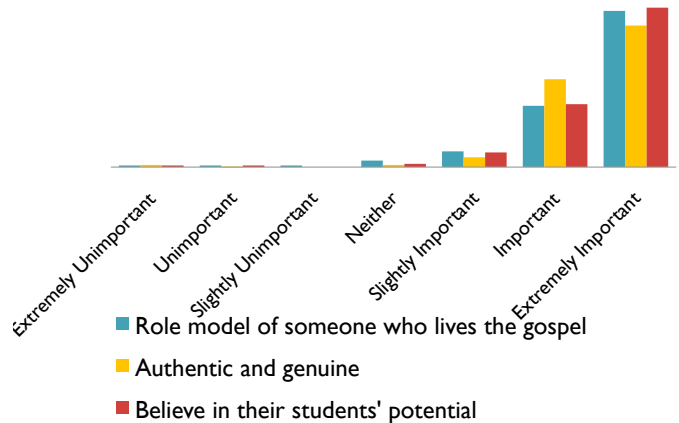
We next asked students what their professors could do to encourage such learning and gave them a number of factors mentioned by our highly-rated faculty members. We asked them to use a scale of “extremely important” to “extremely unimportant” to rate each factor. We were interested to see that while students felt most of these factors were at least “slightly important” on average, some of the things faculty members report to us anecdotally that they do rather frequently are among the least important to students compared with other factors. Figure 5a shows the lowest-rated factors. Figure 5b presents the average ratings for the most highly-rated factors, and Figure 5c contains a list of all of the factors we asked students to rate in order of their average importance to students.

Figure 5

5a. Lowest-rated factors for professors



5b. Highest-rated factors for professors



5c. Characteristics and Practices
(in order of importance to students)

- Showing they believe in students' potential (6.51 on a 7-point scale extremely unimportant=1 to extremely important=7)
- Being authentic and genuine (6.47)
- Being a role model of living the gospel (6.44)
- Helping students deal with professional ethical issues people of faith might encounter (5.97)
- Mentioning gospel connections and insights where it flows naturally (5.95)
- Feeling and expressing concern and empathy for the students (5.89)
- Having rigorous intellectual standards (5.7)
- Taking on controversial subjects in their field with a gospel perspective (5.56)
- Sharing personal experiences of reconciling differences between their faith and intellect (5.53)
- Being personal and sharing personal experiences (5.43)
- Praying in the classroom (5.42)
- Explicitly sharing their testimony on occasion (4.9)
- Being open to deviations from the lesson plan to address gospel topics or questions from the students (4.8)
- Continuing honest attempts at bringing in the gospel, even if awkward at times (4.74)
- Sharing spiritual thought, devotionals, scriptures, or hymns during class (4.34)

What is most interesting to us is that the factors students find most helpful are characteristics of professors more than techniques or specific practices. As we can see in Figure 5b, the large majority of our students are more interested in who we are (role models of living the gospel, and authentic and genuine) and how we feel about them (believe in their students' potential) than the specific things we do in the classroom. One student researcher who reviewed student focus group discussions (reported more fully later) noted:

I found it fascinating that most of the spiritual experiences that students have occur during moments when a faculty member is not overtly trying to integrate the gospel and scholarship. Rather, it can occur at any given moment when a faculty member is living a sincere and genuine life. Ultimately I learned

that often we learn more from what people do than from what they say.

Nevertheless, there are several quite important activities that students also value highly. For example, they appreciate receiving preparation to deal with professional ethical issues (e.g., how I can be a faithful church member in this profession), placing controversial subjects in a gospel context, and hearing how their professors reconcile differences between their faith and their intellectual learning. They also value gospel insights that seem to relate naturally to the subject at hand and having faculty members share personal experiences (related to their faith). Note that they also strongly agree that they are strengthened when professors have rigorous intellectual standards.

One of the most highly-valued practices—“feeling and expressing concern and empathy for the students”—relates again to what students think their professors feel about them more than an explicit connection to the gospel. Many of our highly-rated faculty members remarked that in their experience “students don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” While they recognized that some may think this phrase is trite, they felt it is nonetheless true. One student focus group researcher observed:

I thought that many students would say that in order to have faith in learning, you had to find some explicit way of showing such as prayer, share a scripture, or mention spiritual things. The students surprised me when they said that many of those things were not important to them. What was more important was how the teachers act and treat their students.

What do BYU students mean when they say they feel professors care about them? Figure 6 shows the actions of professors that most help students to feel the professor’s love or concern for them. We find it interesting that students aren’t in general asking for “soft” or “mushy” expressions of love from their professors. They appear to be most interested in having the faculty member help them progress, particularly with difficult assignments. They also appreciate being recognized as a unique individual with a name when possible.

Figure 6

Students feel the professor’s love/concern when the professor:

- Makes an effort to guide them in difficult assignments
- Remembers their name
- Makes self available for consultation and help
- Gives clear and constructive feedback

Student Focus Groups

We collaborated with Dr. Robert Ridge again in the winter semester of 2011 to see if we could gain more specific insights about what students mean when they say that faculty members are, for example, authentic and genuine, believe in their potential, or are good role models of living the gospel. We weren’t looking for specific techniques by which faculty members can act as if they were “authentic and genuine,” of course. Rather, we were hoping to get students to contrast what they see in faculty members who help them open themselves to both intellectual and spiritual growth with what they see in those who don’t help them as much. Dr. Ridge’s class conducted nine focus groups during March of 2011 with each group focusing on a specific characteristic (e.g., belief in student potential, authentic/genuine, etc.).

We have just begun to examine the transcripts of those focus groups and that analysis must be left for a subsequent effort. However, initial themes uncovered by Dr. Ridge’s students confirm what we are learning from the initial student survey, though in some unexpected ways. For example, we were surprised to note that no matter what specific question each focus group was asked to address, some of the same themes were represented in the responses of the students. They almost invariably mentioned the importance of having an instructor who really cares about their learning and extends himself/herself to get to know them, someone who is approachable. They often said that they saw a professor’s efforts to extend himself or herself in helping them learn as being Christ-like. One of the student focus group facilitators summarized these comments in this way:

I was amazed at how important this was to the students we talked to. The over-arching theme seemed to be that living the standards of the Gospel wasn’t manifested by saying prayers in class or singing hymns, but by acting as Christ would...In the end, what shows a student that teachers honestly strive to live the Gospel is when they love their students and are willing to sacrifice for them.

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This feeling encouraged them more than anything else to learn both intellectually and spiritually from these professors.

Many students expressed how important it was that faculty members knew or tried to know their names, even when the size of the class made it very difficult. One student offered an extraordinary example:

When I took physical science from Dr. X, he teaches about 900 students every semester but he has all of them give him their name, where they are from, and something unique about them, and he studies those on his bus rides to and from work every day. When someone raised their hand one day, he called her by name, said where she was from and she was like, 'How do you know my name?' and he was like, 'Oh, I met you on the bus coming to work this morning.' That is really impressive. Professors that make that sacrifice to do that, it makes all the difference to a student who feels that their education means nothing.

Students also appreciate a professor who is passionate about his or her subject, but many said that this effect was significantly less important if they didn't feel a sincere effort to help students learn that subject. One student expressed this feeling as follows:

In [some] classes where the teacher is really scholarly, really knowledgeable about their subject, I feel like they are just trying to survive the semester and that in turn, I feel like the students are just trying to survive the semester. And you get students asking 'Do we need to know this for the test, do we need to know the order of this' all you hear is test, test, test. And once the semester is over and you have any questions and want to go talk to the professor or anything, it's kind of like they're sweeping you under the rug, the semester is over you're not in my class, I have more students now you have to move on. But the opposite to that, teachers who are really scholarly, but also have a good testimony, care about their students, I feel so much more motivated in the classes to do my homework to keep caught up over what we've learned. And just by the things they bring up in class, it ...is like the class feels like it is ... thriving instead of just trying to survive. It is a much better environment to learn and to inspire thought.

Highly-rated Faculty Themes

We now turn to what highly-rated faculty members told us about what they felt most encouraged both spiritual and intellectual growth in their students. Perhaps what most intrigued us was that while we heard much agreement among them, we also noted some rather interesting differences among these professors. For example, one faculty member said:

I pray every day in class. I just decided I'd do that every day, not just at the beginning of the week, but every class. Because I'm thinking, what happens in this class, we've got to have the Spirit in here somehow.

Another faculty member in the same focus group responded:

I'm just the opposite, I never pray. I mean, I pray every day, but [not] in class. It's always been awkward for me. It's always seemed artific[ial] to me. And that's why, because there are several on our floor who do [pray in class] and some swear by it, and I on the other hand, I've always felt like it was awkward.³

Some of these faculty members share personal experiences with their students and others are quite reticent to open up their personal lives. Many of these faculty members felt that gospel or spiritual ideas should only be introduced spontaneously when the spirit is right or it just fits in very naturally with the flow of a discussion, while others carefully plan when and how to bring up gospel themes. A few even said that they would only bring gospel ideas up when a student explicitly raises a question about gospel connections (although they also seem to plan discussion questions that would lead students to raise just such questions).

These faculty members also varied in the relationship they see in general between the gospel and their discipline. Some see the gospel and the discipline as mutually reinforcing. Particularly in the sciences, several of these professors emphasized that there is no inherent incompatibility between searching for truth using science or relying on revelation from prophets and seeking inspiration in their work. However, others see their discipline as needing to be "disciplined" or improved using a thoughtful and faithful perspective based on modern revelation. Yet others see the scriptures and counsel from living prophets as ways to help students cope successfully

³ Students, on the other hand, seemed to be generally in favor of the idea of praying in class (see Figure 5c).

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and faithfully with professional challenges they would face rather than as a way to develop better or more faithful theoretical approaches.

On the other hand, these professors demonstrated significant agreement with each other and with the students we surveyed on several matters. The highest level of agreement among them was that sincerely loving and caring for students opens the way for not only gospel or spiritual discussions but for learning in general. Many added that they see their students as colleagues who are just a few years and some life and learning experiences behind them, many of whom would surpass their own achievements. They perceived that the sincere respect they have for these budding scholars, professionals, fathers and mothers, and Church leaders is felt and appreciated by their students. One faculty member observed:

Students feel engaged...[when] you are willing to listen to the[ir] ideas...as if they were on a par with your own intellect....granted, professors have perhaps more education, more experience, but their capacity to think and bring forward creative ideas is no greater than that of their students....your willingness to engage in intellectual discussions with your students as if you are, and in fact you are, peers together learning goes a long way to demonstrate your respect for them as people and your love for who they are and what they can contribute.

Another point of significant agreement was that the life and integrity of the professor are more important than what he or she says. As one commented:

There's another part, and I want to say this carefully so I don't sound like I think that I'm doing this well. But when we are trying to teach these students by example that the gospel goes together with their academics and their profession and everything else in the world, we're doing it as much by modeling as we're doing anything. ...it's the concept of making what we do with them consistent with what we say we are.

Most of these faculty members also pointed out that encouraging both spiritual and intellectual growth required rigor, commitment to standards, and real effort by both the student and the professor. One of them noted, "part of loving them is not watering things down to be popular with them. Our Heavenly Father expects great things of them and so should we." Contrary to some notions

of what students value, BYU students report excitement and enthusiasm in being challenged and stretched to new heights when they feel the care and support of a professor who is committed to helping them succeed. This is not a path for those who seek an easy climb, whether they are students or faculty members.

And last, all of the faculty members we interviewed were in agreement that it is vital to be genuine and authentic. As one observed:

You can't fake it...you have to come in as a person who is striving to be who we need to be, and our students need to feel that and we need to be open enough to share that with our students. We have to reveal enough of us so they can trust us and feel like they can open up to us....and if you do...the students will trust you, they'll open up their hearts and minds to be taught, both the information and the more spiritual aspects of it. You know, you can put together a long list of things, but unless 1. we're striving to be who we need to be, and 2. we truly do love our students, I don't know how much good the rest of the list does you.

Advice from Highly-rated Faculty

At the conclusion of each focus group, we asked the highly-rated professors what advice they would give to their colleagues, imagining that they were talking with new faculty who are just starting at BYU. A common theme in their responses was that "each teacher, each professor, needs to find his or her own voice." One focus group participant stated:

I'm not sure how you'd go in from the outside and say, you know what, you need to bring the Spirit into your classroom and here's what you should do. Because I don't think that would have worked for me, because his method wouldn't work for me personally, and mine probably doesn't work for him. But somehow it works for us.

Another said:

The thing that I've learned is that one size does not fit all, and we need to identify what our abilities and talents and strengths are, and to use them to really reach the students, to identify our weaknesses and to consistently chip away at those. But to continually try to improve, to not worry if you're not doing it exactly like someone else is, to do the best that you can do as

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a faculty member. And always trying to do better and learn from others.

Another theme in their advice dealt with developing integrity in commitments to God, family, their discipline, and their students. Even beyond striving to be consistent with their religious values in the classroom, several faculty members pointed to the importance of maintaining appropriate commitments in other aspects of their life because this integrity influences the kind of role model they are and the extent to which the Spirit of the Lord accompanies them. One put it this way:

I can't fake things in the sense that I have to be fully integrated in my life for me to be able to integrate faith and learning in the classroom, or to shape the whole person, I've got to be integrated myself. And integration, I think another word that comes to mind is consecration. I have to look at my home life, my civic life, my church life, work life—they're all being interconnected in some profound way in my research.

Yet another theme was to be spiritually and intellectually current or alive. Study, pray, be open, and search the scriptures for insights and comparisons to the issues in your professional life. Your scholarship and practice in the gospel must be as real as that in your discipline if you are to help your students grow in both areas. As one participant said:

...when I do share a testimony or something, I make sure that it is organic, that it's inspired by something active in my life; that it's not so much a memory but it's something that is going on in my life and it is [more likely to] have impact.

He continued saying that true spiritual preparation becomes a "well of water that flows over" in the classroom:

If you have to metaphorically dip down deep into the well to find a spiritual experience, it won't be as natural and it won't feel as right. But, if we're doing the things that we're encouraged to do, we'll all have current experiences with the Spirit. And when they spill over just so very naturally, then the students will see it."

All agreed "you can't fake it." As one person emphasized, students "can read sincerity so quickly. They can read it as quickly as they can insincerity.

New Faculty Interests/Questions

We have recently begun to interview new BYU faculty members, asking them what their questions and ideas are regarding these matters. Most of these new professors, just like most of those who have been at BYU longer, want to help students in these ways. However, many of those with whom we spoke are hoping for help in the following ways: 1) examples of BYU professors with diverse gifts who are lifting students in different yet significant ways; 2) inspiration and invitations from general leaders to remind us that this is important to do; 3) conversations with experienced colleagues in their own disciplines about the specifics of what they do, as well as their philosophy and approach; and 4) encouragement and permission to try different approaches and to learn from their mistakes. Indeed, some worry that they can't make any mistakes and still earn continuing status. They want to know whether they have the opportunity before continuing status to learn how to do this sort of teaching.

Our Invitation to BYU Faculty

Based on the advice from highly-rated faculty members and the interests we hear from new faculty, we encourage you to engage in more individual self-discovery and more public sharing. You might experiment with one or two ideas from this research that seem appropriate for you and your students. Examples could include learning student names and showing interest in their learning in specific ways, sharing more of yourself, finding ways to encourage students to better reach their potential, leading a discussion about how to be a faithful member of the Church as a professional in your discipline, or even stopping to consider how you want to feel about students and their learning before each class session.

Once you have tried something, we encourage you to discuss your experience with colleagues. Please share your experience with us (the Faculty Center) as well so we can find ways to make it available to the BYU community.

We express sincere gratitude to student research assistants who helped us with various aspects of this research:

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