Imagine two BYU–Idaho students: twins, a brother and a sister. They start college together as freshmen. Each enrolls in Foundations courses as they begin thinking about possible majors. Then the brother gets a mission call. He leaves for two years, improves his study skills, sees a new part of the world, learns to communicate and lead, and learns a lot about who he is and what he wants out of life. He comes back with an idea of the type of career he’s interested in, declares a major in a related field, and spends the next three years focused on preparing for his career and finding a wife. Meanwhile, sister is ready to start her senior year when brother gets home. She’s never lived anywhere else, isn’t sure what she really enjoys, isn’t sure what she wants in life, but finally chooses a degree in general studies after exploring a number of majors. She’ll graduate next year, is worried that she might not be married when she finishes, and is unsure what she’ll do when she graduates.

This brother and sister will face many of the same choices in education and life, but often for young women, the choices have to be made more quickly against a backdrop of far less certainty. Righteous LDS young men are given clear goals: get an education, serve a mission, get married, work to provide for your family. A young man can safely make a single generalized career plan: prepare to work full-time in a position that will support a family until retirement. Brother may change jobs from time to time, but the general plan will remain intact. The path for a righteous young woman is less predictable. Sister is likely to perceive her duties as: get as much education as you can; go on a mission if you feel so inspired; get married if a worthy man asks; stay home with your children if you get married and are able to have children; provide for your family if your husband dies, is disabled, or leaves you; provide for yourself if you stay single or somehow lose your husband; help provide for your family if your husband gets laid off or your family encounters other difficult circumstances…and so on.

There are no certainties on the list. Young women need a variety of back-up plans to truly be prepared for an unknown future. At BYU–Idaho, we desire, first and foremost, to “build testimonies of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ and encourage living its principles.” It follows that we should help women prepare for their calling as mothers in Zion. I believe there are three areas where our female students could use more help from the university community. First, they need to understand the
importance of education for all women, no matter what their life path turns out to be. Second, they need guidance in identifying possible life paths they might encounter and creating criteria that will guide them to an appropriate field of study. And third, they need help getting and understanding information about how well different majors and career possibilities meet their criteria.

Education for Women

In the June 11, 2007 employee meeting with Elder Richard G. Scott, an employee who works in advising asked how to advise women who believe they cannot justify the cost of completing their education when they plan to stay home with their children. Elder Scott seemed a little surprised by the question but responded instantly: “Please, open their eyes,” he said. “A mother has got to be brilliantly educated in today’s world. One of the greatest gifts that can be given to today’s children is a mother in the home who is well-educated.”

Perhaps Elder Scott seemed surprised by the question because he knows how often President Hinckley reminds the young women of the importance of education. In the most recent General Young Women’s meeting, President Hinckley urged:

Resolve now, while you are young, that you will get all of the education you can. We live in a highly competitive age, and it will only grow worse. Education is the key that will unlock the door of opportunity.

You may plan on marriage, and hope for it, but you are not certain that it will come. And even though you marry, education will be of great benefit to you. Don’t just drift along, letting the days come and go without improvement in your lives. The Lord will bless you as you make the effort. Your lives will be enriched and your outlook broadened as your minds are opened to new vistas and knowledge.

Making education a priority may be more difficult for married women, whose husbands have not been attending General Young Women’s meetings. I knew a student whose husband was preparing to begin graduate school before his wife would graduate. She couldn’t convince her husband that it was important to her to find a way to complete her bachelor’s degree. I have another student who graduated and is staying in the area and working a short-term job while his wife finishes school. When she graduates, he will begin graduate school. Clearly, for each of these couples, the husband’s attitude toward his wife’s education is the key factor in determining whether she will finish school. The message that women should get all the education they can is a message for all of our students, not just the women.
Criteria for Careers

Once a student understands how important it is for her to get an education, she faces the question, what kind of education? Ideally a young woman would get a degree in a field of study she loves that would 1) allow her to have a fulfilling career if she stays single, 2) contribute to her mothering skills if she is a full-time mom, 3) be mom-friendly in terms of work schedule and pay if she becomes a single mom or needs to assist her husband in supporting the family, 4) allow her to return easily to the workforce after years of absence raising her children, and 5) allow her to earn enough money to support her family if she needs to do so on her own. Undoubtedly there are other criteria women ought to think carefully about.

Few women will discover a major to prepare them for careers that meet each of these criteria, but thinking about some of the criteria and evaluating which are most important could be very helpful. If we can help a student identify which criteria are most important to her, she can begin to ask questions about which of the majors on her list are most likely to meet her criteria.

Evaluating Options

There is one woman in my business law class of 29. I wish there were more, and I often wonder why, at a school where more than 50 percent of the student body are female, so few show up in my business classes. Turns out only 24 percent of our business majors are female. Faculty in other departments must wonder the same thing: where are all the women?

I asked the registrar’s office and discovered where they are:

• 1587 are in early childhood/special education and elementary education (97% of the majors are women)
• 1870 are in general studies (67% are women)
• 765 are in an art major (82% of art majors are women)
• 861 are in health science or health education (69% are women)
• 726 are in communications (61% are women)
• 549 are in psychology (68% are women)
• 397 are in child development (99% are women)

Women are not signing up in droves for:

• automotive technology (3 women and 87 males)
• computer science (19 women, or 7% of the majors)
• economics (21 women, or 15%)
• electrical and computer engineering (12 women, or 6%)
• information systems (30 women, or 12%)
• construction management (29 women, or 5%)

A student can begin to ask questions about which of the majors on her list are most likely to meet her criteria.
Some of these areas may never be especially appealing to women, but I believe we would see some shifts in the numbers if our students had more information about the opportunities some of these majors offer to women.

For example, my experience as the faculty adviser of the pre-law society indicates few of our female students consider law as a possible field of study. During the last three years, I’m aware of fewer than five women who attended pre-law society meetings or functions. Three of them were active in leadership roles. This is compared with at least a hundred male society members over the last three years, with probably 20 to 30 in leadership roles. Of 37 students who took the law school entrance exam in the last year, three were women.

Elder Steven E. Snow of the First Quorum of the Seventy agrees that law can be a great career choice for women:

*I think it gives them a lot of options, as it does men. It’s a career where you can phase back how much you are doing. You can be part-time if you choose. You can take a sabbatical for a time, do your CLE, and come back into practice. I think with technology the way it is now, more women can work at home—more men can work at home.... The reality, even in the Church, is both men and women are employed. I happen to believe that the choice of a law profession is a good one and gives a lot of flexibility....*\(^2\)

Law is one of a number of career paths that offers the kind of flexibility and options most of our female students are probably looking for. But have we shown them where to find these options?

An adult leader in one of my BYU wards told my family home evening group that LDS women should never attend professional school because they would be unable to resist the temptation to work. Ignoring that advice to avoid law school was probably one of the best decisions of my life. At the time I applied to law school, I was only grasping backward at shreds of my Life Plan A: find a husband at BYU, then use my degree to raise twelve brilliant children. After three years of law school and three of work, I finally got married. Five years later I’m finally expecting the arrival of the first brilliant child. I think I’m settling in somewhere around Plan D. Fortunately, the Spirit helped guide me to the opportunities the Lord had in mind, even if they didn’t match my own plans.

Ultimately our students will make major and career plans with guidance from the Holy Ghost and a final confirmation that their choice is the one the Lord has in mind for them. However, to “study it out in your mind” (Doctrine and Covenants 9:8) before “[ asking the Lord] if it be right,” a female student needs to know, first, what are possible life paths she needs to plan for? second, considering those paths, what are some of the criteria she should consider as she decides on a major and
possible career? and third, which majors and careers best fit the criteria she considers important? Of course there are other considerations for all students faced with major and career choices. I believe the most important is, “What do I love?” My focus here is on issues that are particularly relevant to women.

Some career choices are more likely to meet an LDS woman’s criteria better than others. For example, investment banking is a job probably fit only for a young woman who remains single. Work hours and demands make this type of career extremely difficult for a woman balancing family obligations. On the other hand, various careers in computer programming might meet a number of the criteria. The potential to telecommute and work flexible hours in a high-demand industry make these types of jobs mom-friendly while paying enough to support a family. However, a job in the constantly evolving high tech industry may be less than ideal for a woman who needs to return to the workforce after years of raising children. Clearly a woman will have to make choices while weighing the risks: preparing for a career in information technology with the risk that she will become quickly obsolete if she leaves her career to raise children, preparing for a career as a secondary education teacher with the risk that, if she has to work while her children are young, she will be gone from home full-time during the school year with limited scheduling flexibility. What’s important is that she know the risks in advance.

How To Help

What can we do at BYU–Idaho to help? I have just a few ideas. I hope my thoughts will encourage additional ideas.

Information in Advising Centers

Advising offices already contain a variety of information available to students about careers in their major. Included should be a list of information about careers that address areas of particular concern to young women: which of these careers tend to be mom-friendly, which tend to allow telecommuting, which have flexible schedules, which allow children at work, which allow easy re-entry into the field after an absence, which contribute to family skills? There are resources out there that could be helpful. For example, Working Mother Magazine comes out with an annual list of the 100 most “family-friendly” companies in America; there are websites with job ideas for stay-at-home moms and working moms; and the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, lists job information at its website. Compiling a list of the most helpful resources would be worthwhile at BYU–Idaho.

However, resources relying on the world’s version of “family-friendly” may not be precisely what our students are looking for. I have heard
professional women give advice on “work-family balance” such as the following:

One woman explained that after taking a year off from her career to stay home full-time with her children, she was relieved when her young son mentioned that he liked spending time with the nanny better. Realizing that her kids preferred the nanny’s care during the day gave her the green light to return to her career full-time and guilt free. She achieved “balance” by hiring the right nanny.

Another successful career woman explained that she waited to have her children until she had achieved a certain stature in her career that would allow her to have children without being frowned upon by men who thought child-bearing was not consistent with career-building.

A single mom told me she realized she needed two nannies: a daytime nanny and a night-time nanny to take her place at home while she was working so hard in a demanding career. To her relief an older friend assured her, “Your kids turn out fine in the long run.”

These aren’t the examples I think of when I read in the Proclamation on the Family that “mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children.” Of greater value to our students than the three sad examples above would be job information compiled and contributed by campus members. Organizing the effort could be a great learning experience for a student. One way to do this would be by having faculty members contribute information from their field to a chart like the one on the next page. I’ve listed a few careers as examples and have filled in some of the information.

This information is obviously cursory. For example, I’ve listed the profession I’m most familiar with and made some generalizations. More specific information about types of lawyers would be helpful. A lawyer working for a large law firm really has a different career from a lawyer who works for a county prosecutor’s office. On the other hand, the newspaper reporter job is a little more specific, while a broader heading like “journalist” would include broadcast reporters, magazine reporters, and freelance writers who all have very different work demands. A simple chart like this would provide a good starting point for students looking for careers that will meet their personal criteria.
Conferences and Speakers

Our students need to hear from women who have faced a variety of life circumstances. What educational choices did they make that worked to their benefit or detriment in the long run? What do they wish they’d known when they were faced with these difficult decisions as young women? What careers have turned out to best meet the criteria our students will be considering? While our students daily interact with female faculty members, we are a limited group. We all work outside the home to some extent, and we all have the same job. It would be helpful for students to hear from women who have always been at home full-time, who have always worked full-time, who have gone back to...
school later in life, who have returned to their careers after raising their families. Putting real faces on the future possibilities can help students think about the realities of the future while seeing female role models whom they can follow.

The Newel K. Whitney Student Society in the Department of Business and Communication held its first annual Women’s Panel Discussion during the summer of 2007 with the theme “Women Empowering Women.” Seven women from the community were invited to talk about what education has meant for them in their lives. The women’s experiences ranged from one who used a PhD in pharmacy to put a husband through school before leaving work to raise children, to one who left college after the first year to raise children and then finished a degree when the children were in college, to one who gained her education through running a business and serving in the community. The common theme among all the panelists was that life never seems to go exactly according to your expectations, and educating yourself is one of the best ways to prepare for the unexpected. This type of forum is an excellent way to expose our students to examples of the educational choices righteous women have made in an effort to negotiate life’s uncertainties.

In addition, there are probably a number of existing campus forums where these types of speakers could be included. For example, the business department sponsors the Business Summit every year. The speakers are generally highly accomplished businessmen. Occasionally, we find a businesswoman to add to the program, but not always. A few have been moms who have started their own businesses from home. What I have never seen is a woman on the program who is a stay-at-home mom with a degree in business who can speak to the advantages of a business education for moms. If we really believe in supporting and sustaining motherhood, shouldn’t we be willing to highlight the “business” a mother runs in her home every day? The current list of conferences and forums could be expanded to include educated women who have encountered a variety of life situations.

**Pre-matriculation**

This is a project still in its infancy. I’m not an expert on the details, but perhaps the pre-matriculation effort would provide an opportunity to begin introducing young women to these questions before they even start at BYU–Idaho. Beginning to help female students early on and continuing to provide the guidance throughout their time at BYU–Idaho would be ideal.
“Why Didn’t Somebody Tell Me?”

These ideas are really just the beginning of what I hope will be an ongoing effort to better address the life-planning needs of our female students. It will take a campus-wide effort to help them make informed choices about their futures. As they do, we may see increased diversity in some of our classes. Perhaps the number of women studying automotive technology will double to six—you never know. However, even if the result is that women continue making exactly the same choices about majors and career plans, they will do so on a more informed basis, with some idea of the implications of their choices. In twenty years they won’t be asking, “Why didn’t somebody at BYU–Idaho tell me…”?

Notes
