

WATCHING FOUNDATIONS RISE

Henry J. Eyring—Advancement Vice President

At the purely statistical level, the review of emerging Foundations courses by President Clark and a few of his lieutenants sounds like a daunting, even undesirable, task: twenty-five course development teams, 110 team members, thirty-three one-hour meetings over three semesters. All in that same dark, cold Kimball conference room—except for the Science Issues meetings, which were held in the relatively warmer Taylor 120 to accommodate the eight teams at once.

In more than a few ways, hearing these updates from the Foundations course development teams was reminiscent of being on the receiving end of tithing settlement. There was, for instance, the feeling that a good union contract wouldn't allow more than four hours' worth of these meetings in a single day (five was our endurance-testing record). It was hard to stay mentally sharp that long, let alone to resist eating several pounds of complimentary peanuts and M&Ms.

But the experience of hearing the reports was like tithing settlement in some surprisingly wonderful ways as well. This is the story of the surprises that made a long, sometimes tedious, experience sweet and, ultimately, deeply inspiring.

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A SPIRIT OF CONSECRATION

In the press of visiting with every member of the ward in a period of only weeks, a bishop can be forgiven forgetting the miracle of the very premise of the thing: that a mere telephone call is enough to bring individuals and families of relatively modest financial means to report donating at what the world would consider unheard-of rates. The system works only because the consecration and sacrifice can be taken for granted.

The same is true for our Foundations course development process. Even during the fifth report of one workday, one had to marvel at the miracle of the thing. Each team had received a blank slate and a tight delivery timetable. The team members were challenged to collaborate across multiple disciplines, something all but unheard of in higher education. They knew that the new courses should reflect our new learning model, another revolutionary innovation. They also felt the weight of developing new learning materials, avoiding traditional textbooks where possible, and creating online components.

It wasn't surprising, then, to see signs of stress and even fear in the first round of meetings, in fall semester of 2007. Beyond the significant time and effort required, there were valid concerns that ran the gamut from curriculum content, to organizational dynamics, to teaching philosophy.

Many teams, for instance, expressed the worry that crossing disciplines and adding real-world applications would make it difficult to cover the essential material; they spoke of struggling to decide what traditionally taught content to omit.

Other teams seemed to be working through the awkwardness inherent in their cross-disciplinary composition. In typical BYU–Idaho fashion, there was great deference and mutual respect among faculty members who had never met one another and wouldn't have conceived ever working together; it was a bit like watching a bunch of good sports on an ill-conceived blind date. The challenge was especially poignant for faculty members serving as the lone representative of a minority discipline; that is the lot, for instance, of Andra Hansen of the Department of Communication, whose teammates on the Reading and Writing Foundations course are all from English. Others, such as Vaughn Stephenson of Humanities, must have wondered how he could make an equal contribution to American Foundations, given that his teammates are formally trained in History, Political Science, and Economics—the three disciplines central to the old American Heritage course.

American Heritage is emblematic of another challenge—what to do with general education courses that already embodied many of the design principles of Foundations. American Heritage, for example, was designed by faculty in Provo and Rexburg to bridge the historical, political, and economic views of the American experience, while simultaneously adding gospel perspectives. Likewise, Math 108, or “Mathematical Tools for the Real World,” is a unique BYU–Idaho creation that applies math principles to common but important tasks such as calculating interest on a loan or judging the statistical significance of polling data. Perhaps because of the Ricks College/BYU–Idaho emphasis on teaching, many general education courses were already unusually cross-disciplinary, real-world applied, and infused with spiritual content. Redesigning them was thus an act of obedience and faith.

In fact, the same thing could be said of the willingness to consider courses with mainly common elements. The power of the teaching on this campus has historically derived from individual love for the students and reliance on the Spirit. In that respect, great teaching in the Spirit of Ricks has been a highly personal matter. Of the many things that the Foundations teams were putting on the altar—time, effort, past practices, and course development investments—none was greater than their faith that a new curriculum based on common elements and approaches could still allow for individual inspiration and deeply personal connection with students.

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A TREND OF INSPIRED CONVERGENCE

For all of these reasons, the typical first-round meeting left one privately debating the case for glass-half-empty versus glass-half-full. On the one hand, a simple tally of the issues raised suggested that the only thing the members of some teams had in common was frustration. On the other hand, there was clearly a mitigating, perhaps even unifying force at work—collective consecration. For that reason, the glass seemed at least half full. The real questions were whether it would continue to fill and at what rate.

The next round of meetings, in the winter semester of 2008, answered at least the first part of that question. The second time they came to report, many of the teams had made significant progress or even breakthroughs. The progress was manifest in part in the statements of course objectives and outlines. It was equally evident, though, in the spirit of agreement and excitement among team members. Their ideas seemed to be converging in an inspired way.

The trend of inspired convergence had actually been apparent in the first round of meetings. For example, the members of the Family Foundations team were, by their own admission, blessed from the beginning with conditions that fostered convergence. For one thing, they had no preexisting course to break from and no dominant academic discipline to account for. More importantly, though, they were blessed with a curricular lodestar, the Proclamation on the Family. The more they studied the Proclamation, the more they recognized it as providing the foundation not only for course outcomes but also the course outline. The course outline and calendar further fell into place when a learning model architecture—a two-week cycle of preparing, teaching one another, and pondering and proving—was discovered.

The Writing and Reasoning Foundations team apparently had a similar experience. In their second meeting with President Clark, they excitedly reported having discovered an ideal text, a collection of readings edited by their colleague Kip Hartvigsen. They also described useful elements from an online version of English 111 that Janine Gilbert has been developing, drawing not only from her years of online teaching experience but also from more recent experiments with the learning model and simultaneous delivery to BYU–Idaho and BYU–Hawaii students. On top of these finds, the team were engaged in real-time innovation via several course pilots running in winter semester.

Remarkably, the Writing and Reasoning Foundations team returned for their third report, in summer, with the news that they were re-editing Kip's text. Still more surprisingly, Kip, not a formal member of the team, was reportedly at the helm of this exercise in reinvention. The increased

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unity of the now-larger team, combined with the unexpected change in direction, was clear evidence of divine guidance.

The Science Foundations team likewise pulled a curricular rabbit out of their hat. They began with perhaps the greatest course content challenge, covering the essential introductory content from at least five disciplines—physics, chemistry, biology, geology, and psychology. Their early course outlines seemed to reflect Herculean efforts at miniaturization, as they envisioned covering topics such as the creation of the universe and the solar system in a single class period.

The inspired breakthrough came, though, when the team hit on the idea of teaching science fundamentals through the lens of important systems, such as the human brain. Rather than surveying concepts from five sciences at a high level of generality, the Science Foundations course will take students deep into a few highly recognizable and personally relevant topics. Their study of the brain, for instance, will teach students about themselves while transporting them across disciplinary boundaries. It will also help them make connections between science and sacred processes and doctrines.

THE DISCOVERY OF COMPLEMENTARITIES

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Another trend emerged as the teams came back semester after semester: the discovery of unexpected complementarities. For instance, when one of the three International Foundations teams chose to make Pakistan the subject of their course, the only thing they had in common was lack of subject-matter expertise. Their backgrounds couldn't have been more diverse. As team leader Rob Eaton said, "The makeup of our team sounded like the beginning of a bad joke: 'You've got a geographer, a linguist, an economist, and a religion professor all in the same room....'"

Fortunately, this eclectic group agreed quickly on a clear objective—helping students to understand a little known but globally important country, Pakistan. And they let their common lack of expertise in the subject and their disparate backgrounds unite them, by divvying up themes according to individual interest and comfort level. Brian Felt (a professor of Russian) studied the societal effects of Pakistan's language, tribes, culture, and education system. Geographer Theron Josephson did the same for national geography, ancient history, and neighboring nations; economist Allan Walberger analyzed the national economy and living conditions; and Rob, a current religion instructor and recovering lawyer, studied subjects ranging from faith to foreign relations. Each team meeting began with an informal presentation by one or more of these experts-in-the-making. A highpoint of their experience was a day-long offsite meeting they dubbed "All Pakistan All the Time."

As the Pakistan team members learned from one another, they agreed to take similar approaches in teaching the class. Each team member plans to make a statement something like this on the first day of class: “A year ago I knew relatively little about Pakistan. I’ve learned an awful lot about it, but I’m not going to teach you those things. Instead I’m going to help you learn what I learned.”

Other teams have reaped the benefits of similarly unexpected complementarities. For instance, psychology faculty member Chris Lowry, the one social scientist on the Science Foundations team, has added invaluable dimensions to the module on the human brain. In addition, his expertise in the field of learning theory has influenced all modules of the course.

Other Foundations contributors, including some non-faculty members, have also brought their complementary skill sets and perspectives to bear. Kip Hartvigsen, for instance, has enlisted students and the University Press in re-editing his text for Reading and Writing Foundations, with surprisingly innovative results.

Complementarities can also be found among the Foundations courses themselves. For example, students seeking an international learning experience can choose either a country (Pakistan), a region (the Middle East), or the developing world. Likewise, students of the humanities can pursue semester-long inquiries that run the gamut from “What is art?” to “How is art used as a tool of propaganda?” Far from homogenizing the curriculum, Foundations has significantly increased its diversity.

Each instructor who teaches a Foundations course will also bring new complementarities to the learning process. Though all of the courses are designed with a common core, each leaves room for individual addition and adaptation. Infused as they are with the University learning model, the new courses are both more student-centered and also more reliant on instructor inspiration.

THE BENEFITS OF MEETING

The thirty-three meetings with Foundations teams were both instructive and encouraging for the administrators who convened them. Still open, though, is the question of what value we administrators added. Were we really worth the complimentary snacks, not to mention the three hours invested by each of the 110 team members?

There are two good answers to this question. One is that President Clark’s insights were worth the price of admission for faculty and administrators alike. He has personally overseen the development of Foundations since its announcement in late 2005. He thus serves as a connection to the intentions and discussions of the various Foundations design committees.

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He is also broadly read and a cagey classroom veteran. In most meetings he listened far more than he talked. At times he seemed little more engaged than the rest of us listeners. But then, as though from nowhere, would come a series of penetrating questions such as: “Will our students know more than just key scientific discoveries and equations?” “Will they be able to explain and predict phenomena without falling back into flawed Aristotelian logic?” “Will they learn to think like scientists?” Gentle but trenchant questions such as these helped us focus on the connections between course outlines and pedagogies and the learning objectives of Foundations.

The other benefit of our meetings was the inspiration that came as we gathered and that undoubtedly came to the teams as they prepared to gather. Our invocations, as meetings began, were answered with blessings of insight, and the benedictions were full of thanks.

THE PATH FORWARD

There is still much to do. Teaching groups must be formed. Online versions of each course will be developed. More original materials are needed to replace third-party textbooks.

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In addition, we will need to discover ways that are more effective of measuring achievement of learning outcomes and student satisfaction; those will allow us to implement processes of continuous curricular improvement. We will also need continuously improving students; that is likely to require better preparation of prospective BYU–Idaho students (and their parents) for their Foundations experience.

Though these are tasks of equal or even greater difficulty than those grappled with to date, we can be confident of accomplishing them for the same reason that we have succeeded so far. It is the reason that the Church rolls forward, ward by ward, on the tithes of its faithful members. Course by course, our faculty members will continue to make their collective, consecrated sacrifices of time and effort. Their faithfulness will continue to be answered as it has been in the past, with the blessings promised by the Lord through Malachi 3:10:

Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. ∞