



## The Value of Faculty Research at BYU-Idaho

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In January, my first book—*Wordsworth and Evolution in Victorian Literature: Entangled Influence*—was published by Routledge. My work on the project spanned eight years: four years in graduate school, and another four after earning my PhD. The book explores how Victorian authors like Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Thomas Hardy grappled with the conflicting visions of nature in William Wordsworth's poetry and Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory. Rather than delving into the book's content, I'd like to reflect on the pedagogical value of such scholarship and the place of research at BYU-Idaho.

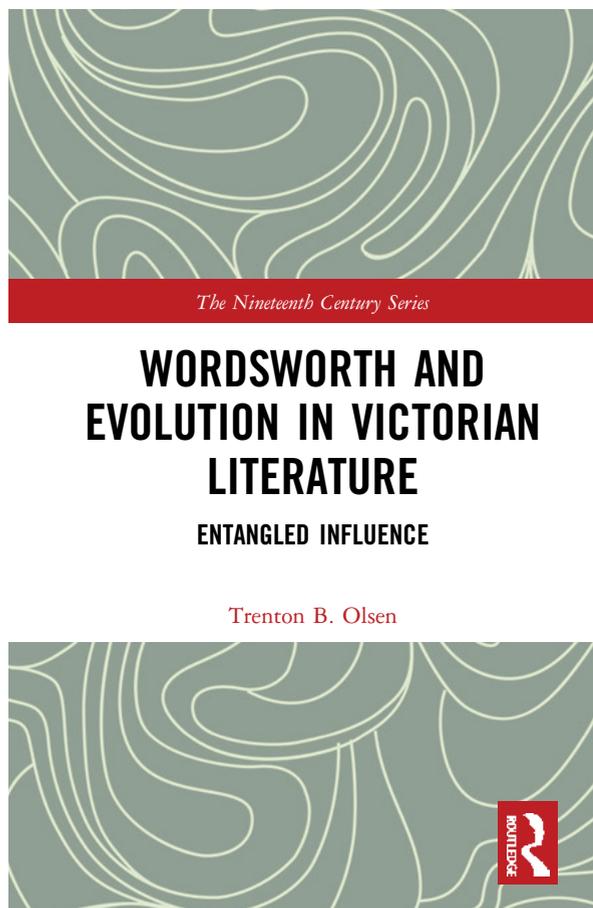
The primary benefit of my scholarly work is that it deepens my content knowledge and enhances my research and writing skills. Doing the kind of work that I assign to my students naturally improves and enlivens my teaching, just as it would for a professor of painting, piano, nursing, or accounting. The classroom is a microcosm of the research conversation where students can analyze evidence, respond to the ideas of scholars and their classmates, and deepen understanding as an intellectual community. While my book does not address undergraduates or focus on teaching, it has helped my students in many ways.

Indirectly, this work communicates the value of discovery and curiosity, models the research and writing process, demonstrates a zeal for lifelong learning, and enables me to teach my subject more clearly. More directly, the project has led to new approaches in five of my courses, valuable editing experience for professional writing students, and an academic article in progress with student co-authors. Working on the book has also led to a new scholarly editing project that involves 75 students in the research and publication process and connects them with librarians, editors, publishers, and museum directors. A student research and writing workshop, a faculty colloquium, a lecture series, and mentorship opportunities for students

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of diverse abilities have all grown out this research. Many faculty members across campus have had similar experiences.

While I'm convinced that research is vitally important for teaching, I've learned that this relationship has sometimes been a touchy subject at BYU-Idaho. When I



The Book written by Trenton Olsen

joined the faculty in the fall of 2014, I read in Perspective about a time in the institution's history when "the word 'research' was relegated to dark hallways and spoken in whispered tones" (Dabell, 2014, p. ii). I was both surprised and confused by this. Of course, I knew this was a teaching-focused university where I would have as many courses in one semester as my former professors taught

in a year. I happily accepted that teaching, rather than research, would be my primary focus. Learning that faculty scholarship was once seen negatively, however, baffled me. I was relieved to know that the institutional culture that dismissed or even stigmatized research was safely in the past. Happily, my day-to-day work experience since then has generally confirmed this. Colleagues in my department and college encourage and support scholarly pursuits. The Faculty Association has created a valuable forum for shared scholarship, and the university generously provides professional development leave and travel funding for research and conference presentations.

Regrettably, however, I've found that anti-research attitudes are by no means behind us. I have often heard faculty members and administrators alike dismiss and disparage scholarship. Some have suggested that faculty research reveals a lack of commitment to teaching or even opposition to the university's mission. Discussions of BYU-Idaho's distinctiveness in higher education focus less on our unique religious mission and more on our supposed lack of research. Never mind that many four-year institutions share our teaching focus. To be sure, there are important distinctions that make us different from research universities. It's been clear from the beginning that BYU-Idaho would not have graduate programs, academic rank, a "publish or perish" system, or a privileging of research over teaching. In my five years here, I have never once heard anyone advocate any other vision. Comparisons of our institution to other universities, however, often move well beyond these foundational differences.

We routinely hear comments elevating us above faculty at research institutions. These professors, we're told, care only about their research, which is motivated by selfishness. They are too immersed in scholarship, the story goes, to bother with students. Implicit in these self-congratulatory sermons is that the absence of research is a virtue, its presence a vice. Having only studied and taught at research universities before coming to BYU-Idaho, I find this caricature of research professors entirely unrecognizable. I frequently saw scholars of the highest caliber display an extraordinary level of commitment to teaching and care for their students. There may be research faculty who don't value teaching, but I have not encountered them. In general, people who devote

their lives to the study and teaching of a particular discipline care a great deal about what and how students are learning in that field. Beyond the inaccuracy and arrogance of these comparisons, such rhetoric insults those of us who are active researchers as well as teachers and discourages faculty members from maintaining currency in their subjects.

The suggestion that faculty research is a selfish indulgence at the expense of students is not only offensive, it's objectively wrong. The attempt to separate teaching quality from content knowledge is naïve. We should know this.

In 2011, BYU-Idaho invited Ken Bain to speak to the faculty about his influential book *What the Best College Teachers Do*. The first major conclusion of his fifteen-year study is worth quoting:

Without exception, outstanding teachers know their subjects extremely well. They are all active and accomplished scholars, artists, or scientists. Some have long and impressive publication lists, the kind the academy has long valued. Others have more modest records; or in a few cases, virtually none at all. But whether well published or not, the outstanding teachers follow the important . . . developments within their fields, do research, have important and original thoughts on their subjects, study carefully and extensively what other people are doing in their fields, often read extensively in other fields (sometimes far distant from their own), and take a strong interest in the broader issues of their disciplines: the histories, controversies, and epistemological discussions. In short, they can do . . . what they expect from their students. None of that should surprise anyone. (p. 15-16)



Faculty members at BYU-Idaho don't research because they want us to become like Harvard; they research to give their students the benefit of learning from scholars. If BYU-Idaho students never took classes from active researchers, they would be at a significant disadvantage in relation to their peers at other institutions.

The problem with stigmatizing research at this university isn't just that it's profoundly demoralizing, though it is, nor that it reveals a deep misunderstanding of the relationship between teaching and scholarship, though it does. The deeper issue is that opposition to faculty research depends on a distorted view of the institution. Far from opposing research, university policies support faculty scholarship. The Faculty Guide encourages BYU-Idaho professors "to develop as teachers and scholars . . . and practice their craft." This official document explicitly includes as part of this development "participating in scholarly and creative endeavors such as researching and writing in a content area and attending and presenting at conferences" (2.3.4). Professional development, including scholarship, is not only permissible but part of a contractual obligation to stay current in our fields. The 2019 faculty contract states, "It is also expected that you will actively involve yourself in professional development in your discipline."

Our university's founding documents also acknowledge the importance of faculty research. In his 2001 address, "On the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching," President

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David A. Bednar said, “Will we as BYU-Idaho be engaged in scholarship? Absolutely yes. We must! If we are not engaged in scholarship, then we have no business being a university.” It’s worth noting that faculty scholarship is part of what qualifies us to be a university rather than a college. While President Bednar noted that “research is one type of scholarly activity; it is not the totality of scholarship,” he made clear that “research [is] . . . a key component of scholarship at BYU-Idaho.” If the university’s faculty are going to fulfill President Gordon B. Hinckley’s vision that BYU-Idaho “will be just as good a teaching institution as we can make it,” (qtd. in Eyring) then, in President Bednar’s words, “we should be excellent scholars.” Hostility toward faculty research is inconsistent with President Hinckley’s charge that our faculty must be “committed to academic excellence” and fundamentally incompatible with what Elder Henry B. Eyring called the university’s “steady, upward course” (2001). Faculty scholarship, including formal research, is clearly part of our institution’s true birthright.

Just as no university can tolerate anti-intellectualism, no gospel-centered institution can oppose scholarly inquiry. Discouraging academic research at BYU-Idaho ignores the central theological value of learning in the restored gospel. If we really believe that “the glory of God is intelligence” and that “to be learned is good,” if we take seriously the scriptural imperative to “seek learning . . . by study and also by faith,” and if we hold with our institution’s namesake, Brigham Young, that “the object of [our] existence is to learn,” then we must abandon the mistaken idea that faculty research does not belong at BYU-Idaho (D&C 93:36; 2 Nephi 9:29; D&C 88:118; Young, 1997, p. 85). Telling faculty not to research or publish limits professional development, threatens academic freedom, impoverishes

teaching, and hurts students. What’s more, it diminishes discipleship. Elder Neal A. Maxwell (2001) taught,

For a disciple of Jesus Christ, academic scholarship is a form of worship. It is actually another dimension of consecration. Hence, one who seeks to be a disciple-scholar will take both scholarship and discipleship seriously; and, likewise, gospel covenants. For the disciple-scholar, the first and second great commandments frame and prioritize life. How else could one worship God with all of one’s heart, might, mind, and strength? (p. 87)

Since the cultural resistance to faculty research at BYU-Idaho is inconsistent with official policies, founding documents, overwhelming empirical evidence, good teaching, the experience of faculty members, Latter-day Saint theology, and basic common sense, I hope we can work together to move beyond it and more fully realize our institutional potential. Doing so will help us better prepare students to meet the demands of a complex and rapidly changing world. By gaining experience as researchers, students learn how to learn, which is ultimately more valuable than any content. Far from diminishing our student-centered focus on teaching, faculty research enhances it. ❖

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