

ON THE FUTURE OF FACULTY SCHOLARSHIP
AT BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY-IDAHO

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When I was hired at Ricks College in 1998, I was told clearly that my highest priorities as a faculty member would be teaching and advising. But I was also told that pursuing other professional and scholarly activities was fine as long as these pursuits were kept in balance. I knew that Ricks College, as a junior college, was very different from BYU-Provo and was glad that Ricks did not follow the publish-or-perish mantra so common at other institutions.

However, since our transition to BYU-Idaho, I have sensed that the transformation to a university “of curious workmanship” the Lord intends would be unsettling for many faculty and administration who had only known Ricks College. The Spirit of Ricks, as exemplified in the teaching and learning by the Holy Ghost that occurs here, would never leave this sacred place. But changing from Ricks College to Brigham Young University-Idaho has and will necessitate serious academic and professional adjustments on the part of our faculty and administration. I believe our leaders know this.

Concerning faculty research and scholarship, let me offer a few thoughts I’ve had over the past few years. Our becoming a four-year university seems to require, at a minimum, the following adjustments, some of which are already in progress:

1. Junior and senior level courses with specialized knowledge, methods, and research activities for specific disciplines and majors (physics, music, psychology, etc.).
2. A faculty qualified to teach both G. E. courses (general scholars in their fields) and advanced courses (scholars with a specialization and/or keen interest in modern American literature, organic chemistry, the latest field methods of biological research, etc.).
3. A shift—as gradual and careful as need be—to a focus on hiring faculty with more PhD and other terminal degrees while always seeking the very best teacher-scholars (faculty with strong testimonies, the ability to mentor students to achieve excellence, a desire to use technology and other means to reach as many students as possible, etc.).
4. The acknowledgment that PhD faculty—by training and nature—generally have strong backgrounds and a continuing interest in research and scholarship. The PhD dissertation process shapes one’s critical thinking on a fundamental

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level. Many future faculty will be frustrated if they are not given adequate time for scholarly development.

5. The acknowledgment that junior/senior students at BYU–Idaho desire that faculty teaching their advanced courses are actively engaged in their chosen fields—i.e. keeping up on the latest research, publishing ideas of their own, attending conferences—with the full support of their departments and colleges.

Now for the white elephant standing in the corner: *a few faculty and administration at Brigham Young University–Idaho mistrust or misunderstand the higher reasons for faculty research and scholarship*. I believe this occurs more in the form of unease than in open opposition. I also believe that underneath this mistrust are several legitimate concerns: that BYU–Idaho will become less student-focused; that our faculty could in time demand academic rank and become preoccupied with assembling résumés and reputations; and that we could lose the “Spirit of Ricks” and become, as many other institutions, “Ever learning, and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7). Certainly more administrative and faculty training on “worthwhile” research and scholarship is needed so we better understand its essentiality to the University’s educational model.

But these concerns aside, I can say that after mingling with faculty from across campus for the past eight years, there are two things I know about my colleagues. First, almost all of them love to teach and have a deep concern for the welfare of their students. Second, many are also concerned over the current quality of instruction and learning models being employed in their 300 and 400-level courses and wish they had more time to think, read, ponder, write, and research in their chosen fields.

These two concerns, student welfare and research, are intertwined. As I teach my students in argumentative writing, there is such a thing as an either/or fallacy. Perhaps too many on this campus assume that either you are a devoted teacher of students, filled with the Spirit of Ricks, or you are a devoted scholar and researcher, filled with the spirit of learning. At Brigham Young University–Idaho, the two *must* go hand in hand. I believe from President Clark’s recent meetings concerning workload and contract issues that we will soon have the flexibility needed to ensure that faculty can be both outstanding teachers and engaged scholars in their disciplines.

We should acknowledge that much of the scholarship that is demanded by the publish-or-perish crowd is of little worth. It is often churned out first by frantic assistant professors seeking tenure and then continued throughout the academic career to pad résumés, court public honor, and perhaps help scholars feel that their quiet academic lives really do matter.

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There is no need for the publish-or-perish mentality here at BYU-Idaho. We know our first priority is to cultivate a testimony of Jesus Christ within our students. We also know that all truth has a place within the eternal plan, that all subjects may be taught and researched by the Spirit of God, and that our faculty and students have something meaningful to share with the larger academic world.

What research and scholarship, then, should be pursued and promoted at BYU-Idaho? I believe there are at least two general areas:

1. Any scholarship that directly improves our curriculum and teaching efforts.

Such scholarship would include creative work in course design, teaching methods, technology, and off-campus learning, as well as writing textbooks, designing web sites, producing on-line educational or virtual experiences, etc. As President Clark has indicated, we can do much more to make a BYU-Idaho experience both accessible and affordable. But all such experiences must be academically grounded in the latest developments of the specific major or discipline—a business, chemistry, or education degree from BYU-Idaho must instill confidence in potential employers.

2. Any scholarship that engages students in learning to create new knowledge and pursue new ideas while engaging faculty in their chosen fields.

Such active scholarly roles for students could include serving as research and teaching assistants to faculty, in faculty-mentored positions for conferences, as designers of educational materials and producers of original work for use in campus and faculty publications, etc. There are many ways our students can transition from the *being acted upon* to the *acting* model of learning.

Such scholarly activities for faculty—all directly or indirectly impacting student learning and growth—include but are not limited to the following:

- a. Writing the Great American Novel, composing an operetta or ballet, or creating any work that can be appreciated and/or performed by our students.
- b. Doing primary, even grant-funded, research which the professor could then incorporate into his or her junior/senior-level courses. Such research need not entail million dollar grants or take up an inordinate amount of faculty time. But as a science major with an interest in graduate school, I'd welcome the chance to participate in such research and to be taught and mentored by such an active scholar. As one of my colleagues has noted, geology teachers

“teach”; geologists “do”—our students need to be mentored by “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22).

- c. Participating in and even directing a professional conference. In June 2005 my department and college provided funds so I could co-direct a Steinbeck conference in Kyoto, Japan, a stimulating intellectual/cultural experience for me and a chance to discuss BYU–Idaho’s mission with colleagues from around the world. In March 2006 we had an international literary conference in Sun Valley supported by our BYU–Idaho English Academic Society, whose students and faculty leaders led sessions and presented scholarly papers. Engaged faculty/scholars are positioned naturally to make this real-life learning experience happen for their students.
- d. Publishing a review, note, article, or book that advances knowledge and models for our students what being a scholar is all about. This is particularly important because a faculty member’s own struggles with publication can be shared in class, with students coming to identify with the rigorous nature of research-based writing. My composition students benefit greatly when I tell them about my own publication experiences. With the appropriate motives, such publication is completely within the mission of BYU–Idaho.

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On a personal note, my richest scholarly experience at BYU–Idaho came out of a need for our English 495: Senior Seminar course. The English Department wanted this seminar to bring together our four major emphasis areas—creative and professional writing, education, and literary studies—in a way that fit the unique religious and spiritual nature of BYU–Idaho. Our English Council decided that an emphasis on literature and ethics would meet these needs for now. But we could not find a suitable textbook for our undergraduates.

During a 2004 sabbatical and with the support of my chair, Kip Hartvigsen, I compiled and edited what I think is the best piece of scholarship I will ever produce: *Ethics, Literature, and Theory: An Introductory Reader*.¹ It is our hope that this textbook will play a role in returning our discipline to a serious discussion of the moral effects of art, our responsibilities as readers and artists, and the debate over appropriate readings and materials for the classroom. After teaching from this new text in the Fall 2005 semester, I can fairly say that our senior seminar students were actively engaged. And because of my scholarship in this area, I was a much better and more authoritative teacher.

Appropriate, student-friendly scholarship and research must not only be pursued at BYU–Idaho; it must be actively promoted and encouraged. Administration, deans, and department chairs should fully support

1. Editor’s Note: Stephen George’s “Preface to *Ethics, Literature, and Theory: An Introductory Reader*” appeared in *Perspective*, Volume 6, Number 1.

faculty efforts in these areas, even suggesting projects and research when there is a need. The generous funds for professional development must be continued. Without ego, faculty research and faculty/student projects should be publicized on faculty and departmental web pages, in departmental and college newsletters, and in *BYU–I News & Notes*, *Summit Magazine*, *Perspective*, and other appropriate venues. What a wonderful thing if an attractive university web site could be created to detail the exciting research performed by our faculty and students! I think our church leaders would undoubtedly approve of research and publishing done in purity to showcase this university of curious workmanship.

Finally, I believe that for Brigham Young University–Idaho to fulfill its unique mission within the Church and the world, its faculty and student body must evidence a sincere interest in life-long learning, meaningful scholarship, and appropriate research endeavors. I am confident that with the Lord’s guidance, faculty can engage in research without losing sight of the needs of their students or the inspired purpose of this institution. Clearly, we as faculty cannot model or mentor that which we cannot do ourselves. ☺

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