

THE PRE-MATRICULATION PROJECT

Rhonda Seamons—Department of English

During the first week of the Fall 2006 semester, Henry Eyring asked me to meet with him and President Clark to talk about a new pre-matriculation project. Henry gave me a cursory overview of the concept behind the project, explaining that students who are admitted to Harvard's Business School must complete certain modules and attain proficiency in a number of areas before they are permitted to register for classes. He and President Clark were thinking about implementing something like that here. He asked me to give the project some thought.

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Before the mid-October meeting, I produced a document that reflected a variety of strategies we might employ to help our students arrive at our doors better prepared to learn. I had organized my thoughts around Luke 2:52, which explains that “Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man.” I had brainstormed ideas for development and preparation in the cognitive, psychomotor, spiritual, and affective domains. It was a broad and random list, which I emailed to all of the participants before the meeting. Both in the email message and in person at the meeting, I expressed reservations about the wisdom of having high-stakes testing in a non-proctored environment. In fact, I was emphatic about what I didn't want to see happen with our future students. Ironically (or maybe not), I was asked to assume leadership for the project.

I have been working officially on the online pre-matriculation materials for about five months now, but my involvement with this topic has been of much longer duration. About ten years ago, I was asked to speak at Madison High School on the topic: “What high school students should know to prepare for college.” I eagerly began compiling a list of what I considered to be “the important stuff.” A week or so before the event, I mentioned the upcoming speaking engagement during the pre-class chatter with my Spanish students. I spontaneously decided to get my students' take on the subject. “Most of you are freshmen,” I pointed out. “What do you think I should tell a bunch of high school students who are planning on going to college?”

Without missing a beat, one young man looked up from the backpack he was unloading and declared, “Don't assume your roommates will buy toilet paper.”

The other students gave knowing chuckles, and several called out additional tips, which I scribbled on the bottom of my lesson plan. Within minutes, I had a much different perspective on what I should put into my presentation for the high school. My students had given

me some powerful insights about what it takes to adjust to college life. Over the years, I have occasionally remembered that conversation, and I have pondered on how we might help students make the transition into college more successfully.

Our students come from every inhabited corner of the earth. Some have had a solid upbringing in the Church. Others are converts. Some have visited a Church campus, perhaps attending an EFY event. Others have only seen pictures of the beautiful school buildings. We know all too well that our students have not had a uniform high school experience, a common curriculum, or even a similar opportunity for enrichment activities. Yet we welcome all of them, and we want them to succeed. We also want them to understand the expectations that surround the use of sacred tithing funds.

The youth of the Church have a mandate from the Lord to get an education. Receiving that education at a Church school is both an honor and a privilege. In the pre-matriculation project, we are creating online resources to help future students gain a deeper understanding of what it means to attend a Disciple Preparation Center. We are assembling materials to help them act earlier and make more informed decisions. We are hoping to assist them in choosing a major before they arrive, selecting courses in a focused and meaningful way, and engaging in extracurricular activities. We want future students to feel the Spirit and to recognize the preparation and commitment expected of those who come here.

Remembering my experience with that Spanish class a decade ago, I suspected my current students could give me tremendous insights. I am sure my students did not understand the significance of the many questions I posed during the few minutes we prepared for class each day during the month of October 2006, but their answers and anecdotes became course-defining counsel for me. I quickly realized they were powerfully and uniquely positioned to speak to the needs of their younger brothers and sisters who might become future students. Just before mid-term, I invited my English III students to help me get the Future Students website started. I offered to let them write research papers about our academic programs in lieu of a traditional college paper. Enthusiastically they accepted.

In November, we began our research of each department's academic options by reading the University Catalog and visiting the advising centers. Over the next few weeks, we talked with faculty members, corresponded with department chairs, and worked with society presidents and advisors. My students were continually surprised—and delighted—to discover the resources waiting to assist BYU–Idaho students on campus. Slowly, they began to understand the requirements of each academic program and to see how a future student might best prepare to enter a given field.

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Since my composition classes had been organized around my personal learning model which is based on “Light: The Armor of God,” my students understood that we “put on” light as we embrace truth, serve in righteousness, work out our salvation, finish our preparation, learn by faith, and receive the Spirit. As the students’ papers began to take shape, I found that they naturally wove in the learning model they had been taught. They incorporated scriptures (Spirit), things future students could do while in high school (preparation), lists of the majors and minors available (salvation), quotes from various authorities (truth), information about serving and participating in societies (righteousness), and questions future students might ask as they consider a certain career (faith). It was fascinating to watch the learning model give strength and structure to their work—and it was work—an incredible amount of work. And they loved it. The students grinned as they sat for the photographs.

On the day we went to a computer lab to proofread the embryonic Future Students website, the excitement in the air was palpable. Of course, my students first searched for their own smiling faces. Then they read their polished (and published) texts. But then, to my great satisfaction, I caught many of them reading their classmates’ work—seeking information about other majors and minors. It was a lot of fun.

A few days later, Public Relations informed me that one of my students had put a link to the still unreleased Future Students website on myspace.com. When I casually mentioned the incident to my classes, quite a few students surprised me by admitting they’d called their moms, dads, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and friends to have them look at their work. Several told me they had to walk their parents through the steps of typing in a URL, going to a website, and making a bookmark. I suppose that’s the electronic equivalent of a “fridge paper.” Since the deed was done, I asked the students what their friends and families had thought of our work. The feedback pleased me. Parents were especially grateful for the information and guidance they had discovered. Even in a rough-draft form, like it was, the parents could see the potential of the site.

With the Academic Options information revised and edited by the departments, I assembled the online initiative committee to select the next area of focus. We determined to investigate the possibility of offering voluntary diagnostic testing and placement recommendations for future students. Committee members talked with department chairs and presented findings.

Three departments showed early interest in placement recommendations: Foreign Language, Mathematics, and English. The Foreign Language Department constructed a placement guideline based on number of

years a language has been studied. The department chair also asked me to link to BYU's WebCAPE online exams. The diagnostic tests in French and Spanish are particularly well done, and BYU has been most supportive of our using them. The Math Department is in the process of creating a placement test, though they are waiting for the acquisition of Maple TA software to finalize it. Apparently, that program has a greater capacity than Blackboard to evaluate equivalent answers in an open response format. The English Department is exploring two options for placement purposes: ACT scores or Criterion evaluations. Criterion is an online grading program produced by ETS, which allows students to submit essays and receive individualized feedback. We recently held a "webinar" with representatives from ETS, and a three-week pilot is already underway. The Placement Recommendations link also includes information on the Advanced Placement tests, though we realize that information will certainly need to be updated as the Foundations Initiative continues to take shape.

During the Winter 2007 semester, we began to add courses and modules to the website. We wanted to provide future students with the opportunity to be introduced to our learning model before they enrolled in classes on campus. Since we do not yet have an official learning model, I created a simple template based, again, on the Armor of God metaphor I had been using in my classes. I then invited a number of faculty members and students to provide content. While we someday hope to have orientation courses and remedial modules, we presently have interesting courses and modules for prospective students to explore on business, teaching, relationships, finance, digital photography, steadfastness, vision, and other topics. Each module contains a scriptural connection, a course overview, online lessons (of varying levels of complexity), a comprehension check (we tried to design fun, educational games), and additional resources (like links to devotional talks or other campus websites). BYU-Idaho students who have previewed the site say the courses are enjoyable and informative, and we held a focus group with high school students on March 28th.

We are also in the process of adding material about the Mission Statement to the Future Students website. This is in response to a conversation my students had with President Clark. Someone had posed a question about the Mission Statement, which the President was trying to answer. As he attempted to quote the Mission Statement from memory, I offered to bring it up on the screen. Once I located the appropriate website (which had only a simple list of the four points), the President expressed a wish that we had additional information and examples for future students to read—things that would help them understand how we implement the Mission Statement on campus. My teaching assistant

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offered to lead a student group in creating such a website this semester. She asked for twelve students, and they began meeting in mid-March.

More than 250 students and faculty members have already contributed to the pre-matriculation project. I have been particularly pleased with the students' contributions; indeed, I believe that current student involvement will continue to be a defining feature, both in the development and in the maintenance of the site. Some wonderful materials have been assembled and placed on the Future Students website to assist our young brothers and sisters in their college preparation. As we edit and refine—and create additional resources—it will just keep getting better. ☺

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