

AN ONLINE DEGREE

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Before the advent of the printing press and the wide distribution of books, the only option available for learning was to gather together and talk with other people. Those desiring to learn would seek out experts with various skills and knowledge, often going to great lengths to do so. These experts would verbally describe what they knew to the inquiring learners. This gathering together also provided a natural opportunity for dialogue about the topics being learned. The university tradition was established, and the same model has persisted in thousands of universities today.

With the then-innovative technology of printed books and with the now-innovative technologies for communication, the dissemination of knowledge has become worldwide and nearly instantaneous. It is no longer necessary to go to great lengths to seek out the experts. However, universities continue to be centers of learning—not only for their ability to disseminate knowledge, but also for their capacity as centers of gathering. The by-product of the original universities, that of gathering and discussing knowledge and ideas, has become a primary value of today's university. Gathering together to learn has even greater significance at BYU–Idaho. In a devotional address, Elder David A. Bednar taught:

The spirit, purposes, and blessings of gathering also occur in smaller but equally important ways on this set apart and special campus. . . . This spirit of gathering brings assurance, encouragement, and a sense of purpose greater than self. At BYU–Idaho you gather to worship the Father in the name of the Son, to build up the Church and the university, to find defense and protection, and to receive counsel and instruction. You gather together to learn and to prepare for your mortal and eternal opportunities and responsibilities. You gather together to strengthen each other. You gather together to develop appropriate relationships and to create eternal families. You gather together to increase in understanding about the purpose and measure of your creation. You are richly blessed to be students gathered together on the campus of BYU–Idaho.¹

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Advancements in communication technology, though still lacking in many regards, allow a type of virtual gathering of learners who are located in geographically diverse places. The learning environment is not as place-bound as it once was. To improve the quality of the learning experience and extend the learning environment to more students, an online degree program is being established at BYU–Idaho.

BYU BACHELOR OF GENERAL STUDIES

On September 1, 1998 Brigham Young University in Provo began offering an online Bachelor of General Studies (BGS) degree. Its purpose was to accommodate the large number of students who left school before graduation. BYU already had in place a nationally recognized independent study program that utilized online learning technologies. These independent study online courses became a curriculum base for the BGS degree program. The program was marketed to former BYU students who had completed at least 30 credits on the Provo campus. This program, which is not available to current BYU students in Provo, includes a student body from across the nation and world.

The BGS administrative offices in Provo received many phone calls from former Ricks College students wanting to participate in the program. It was determined that the online BGS program would focus on serving former BYU students, not on accommodating students from other CES institutions.

In September 2000, Ricks College began offering a small number of online courses. These courses were intended to provide additional opportunities for on-campus students as well as off-track and community students. Almost simultaneously with the first online course offerings, Ricks College began receiving phone calls from former students asking if they would be able to complete their degrees online. As Ricks College transitioned to BYU–Idaho, the number of calls increased. Former Ricks College students wanted to find out if they would be able to complete their bachelor degrees online, having already earned associate degrees from Ricks College.

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BYU–IDAHO BACHELOR OF UNIVERSITY STUDIES

In September 2007, BYU–Idaho will begin offering an online Bachelor of University Studies (BUS) degree. The intended audience is former Ricks College/BYU–Idaho students who have not completed their degrees. Because the on-campus gathering is a fundamental part of the BYU–Idaho experience, candidates for the online BUS program must have completed at least 30 credits in Rexburg.

The BUS itself is not a new degree. Beginning with the creation of BYU–Idaho, students have had the option of graduating with a degree in University Studies. The BUS degree is structured to allow students to design their own programs. Students are required to complete all general and university requirements, along with a minor and two clusters, or two minors and a cluster. The degree requirements for online students and on-campus students are the same, including the requirements to complete an annual ecclesiastical endorsement and abide by the honor code.

The online BUS students will complete their degree requirements by taking courses taught entirely online with no classroom component. Online course offerings that are currently available, along with additional courses that will become available in upcoming semesters, will provide an online curriculum for online BUS students to complete a minor and two clusters. Initially, the course offerings will be limited. Students will have additional minor and cluster options as more online courses are designed and developed.

Foundations: The transition from General Education to Foundations will impact the BUS degree, both in-class and online. Since most Foundations courses will undergo a complete redesign, it is anticipated that an online version of these courses will be built concurrently with the in-class version.

Diverse Student Body: The concurrent online/in-class development of new Foundations courses highlights a primary goal of the online degree program. The online degree is designed to integrate its participants into the BYU–Idaho experience. There will not be separate online course offerings for BUS students and on-campus students. Rather, a single BYU–Idaho online course will enroll students from three groups:

1. First priority for registration in a BYU–Idaho online course will be given to online degree-seeking (BUS) students.
2. Any on-campus student will be able to register for the same online course, providing them with additional registration options.
3. Registration will then be opened to off-track and community students.

This blending of students from various backgrounds and physical locations, both on and off campus, will create a rich learning environment. It is anticipated that most of the online BUS participants will be non-traditional students with diverse life experience that will contribute depth, breadth, and diversity to the classes.

Online Learning Model: Online university courses are expanding. In the United States, nearly 3.2 million students were enrolled in an online course during the fall term in 2005. This was up from 2.3 million students the previous year.²

Universities have frequently adopted online courses as an innovation allowing them to serve more students with less overhead cost. However, in many instances, the quality of the learning experience has been sacrificed to serve those additional students and increase profits. There is little precedent in online education for building quality first, then working toward serving more students and lowering cost. The quality of the learning experience is the top priority for any online course created at BYU–Idaho. The potential benefits of serving more students and lowering

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MEASURING QUALITY

Measuring quality in any learning environment is difficult. A study was recently done to determine the quality of the student experience in BYU–Idaho online courses. A student in a religion course commented, “[I] learned a lot more in the online course, but I had a much better experience in the classroom course.” This specific comment raises a number of general questions:

- What is the purpose of the learning environment?
- What goals should we seek to achieve in a course that is conducted entirely online?
- Should we seek for the intangible, yet highly desirable, “better experience” that this student had in the classroom-based religion class, the experience so often associated with the Spirit of Ricks?
- Should we seek for maximum knowledge?

A combination of these goals seems most appropriate. This combination of knowledge with the Spirit of Ricks becomes a general standard of quality in the learning environment, whether in-class, online, or a hybrid course that blends the best of in-class and online.

To achieve quality first, some general standards have been established for any online course offered from BYU–Idaho. Rather than independent study, each online course will be cohort-based with a high level of collaboration. Students enrolled in the course will work together as a class to achieve the learning goals. Primary focus will be given to student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions, and in some cases, students teaching each other. Creating opportunities for students to interact with each other and with their instructor, in any course, in-class or online, is central to the mission statement of BYU–Idaho and is at the heart of the Spirit of Ricks. Each online course will be based on a semester calendar, subdivided into regularly scheduled learning units. Students will work together through these units.

This style of online course requires a unique style of teaching. It is a style of fostering student relationships, guiding student conversations, assessing student progress in critical thinking and analysis, and fostering participation and involvement, all through a largely text-based communication medium.

FACULTY

With the introduction of this online learning degree program, there is a need and opportunity for faculty expertise in the areas of course development and teaching.

A Team Approach to Course Development: Online courses provide a natural setting for a team approach to course development. An online course development team could consist of the following individuals:

- course designers (at least two faculty members)
- an instructional designer
- a multimedia developer
- a graphic designer
- a programmer

This team approach will allow faculty members to focus all of their energy on their best skills: understanding their discipline and ways to teach students within that discipline. The other members of the team will lend their expertise to the course.

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Stewardship for an online course and its components resides with departments, not any one individual. One benefit of this policy is that it fosters a team approach to course development. The benefits of counseling with our councils, as explained by Elder Ballard,³ are played out as at least two faculty members counsel together to determine what content and learning strategies to include in a course. The other members of the development team are added to create an expanded council that offers expertise and development skills in areas unique to the online learning environment. Because the finished course is a product of counseling together and represents many voices, any qualified faculty member would be able to step in and do the actual teaching of the course.

Course Updates: Historically, online course development processes have followed a 3-4 year revision cycle, depending on the volatility of the content. Once an online BYU-Idaho course has been initially developed, it will follow a two-phase update process. The first phase will be perpetual. One of the advantages of an online environment is the capacity for instant revision. As changes are needed, the instructor or a member of the course development team can make them immediately. As new technologies and innovations in teaching emerge they can be introduced into the course, either between semesters or while the course is being conducted. Evaluations are built right into the course structure to help identify needed changes. The second phase of the course update process would involve major revisions or a course redesign. These could take place every three years or as often as necessary.

Any online course developed at BYU-Idaho will contain the same rigor and expectations as courses developed for in-class delivery or hybrid (online plus in-class) delivery. The initial batch of online course offerings

may require that some courses are created from scratch exclusively for online or draw substantially from other sources (i.e., publishing company resources or the BYU online course library). Over time, however, a different development model is anticipated. As instructors refine and modify on-campus in-class courses to align with the BYU–Idaho Learning Model, they will likely be asking core questions such as:

- What should my students be able to do or know at the end of this semester that they are not able to do or know now?
- What types of activities could the students participate in during the semester that will allow them to learn those lessons and have those experiences?
- Which of those activities are best done inside the classroom?
- Which of those activities are best done by the students outside of the classroom, either on their own or collaborating or through the use of technology?

As the answers to these questions emerge, it is clear that an entirely face-to-face learning environment is not ideal, nor is an entirely online learning environment. The ideal learning environment makes the best use of whatever tools or gathering places or activities are available. In some cases, it will be online activities. In other cases, it will involve gathering together in a classroom. Classes that incorporate both are often called “hybrid” courses because they utilize the best components of the classroom and online environments.

As courses become “hybrid,” or refined to make the best use of all available tools and activities, a natural next step is to determine ways to extend that quality learning environment to more people. The opportunity for innovation in online learning today is to increase the fidelity of gathering experiences that take place over a distance. General Conference serves as one model. Because of the church satellite system, the branch president in San Vicente, Argentina, has an opportunity to gather every six months with the Prophet, the Apostles, and the entire church membership and feel at one with them. A more interactive gathering experience would be the focus of innovation for the online BYU–Idaho learning environment.

Teaching Online: Once an online course has been through the initial development process, its first-run would normally be taught by a full-time BYU–Idaho faculty member, ideally one of those on the development team. Each of us that has taught a course, in-class or online, knows very well that the best laid plans are always altered once the interactions with students start. The full-time faculty member is in a unique position to find ways to improve the course as the students experience it for the first time.

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All online courses will be administered through the Division of Continuing Education. In the event that there are no full-time faculty who opt to teach online as overload, then adjunct faculty will be hired to teach the courses.

The Academic Technology office has received many calls from students who have been unable to register for an online course because it is full. Their questions are often variations of “how can an online course be full?” This question is based on a commonly held assumption that an online course is built to be an independent study experience with computer-graded assignments. If this were the case (which may be, but only for some modules of some courses) no enrollment cap would be necessary. The courses in the new online model will not be of this variety and will require controlled enrollment caps.

The day-to-day teaching of these collaborative-based online courses will involve a coordinated effort between the instructor of record, an online learning mentor or guide, teaching assistants, and a call center for administrative and technical help. This team approach could allow a collaborative style course normally limited to 10-15 students to serve 60 or more students. The first factor in determining class size, however, is the quality of the student experience. The online environment can provide a greater organization of individual student preparation activities, small-group interactions, and individual student reflection and assessment. This will give the online instructor more opportunities to manage large-group interactions. Overall learning could increase relative to smaller online courses, even as a single faculty member serves more students.⁴

CONCLUSION

In his inaugural response, President Kim B. Clark said:

I am convinced that we will find new ways to use information technology to reach more students and to deepen the learning experience of those we touch. In a day not far from now, we will be able to break down the barriers of time and space and connect our students on internships or between semesters to the university and to each other and create outstanding, interactive educational experiences. In these experiences students will teach one another in new and powerful ways. This capacity to educate effectively across time and space will allow us to leverage the capacity of the university and reach many more young people.⁵

Many of the boundaries that have traditionally limited the capacity of the university are being lifted.

Many of the boundaries that have traditionally limited the capacity of the university are being lifted. The online Bachelor of University Studies degree at BYU-Idaho is one of the beginning steps in seeking to understand how to improve the quality of the university experience while extending it in an efficient manner to more students. ∞

NOTES

1. David A. Bednar. "The Spirit and Purposes of Gathering." 31 October 2006. <http://www.byui.edu/Presentations/Transcripts/Devotionals/2006_10_31_Bednar.htm> 23 March 2007.
2. I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman. *Making the Grade, Online Education in the United States, 2006*. <http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/pdf/making_the_grade.pdf> 22 March 2007.
3. M. Russell Ballard. *Counseling with our Councils*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997
4. Henry J. Eyring. (2007). Personal communication.
5. Kim B. Clark (2005). Inaugural Response. 11 October 2005. <http://www.byui.edu/Presentations/Transcripts/MiscellaneousAddresses/2005_10_11_Clark.htm> 23 March 2007.