

# **A University's Multifaceted Approach to Measuring Character and Spirituality Outcomes**

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## **Abstract**

Brigham Young University (BYU) has had defined by its sponsoring institution since its founding in 1875 those elements of character and spirituality (affective domain) that comprise mission, in addition to the intellectual (cognitive domain). However, it is only since the establishment of the Office of Institutional Assessment and Analysis (hereafter Office) in 1996 that any strategic and comprehensive analysis has been undertaken to gather evidence, measure results, and assess or evaluate the degree to which these affective outcomes have been realized according to students, employers of graduates, alumni, staff, and faculty.

From its university's foundational documents, the Office developed those constructs of character and spirituality to measure and then assess. In an effort to also benchmark the university's relative standing on these affective constructs with other universities of comparison, the Office identified three national studies and instruments: the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) Faculty Survey, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and the National Academic Integrity Study survey. To make the evaluation complete, it then developed and adopted five institutional instruments: the BYU Alumni Questionnaire; the BYU Senior Survey; the Employers of BYU Graduates Survey; the BYU Mission, Aims, and Objectives Study; and BYU Student Ratings.

This article briefly describes each of these eight instruments and then summarizes key findings from each (two tables are included). One of the most significant findings is taken from the NSSE study wherein 96 percent of students reported that they participate in activities that enhance spirituality "often" or "very often" and that they experience substantial growth from their experience at BYU in developing a personal code of values and ethics. This result was

further substantiated by the Academic Integrity Study that found BYU students cheat significantly less than the national norm.

## ***Introduction***

In 1987, Ernest Boyer noted, “We need educated men and women who not only pursue their own personal interests but are also prepared to fulfill their social and civic obligations. And it is during the undergraduate experience, perhaps more than at any other time, that these essential qualities of mind and character are refined” (1987, 7). The qualities of character are not only difficult to define, they are also challenging to measure. Dalton and Henck, in the introduction to their text, *Assessing Character Outcomes in College*, pointed out that “Two important current challenges for promoting character in higher education are (1) achieving a better understanding of the complex interrelationships of intellectual, affective, and behavioral factors that contribute to development of moral character and (2) *determining the most appropriate measures for assessing character outcomes*” (2004, 3, italics added).

## ***Background***

BYU, a faith-based institution founded in 1875 and sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), bears the name of its founder and early pioneer and Church leader, Brigham Young. BYU is “a private university that seeks to develop students of faith, intellect, and character who have the skills and the desire to continue learning and to serve others throughout their lives” (Brigham Young University [BYU], 2003a, ¶ 1). BYU welcomes all to its beautiful campus with these words: “Enter to learn, go forth to serve.” BYU serves 30,000 students on its campus and is one of the largest private institutions of higher education in the United States and the nation’s largest church-related university. From the viewpoint of the board of trustees (which consists of General Authorities and other general officers of The Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), BYU is an extension of the Church's mission itself. The president of the sponsoring church and the university's board of trustees, Gordon B. Hinckley, said, "This institution is unique. It is remarkable. It is a continuing experiment on a great premise that a large and complex university can be first-class academically while nurturing an environment of faith in God and the practice of Christian principle" (Welch & Norton, 1996, 206). Many characteristics of BYU are best understood in the context of its close church relationship and are expressed in its three foundational documents: The Mission of Brigham Young University, The Aims of a BYU Education, and BYU's Institutional Objectives (Mission, Aims, and Objectives). The intent of BYU's Mission, Aims, and Objectives is to give direction to all the university's educational and outreach activities, admission policies, selection of faculty and staff, allocation of resources, and planning.

Since its creation, BYU has always sensed its uniqueness among institutions of higher learning. Brigham Young told the first president of BYU, Karl G. Maeser, that he shouldn't even teach the multiplication tables without the spirit of the Lord. BYU president Franklin Harris (1921–1945) said it this way: "The first task of the future is to preserve at the institution this spirit that comes to us from the past—the true spirit of the Brigham Young University. This spirit places character above learning" (Welch & Norton, 1996, 8).

A former president of the Church and of the BYU Board of Trustees, Spencer W. Kimball said this about BYU: "This institution has no justification for its existence unless it builds character, creates and develops faith, and makes men and women of strength and courage, fortitude, and service" (Kimball, 1979, 2). Dallin H. Oaks, president of BYU from 1971–1980, said:

The whole trend in American higher education has been to decrease the Christian emphasis in a Christian college, to abandon value orientation, and to become more and

more secular. . . . Brigham Young University has not been part of that trend. Although the current has been almost exclusively in the other direction, we have retained our basic value orientation. . . . Throughout our curriculum we teach the basic values of honesty, patriotism, integrity, and faith in God. Those ideals are a vital part of our curriculum across the length and breadth of the university (“A Conversation,” 1975, 17).

The BYU community also places a premium on public service as part of its character-based mission. Many BYU personnel and students routinely engage in such activities as carrying out service projects with local churches of diverse faiths; mentoring in elementary and secondary schools; and assisting with literacy, food, housing, and sports programs. The BYU Center for Service and Learning formally sponsors 29 campus and community service programs and provides information on many more. Records indicate that approximately half of all BYU students participate in one or more of these formally sponsored opportunities and that in a typical year BYU students provide more than 78,000 hours of service.

### ***BYU’s Character and Spirituality Outcomes***

The university’s mission statement, written and adopted in 1981, identifies four educational goals. The first goal is derived from its church sponsorship: (1) “students should be taught the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Mission statement reference). The other three goals include (2) the provision of a broadly based university education, (3) instruction in specialized fields of each student’s choice, and (4) scholarly and creative work by the faculty.

In 1995, the university administration and community, in consultation with the BYU Board of Trustees, approved a student-focused description of the university’s mission known as

The Aims of a BYU Education. This statement asserts that the experience of students at the university should be (1) spiritually strengthening and (2) intellectually enlarging in terms of skill development (i.e., sound thinking, effective communication, and quantitative reasoning), breadth of understanding (i.e., religion, historical perspective, science, arts and letters, and global awareness), and development of competence. A BYU education should also (3) help build character and (4) engender lifelong learning and service (BYU, 1995).

In 1999, the university community and board of trustees reaffirmed the Mission and Aims of BYU and also articulated four Institutional Objectives to inform the university's operational and fiscal priorities: (1) educate the minds and spirits of students within a learning environment that increases faith in God and the restored gospel, is intellectually enlarging, is character building, and leads to a life of learning and service; (2) advance truth and knowledge to enhance the education of students, enrich the quality of life, and contribute to a resolution of world problems; (3) extend the blessings of learning to members of the Church in all parts of the world; and (4) develop friends for the university and the Church (BYU, undated).

The four expected outcomes of a BYU education, also known as the four aims of a BYU education and as the first of the four Institutional Objectives, are described below and then further defined in table 1 using 24 subconstructs, including those with character and spiritual dimensions:

### 1. Spiritually Strengthening

“A shared desire to ‘seek learning, even by study and also by faith’ (Doctrine and Covenants 88:118) knits BYU into a unique educational community. A spiritually strengthening education warms and enlightens students by the bright fire of their teachers’ faith while enlarging their minds with knowledge” (BYU, 2003e, ¶ 3).

## 2. Intellectually Enlarging

“In preparing for the bachelor’s degree, students should enlarge their intellects by developing skills, breadth, and depth: (1) skills in the basic tools of learning, (2) an understanding of the broad areas of human knowledge, and (3) real competence in at least one area of concentration” (BYU, 2003c, ¶ 2).

## 3. Character Building

“Because it seeks to educate students who are renowned for what they are as well as for what they know, Brigham Young University has always cared as much about strong moral character as about great mental capability. Consequently, a BYU education should reinforce such moral virtues as integrity, reverence, modesty, self-control, courage, compassion, and industry” (BYU, 2003b, ¶ 2).

## 4. Lifelong Learning and Service

“Well-developed faith, intellect, and character prepare students for a lifetime of learning and service. By ‘entering to learn’ and continuing to learn as they ‘go forth to serve,’ BYU students strengthen not only themselves—they ‘also bring strength to others in the tasks of home and family life, social relationships, civic duty, and service to mankind’” (BYU, 2003d, ¶ 2).



Table 1

*BYU Mission and Aims constructs*

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*Spiritually Strengthening*

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1. Relationship with God and religious identity

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*Intellectually Enlarging*

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2. Thinking habits

3. Thinking skills

4. Quantitative reasoning

5. Listening skills

6. Speaking/presentation skills

7. Writing skills

8. Reading skills

9. Possesses historical perspective

10. Understands, uses, and appreciates science

11. Understands and enjoys excellence in the visual and performing arts

12. Understands and appreciates literature

13. Possesses informed awareness of peoples, cultures, languages, and nations

14. Confidence/competence in major

15. Competence in studying, interpreting, and applying scripture

16. Understands the doctrines and history of the Church

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*Character Building*

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17. Strives to develop Christlike character and live a Christlike life

18. Views the world through an eternal perspective

19. Values physical, emotional, and mental health

20. Maintains healthy relationships with others

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*Lifelong Learning and Service*

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21. Possesses the desire and skills needed for lifelong learning

22. Uses technology effectively

23. Church service

24. Community service and involvement

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The BYU Mission, Aims, and Objectives are published in several university documents, including both the undergraduate and graduate catalogs, and are made available to prospective students, enrolled students, faculty, and staff. They are also discussed at the annual fall University Conference, new student orientation, and new faculty workshops.

### ***Instruments Used to Measure Character and Spirituality Outcomes***

The Office of Institutional Assessment and Analysis facilitates institutional research and assessment and helps nurture a culture of assessment and continuous improvement by providing evidence used to improve decision-making. BYU uses eight assessment instruments to assess character and spiritual outcomes. These instruments are listed in table 2 and then described in greater detail (administration frequency, respondents, evaluation, and question types), along with key findings, in the body of the text. The three national instruments are the national Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) Faculty Survey, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and the National Academic Integrity Study survey from Duke University; the five institutional instruments are the BYU Alumni Questionnaire; the BYU Senior Survey; the Employers of BYU Graduates Survey; the BYU Mission, Aims, and Objectives Study; and BYU Student Ratings.

Table 2

*Instruments used to measure character and spiritual outcomes at Brigham Young University*

Instrument	Target Population	Mode	Cycle	Response Rate and Number of Responses (recent)
Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) Faculty Survey	Faculty	Paper	3 years	49% (1,137)
National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)	First-year and senior students	Web and paper	Annual	59% (991)
Academic Integrity Study (Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University)	Students and faculty	Paper	5 years	N/A
BYU Alumni Questionnaire	Alumni that are three years post-degree	Paper	Annual	39% (2,570)
BYU Senior Survey	Seniors who have applied for graduation	Web	Annual	26% (2,073)
Employers of BYU Graduates Survey	Industry recruiters	Paper	3 years	30% (1,300)
BYU Mission, Aims, and Objectives Survey	Students, faculty, staff, and administrators	Web	As needed	51% (2,474 employees) and 46% (4,571 students)
BYU Student Ratings	Students	Web	Semester/term	64% (115,212)

**Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) Faculty Survey**

BYU has participated in this national faculty survey four times—in 1992, 1998, 2001, and 2004.

- Administration: Nationally every three years

- Respondents: All teaching faculty (part time and full time)
- Evaluand: Faculty
- Question types: Multiple choice

Key findings compared to national benchmark groups include:

- Most BYU faculty agree that colleges should be concerned with students’ “spiritual development.”
- BYU faculty “do to a great extent”
  - Consider themselves religious.
  - Consider themselves spiritual.
  - Seek opportunities to grow spiritually.
  - Experience close alignment between work and personal values.
  - Engage in prayer/meditation.
- BYU faculty note the following as “very important/essential” goals for students:
  - Develop moral character.
  - Develop personal values.
- BYU faculty note the following as “very important/essential” goals for themselves:
  - Integrate spirituality into their lives.
  - Achieve congruence between their own and institutional values.

## **National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)**

BYU has participated annually in this national assessment since its inception in 2000.

The survey is viewed as an excellent process measure of the learning environment and assists in

providing multifaceted measurement of institutional performance regarding the Mission, Aims, and Objectives. Questions focus on areas of student engagement which empirical research has shown to be predictive of success in achieving important learning outcomes.

- Administration: Every year
- Respondents: Freshmen and seniors
- Evaluand: University faculty, staff, and programs; students
- Question types: Multiple choice

Key findings include:

In 2006, those NSSE questions that focused on spiritual issues within the university revealed that 96 percent of BYU students say they participate in activities that enhance spirituality “often” or “very often.” Students also reported substantial personal growth from their experience at BYU in

- Understanding themselves.
- Developing a personal code of values and ethics.
- Developing a deepened sense of spirituality.

### **Academic Integrity Study**

BYU has participated in this national survey twice—once in 2000 and again in 2005.

- Administration: Every five years, funded and administered by the Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University
- Respondents: Students (undergraduate and graduate) and faculty
- Evaluand: University faculty, administration, and policy; students

- Question types: Multiple choice, free response

Key findings include:

- BYU students report significantly lower levels of personal cheating and observed cheating than national counterparts.
- BYU faculty similarly report significantly lower levels of observed cheating than national counterparts.

## **BYU Alumni Questionnaire**

BYU developed the Alumni Questionnaire (AQ) to measure the extent to which BYU graduates felt BYU fulfilled its Mission, Aims, and Objectives in their lives. BYU first administered the AQ in November 2000 and has done so each year since. The AQ asks alumni to rate themselves on specific self-descriptive statements derived from official statements of university aims. Other items solicit alumni perceptions of the impact of their experiences at BYU in terms of their spiritual, character, and intellectual development. Free response items ask alumni to describe significant experiences with faculty members, key learning experiences, and areas in which the university can improve.

- Administration: Every fall since 2000
- Respondents: Alumni three years postdegree
- Evaluand: University faculty, staff, and programs; alumni
- Question types: Multiple choice, matrix rating, free response

Key findings include:

- Most alumni believe that statements regarding having a strong relationship with God and living a life of high character describe them “quite well.”
- Statements regarding maintaining healthy relationships with others are also highly endorsed.
- Most alumni say that the greatest benefits derived from attending BYU are spiritual growth and strong relationships.

## **BYU Senior Survey**

The BYU Senior Survey is a companion to the AQ and assesses similar constructs. Many items focus on issues of student engagement (e.g., student-faculty interaction, active and enriched learning experiences, and critical thinking in major) known to be tied to student learning. Other items ask seniors to estimate the impact of their overall experience and specific facets of their experience at BYU on their spiritual, character, and intellectual development.

- Administration: Every year
- Respondents: Seniors approaching graduation
- Evaluand: University faculty, staff, and programs; students
- Question types: Multiple choice, matrix rating, free response

Key findings include:

- Most seniors report that character growth was strongly enhanced through serving others and participating in organized off-campus study (e.g., Semester Abroad) programs and off-campus internships, as well as employment.

- Most students who are less engaged in university life report less positive impacts and are less likely to indicate satisfaction with their university experience.

## **Employers of BYU Graduates Survey**

BYU has developed a survey to assess employers' perceptions of BYU graduates.

- Administration: Every three years
- Respondents: Recruiters of BYU graduates (over 5,000 in current database)
- Evaluand: Employed BYU graduates
- Question types: Multiple choice, free response

Key findings include:

- Over 90 percent of employers acknowledged the importance of their employees possessing the attributes of “a strong work ethic” and “moral values.”
- BYU graduates' greatest strengths as noted by employers included integrity, moral values, honesty, and a strong work ethic.

## **BYU Mission, Aims, and Objectives Study**

This study was conducted in order to assess the degree to which members of the campus community understood official statements of university purpose and the degree to which faculty and staff felt their daily practice reflected those statements.

- Administration: 2005
- Respondents: Undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff, and administrators
- Evaluand: University faculty, staff, administrators, and students
- Question types: Multiple choice, free response



Key findings include:

- Most faculty and staff report high levels of understanding and affinity regarding statements of institutional purpose.
- Faculty and staff report enhanced understanding of these statements coming from the annual university conference, department meetings, and personal study.
- Students report enhanced understanding of these statements from devotionals, personal study, and their majors.
- Most university personnel and students report integrating principles in these statements of purpose in daily activity less well than they believed they should, indicating perceived room for growth.

## **Student Ratings of the Learning Experience**

All students are invited to evaluate each of their courses and instructors using a 24-question student rating instrument administered online. One question about the course, two questions about the instructor, and one question about both course and instructor from the instrument seek to measure the spirituality and character outcomes of the student experience in each course with each instructor: (1) “This course provided knowledge and experiences that helped strengthen my testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ,” (2) “The instructor appropriately brought gospel insights and values into secular subjects,” (3) “The instructor was spiritually inspiring insofar as the subject matter permitted,” and (4) “The instructor and course contributed to the Mission and Aims of a BYU Education (i.e., Spiritually Strengthening, Intellectually Enlarging, Character Building, Leading to Lifelong Learning and Service).”

- Administration: All classes taught every semester and term
- Respondents: Undergraduate and graduate students
- Evaluand: Course and instructor
- Question types: Multiple choice using an 8-point Likert scale and free response

Key findings include:

- Overall, students “agree,” but not quite “strongly agree,” that BYU courses helped strengthen their testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Students almost “strongly agree” that BYU instructors help integrate “gospel insights and values” into the subject matter of the course as much the subject matter will permit.
- The students also almost “strongly agree” to their instructors being “spiritually inspiring insofar as the subject matter permitted.” Finally, the students “very strongly agree” that the instructor and course contributed to the fourfold mission of the university, e.g., Spiritually Strengthening and Character Building.

## ***Conclusion***

BYU has in place not only clear statements of its character- and spirituality-based mission but also its use of three national and five institutional instruments to measure character and spiritual outcomes. At a time when so much emphasis is being placed on cognitive outcomes in higher education, it is important for institutions that have affective outcomes, i.e., character and spirituality, not to overlook their measurement too. While some national instruments are extant to assist in this measurement effort, institutional instruments will still need to be developed to provide the full measure of an institution’s character and spiritual outcomes. The

key findings from the eight instruments used at BYU show that the institution is generally achieving its desired student outcomes in character and spiritual development.

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