

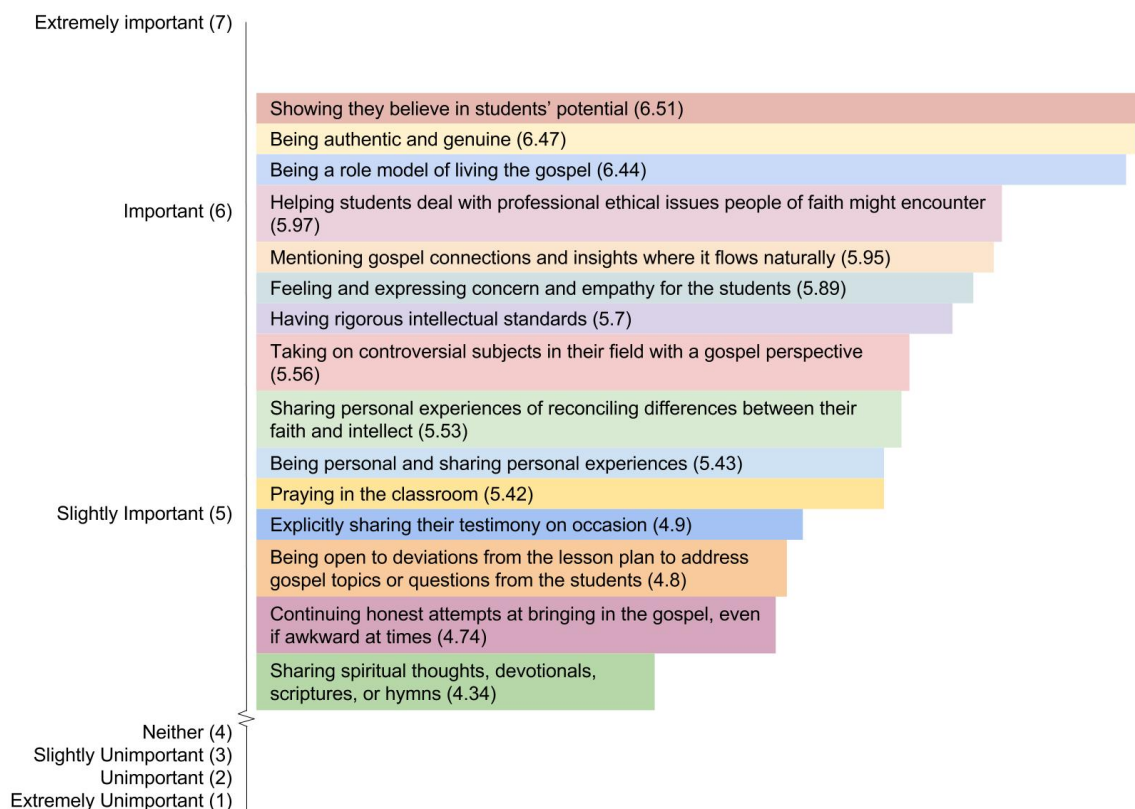
# Spiritually Strengthening and Intellectually Enlarging Professors: Four Questions Students Ask

A. Jane Birch and Alan L. Wilkins (BYU Faculty Center)

2018

In a previous paper the Faculty Center reported on the principal factors that BYU students say make the greatest difference in whether a professor is both spiritually strengthening and intellectually enlarging (see Wilkins and Birch, 2011). Figure 1 lists these factors, arrayed from those judged as most important to those seen as somewhat less important. Note that while some factors are much more impactful than others, on average all of these factors are rated positively by students and none are seen as negative by the majority of students. Note also that nearly all of these factors are not dependent on the type of class one teaches. They apply equally as well to a math professor as a religion professor.

Figure 1: Student ranking of factors exhibited by professors who are both spiritually strengthening and intellectually enlarging



This research was followed by several more studies where we continued to explore this and other factors that students report make a BYU class both spiritually strengthening and intellectually enlarging. In this paper, we present a useful way to categorize our main findings in order to make them memorable and therefore of more practical use to faculty. These are in the form of four questions that students ask. The first three they ask of their professors. The last one they ask of themselves:

1. Who are you?
2. Who am I to you?
3. Why does this course matter?
4. Who am I?

While students may not ask these questions explicitly, research on what students care most about suggests these are the questions they may be asking implicitly as they make value judgments about the professor, their relationship with the professor, the value of the class, and the implications for who they are and who they are becoming. Framing what matters to students as questions invites faculty members to reflect on the answers they hope their own students will find to these questions.

Below we sketch out the main faculty characteristics that students report are the most useful in helping them find spiritually strengthening and intellectually enlarging answers to their questions. No faculty member is strong in every characteristic, but according to our research the most highly-rated faculty tend to be strong across multiple dimensions. And even faculty who do not get consistently high ratings are often strong in one or more of these dimensions. Our invitation to faculty is to consider how you might stretch yourself in one or more of these characteristics.

## Who are you?

Students want to know what kind of a person a faculty member is. Is this person authentic and genuine? Can I relate to this person? What does this professor care about? Does this person “know their stuff”? Is this someone I can trust, someone I can respect intellectually and spiritually? Is this someone I want to go on an educational journey with? Does this person have a testimony? Do I want to become more like this person?

Here are the main characteristics mentioned by students as typical of professors who are both spiritually strengthening and intellectually enlarging.

### *Being a spiritual role model*

For students, a spiritual role model is someone who has a strong testimony, loves the Savior, is committed to the gospel, and committed to keeping the commandments. Such professors demonstrate a strong congruence between gospel standards and their personal life. Students may know this partly because the professor is willing to share some of his or her spiritual self with the students, but mostly because it is evident in how the professor speaks and acts. Strong spiritual role models may or may not share their testimony verbally, but they do share their testimony in how they act and in their interactions with other people. It is who we are and not who we say we are that matters most.

### *Being an intellectual role model*

Students want to be able to look to their professors to find worthy intellectual role models. Seeing a professor hold him/herself to high academic standards builds trust with students. Being an intellectual role model does not mean the professor has to have all of the answers, but she or he should be a credible and knowledgeable guide in the subject matter. Students appreciate the example of a professor who stays current in the discipline and demonstrates a willingness to change his/her viewpoint in the face of compelling evidence. Professors can also build trust with their students by sharing personal or professional sacrifices they've made to master their discipline.

### *Teaches by the Spirit*

Students are not always conscious of whether a professor is teaching by the Spirit, but the times when they are aware of the Spirit's presence in the classroom are impactful and greatly appreciated. When we interview faculty who teach classes where students feel the Spirit, we find that generally these professors spiritually prepare to have the Spirit before class. Like the students, these professors may or may not be fully conscious of the Spirit during class, but they try to be in tune and be flexible so they can go in the direction the Spirit indicates or at least do what seems best suited for the situation. Another characteristic we find in these faculty is that they focus on serving the needs and interests of the students more than on trying to make interesting connections between the subject matter and the gospel.

### *Being authentic and genuine*

Authenticity and genuineness are characteristics students consistently indicate are important in how impactful a professor is. Students appreciate faculty who come across as "real." These faculty are sincere, open, and honest. They don't hide behind their role as "professor." They are vulnerable. They are willing to share their whole selves with the students, which includes both successes and failures they've experienced. They are frank about not knowing everything and admit mistakes. They feel comfortable with themselves, are less self-conscious, and are less worried about what others think.

### *Naturally integrates the gospel*

Spiritually strengthening and intellectually enlarging faculty tend to have a natural passion and curiosity about connections between the gospel and their discipline. Because they are genuinely interested in this integration, it has become a part of who they are and so it naturally comes out in their teaching and conversations. They also respond readily with sincere interest to the questions and needs of students about gospel-related connections. Whether professors plan to address specific topics or gospel discussions spring up spontaneously from what is happening in the class, sharing gospel connections happens regularly in their interactions with students.

Of course some subjects lend themselves more naturally to direct connections with the gospel. However, integrating the gospel with the subject can also include connecting the gospel to the process of learning (e.g., faculty share how the Spirit has helped them learn difficult concepts or how the Lord can help students learn from "failure" and mistakes, etc.). These connections can be made by faculty in every discipline.

Faculty may or may not include prayer, spiritual thoughts, devotionals, scriptures, and/or hymns in their class, but whatever they do include is strongly congruent with who they are and what comes naturally to them. Because it is comfortable and interesting to them, it is comfortable and interesting to the students.

## How can you positively communicate who you are to the students?

Faculty communicate who they are constantly, without effort, for good or ill. Who we are comes out in all that we do. Students are inspired when they see their professors striving to improve. Students also appreciate it when faculty share themselves with their students. They love it when faculty appropriately share stories from their personal lives that reveal something about them beyond the classroom.

Some ways you can share yourself with students may include talking about one or more of the following:

- Why studying this subject is meaningful, even sacred to you
- Ways you have dealt with ethical challenges in your career
- Authentic feelings about things that you love: the Lord, your family, etc.
- How you have tried to balance work, family, and church responsibilities
- How you dealt with the pressures of being a student and what you learned
- How the Spirit has led you in critical junctures of your life, research, etc.

Brief related comments from faculty (videos):

- [George Handley, Modeling Intellectual Honesty and Christian Scholarship](#)
- [Deborah Dean, Following the Promptings of the Spirit](#)
- [Sarah M. Coyne, Sharing Myself](#)
- [Douglas F. Prawitt, Be the Whole Person](#)
- [Anton E. Bowden, Integrating Faith Naturally](#)

## Who am I to you?

Students want to know how their professors view students in general and themselves in particular. Do you care about me? Do you see any potential in me? Am I worthy of your attention? Do you care about my learning? Can I trust you to help me? Are you just doing this as a job or is my welfare something that matters to you?

### *Cares about students*

Students want to feel that faculty members genuinely care for them as individuals, even beyond wanting them to learn class material. While students appreciate it when faculty take the time to learn their names, faculty demonstrate their care for their students foremost by how they interact with them as a group and as individuals. Students appreciate it when faculty show genuine interest in them and their lives. A faculty member can talk with students before or after class or encourage students to share aspects of their lives during class. When students know you care, they are more willing to invest themselves in the course.

### *Cares about student learning*

Faculty build trust with their students as the students see the faculty member's strong commitment to the learning growth of the students. These faculty members put in the preparatory work to have a well-organized course. They patiently help students and often seek student feedback. They are willing to make adjustments when things are not working, because student learning is a high priority for them.

### *Believes in student potential*

Surrounded by intelligent classmates, students sometimes wonder if they have what it takes to be successful and make a meaningful difference. As students are asking themselves this question, they often look to faculty members to reassure them. Students want to feel that their professors believe that they can succeed in and out of the classroom. Students benefit when they trust their professors enough to value their judgement and sincere evaluation of the student's potential. Faculty show that they believe in their students' potential by setting high expectations that challenge their students, helping students see that they can meet the expectations, and then working to help students succeed.

### *Has a deep respect for agency*

Students appreciate faculty who respect them as intelligent beings capable of forming their own thoughts and opinions. Students dislike feeling manipulated or coerced into thinking a certain way. When they are given space to form their own opinions and treated with respect, they are more likely to thoughtfully consider multiple viewpoints. Faculty who share multiple viewpoints create a safe space for students to learn, because students have room to explore without judgment as they search out answers. The learning process is sometimes just as, if not more, important than the end outcome. Students want to feel supported and invited through the process rather than compelled.

### *Approachable*

Approaching faculty members can be one of the most intimidating yet potentially rewarding experiences for students. Developing relationships in which students feel comfortable asking for help can assist students in being successful. Students are more likely to engage with faculty when they feel the faculty member is approachable. Faculty demonstrate how approachable they are by how they treat the students. Students appreciate when faculty members demonstrate that they are happy and eager for students to approach them. Some faculty extend direct invitations for students to visit with them. Others make time before and after class to visit. Most importantly, highly-rated faculty avoid doing things that would feel demeaning to students.

## **What can faculty do to build good relationship with students?**

What can you do to build a good student relationships? Consider whether any of these ideas seem helpful:

- Learn student names and something about them
- Treat students with respect
- Have high expectations for students and help them succeed
- Be approachable, not standoffish
- Check to see if students are understanding and offer to help them
- Give students honest, useful feedback

Brief related comments from faculty (videos):

- [Jeff Barrow, How Do You Show Students You Care?](#)
- [Mark Butler, It Is About the People, Not the Subject](#)
- [Brad Bundy, My Goal is to Help Students Succeed in Life](#)
- [Kristen Matthews, Creating an Inviting Classroom](#)
- [Kent Blad, What Really Matters: Helping Students See Their Potential](#)

## Why does this course matter?

Students want to know why they should care about the course you are teaching. Why is learning this material beneficial? How does it relate to their life right now? How will they use this information and these skills in the future? Why should they put forth effort to learn? Helping them to see the importance of the course for their lives can greatly increase their desire to learn.

*Shows passion for the subject*

Students love experiencing the passion their professors have for the material they are teaching. When faculty share their genuine enthusiasm for the subject, students catch a glimpse of why the material is interesting and important. A passionate professor's enthusiasm is contagious. It can open up whole new worlds and possibilities for students. Conversely, if the professor is not enthusiastically engaged with the course material it is very difficult for students to get engaged.

*Connects the subject to the gospel and the other big questions of life*

Highly-rated faculty often help students understand the importance of the course by connecting the subject to things that are already important to them, including the gospel and the "big questions" of life. When students discover that the gospel gives them deeper insight into the subject matter or when the subject matter helps them better understand the gospel, these revelations can be powerful and life-changing. Making these connections helps students see why the material in the course is worthwhile and motivates them to dig deeper into the content.

*Connects the subject with the lives of the students*

It is not always obvious to students how the things they are learning can benefit their lives now and in the future. Faculty can increase motivation and interest by helping students see how the course content is connected to their current and/or future lives. Much of this can be accomplished when faculty share personal stories of ways they (or others) have used this material in their lives (professionally or personally). It is also important for faculty to get to know what matters to their students.

## What can you do to help students know why the course matters?

What idea(s) from the list below might you want to try? Remember that change often takes time and there is not necessarily one right way to help students capture the vision of why the course matters.

- Get to know your students and what matters to them so you can better help them connect the course subject to their lives.
- Share why you got into the subject and why you are passionate about it

- Share your excitement about your current research projects
- Help students see how a gospel perspective gives us motivation to study this subject
- Share connections between the discipline and the gospel you find meaningful
- Discuss controversial subjects in the field using a gospel perspective
- Show students how the discipline connects to their lives and can help answer their questions
- Suggest ways mastery of the discipline might help students fulfill their life mission

Brief related comments from faculty (videos):

- [Julie Haupt, Trying New Things](#)
- [Larry Nelson, Faithful Critical Thinking](#)
- [Kristine Hanson, Examples of Connections](#)

## Who am I?

The first three questions featured in this article are well supported by research studies conducted by the Faculty Center over many years, using a wide variety of methodologies. Over time, these studies also revealed that the answers students found to these three questions were playing a significant role in helping students to answer a fourth question, perhaps the one that is ultimately of the greatest concern and interest to students: Who am I? That is, who the professor is, how the professor treats them, and the significance of the course all contribute in meaningful ways to students' growing understanding of who they are, what they are capable of, and what they want to be.

*Who the professor is helps students consider who they are and who they want to become*

How professors present themselves in the classroom impacts the students' exploration of self identify in variety of ways. Students often mention passion; a professor's passion for a subject can awaken genuine (potentially) life-long interest in a subject. Students also talk about virtues their professors exhibit, like intellectual integrity or Christ-like charity, that deeply invite them to consider their own lives, how they are living, and how they want to live now and in the future.

*How professors treat students gives provides feedback that helps them reflect on who they are. It also impacts their thinking on how they want to treat others*

There are many ways professors impact how students think of themselves by how they treat them and the type of relationship that is formed. This includes all of the characteristics under question two: how much they care about students and their learning, what they see in their potential, how much they respect student agency, and how approachable they are. How professors treat students can have both a positive and negative impact on how student's view themselves and their potential. Students also report that how faculty treat them helps them as they think about the quality of relationships they wish to have in their future.

*Understanding why the course matters helps students think about the value of the course subject to their current and future lives*

In Faculty Center research, students share many examples of how they are impacted as a result of a professor sharing how students' lives relate to either the course matter or something the professor had experienced.

#### *Who Am I Examples*

Faculty Center research includes many examples of how faculty are impacting how students view themselves, their attitudes, and their behavior. Here are a few examples.

One professor shared his experience of being blessed for not studying on Sundays. This led one student to reflect, "I've been striving really hard to get to that point." Another student said, "I have it in my mind that I should try to do better and do as little as possible on Sunday. Hopefully by the end of the semester, I won't do it. I think it is improving, which is good."

In a public speaking class, the professor had students do exercises that would help them in their personal lives, beyond the course subject. One student said this professor "made us get out of our comfort zone, which ... really made me grow and it helped me a lot for my mission too."

A psychology professor talked about how an understanding of psychological disorders should help students be less judgmental toward people. This led students to seriously reflect on how difficult it is to know what is happening in the lives of others and how important it is understand "what's going on in their lives, so you can see them like Christ would see them."

Two students talked about how religion professors helped students have personally relevant applications of course material. One said that a professor, "had us write a paper on how the Old Testament helped us understand the plan of Salvation ... I was able to really express my feelings, and ... [I saw] how much I had learned, [and that] I grew spiritually [and] also did well on my research paper. So you can imagine the happiness that brought to me in my personal life."

Another student said that in her class, "We would go over principles that we found in the Book of Mormon ... [and] look for ways that principles could apply to your life. ... At the end of class [the professor] would give us these challenges that implanted that principle." She then described how the principle of "Here am I, send me" helped her be more willing to volunteer to do things.

When professors relate their own experiences, the subject matter, or class assignments to students' lives, it helps students see and experience new possibilities for their personal growth.

### **What can you do to help students consider who they are?**

How can you help your students catch a vision of who they are? Areas for exploration—

- Share who you are and how you came to know that, including your self-doubts and struggles
- Let them know the potential you see in them. Hold them to the high standards you know they are capable of achieving and give them the support they deserve as children of God
- Help them discover ways this course matters for their lives and for who they may become
- Give them opportunities to reflect on who they are and what they envision for their future
- Challenge them to stretch themselves by dreaming big and developing self-confidence.



## These characteristics are all interrelated

It is not just the fourth question that is related to the first three questions. Although we have addressed each question and the characteristics separately, in reality these questions and characteristics are strongly interrelated. There is significant overlap between most of these attributes and actions of effective BYU professors. Each may be viewed as a different perspective on the same phenomenon.

For example, faculty who care about students are more likely to take the time to emphasize why the course matters and how it relates to their students' lives and to the important questions in life. Faculty who are passionate about their disciplines tend to care about helping students learn to love the discipline and to master it. Faculty members who care about their students' learning are more likely to care about the struggles students are experiencing outside of class that may be impeding their learning. Faculty who are willing to share their own past struggles and successes naturally help students see how they can succeed in spite of significant challenges and setbacks. Faculty with a strong testimony and commitment to Heavenly Father are better able to see the potential in their students and to help students rise to that potential.

Within each of these questions, the characteristics are similarly interrelated and do not represent distinct attributes. As we mentioned previously, our research reveals that the most successful faculty tend to have developed many of the characteristics, so it seems that developing one characteristic may strengthen their abilities in other characteristics, particularly those which are more related. In addition, the more successful faculty tend to not rate very low in any of these characteristics. In contrast, less highly-rated faculty may still exhibit significant strengths in some characteristics, but have not yet achieved the well-roundedness that may impact students more significantly. Fortunately, work to develop any one characteristic is likely to also strengthen others as well.

### *There are many ways to succeed*

Despite the fact that spiritually strengthening characteristics are strongly inter-related, spiritually strengthening faculty are not all cut from the same cloth. Even though highly-rated faculty typically exhibit strength in multiple characteristics, they nevertheless demonstrate greater strengths in certain areas. That helps explain how their strengths and teaching styles may vary considerably.

Most importantly, there is not a single style or teaching technique that works. There are multiple styles and techniques that can be spiritually strengthening and intellectually enlarging. Some highly-rated faculty pray in class; others do not. Some lecture and others use active listening. Some get to know their students very well, while others struggle to remember names.

Authentic spiritual and intellectual role models also come from a wide variety of personality types. Some are extroverted and others very quiet and reserved. Some faculty feel comfortable using a lot of humor and stories; others are more analytical and methodical in their approach. Some are very down-to-earth; others are particularly talented at understanding student needs; and still others are known for their passion for the subject.

In fact, we believe that a key to being a spiritually strengthening and intellectually enlarging faculty member is to draw on your own unique strengths, talents, and personality, to bring your whole, authentic self into the classroom and into your relationships with students. Because what this looks like varies so much from person to person, it can't be taught as a technique, but we believe you can find in yourself

what you have to give. As you give yourself freely, not holding back out of fear of rejection or “doing it wrong,” students will respond in kind to your generous offering. Only you can find your unique way to be spiritually strengthening and intellectually enlarging.

### *Our Invitation*

If you are wondering about how you might improve your ability to help your students both spiritually and intellectually, we invite you to consider your response to the four questions. What do your students know about you as a whole person? How are you communicating your care for them? What do your students care about and how do you help them see how the courses you teach relate to their hopes and dreams? How are you supporting their evolving search for self identity?

Our work with faculty and related research makes it clear that the effort to improve in these ways is a journey that requires time and learning from experience. Nevertheless, we have also discovered that while each person is likely to start in a different place and proceed at a different pace, these efforts can find rather immediate positive responses from our students. For example, our experimental work with a PhD candidate Matt Hiatt and Dr. Jeffrey Reber in the Psychology Department found that a one-hour discussion about how to apply these insights concretely and authentically to a 30-minute teaching session of one of their current courses (but with randomly assigned students) led to significant improvements in student ratings of spiritual strengthening and quality of teaching compared with teaching the session the way they would at a state university.<sup>1</sup>

We invite you to share yourself generously with the students you interact with, in and outside of the class. They want you at your authentic best. They want a whole person to show up in the classroom, to be a role model, to care about them and their learning and to help them reach their potential. They want to know why you think this course matters and how your discipline is related to the gospel and to their interests and opportunities to make meaningful contributions in their own lives. All of this can support students in their personal self development.

We hope as you consider the ideas presented in this paper that something will have touched your heart. We trust that the Spirit will inspire each of us with a useful “next step” to try out.

### *Opportunity to Get Feedback from Students*

The Faculty Center has created a survey instrument to enable faculty to get feedback from their own students on the characteristics mentioned in this paper. If you choose to use it, you’ll simply email the survey URL to your students. The Faculty Center will take care of the analysis and present you with a detailed report. Contact Jane Birch ([jane\\_birch@byu.edu](mailto:jane_birch@byu.edu)) for further details.

---

<sup>1</sup> See “PhD Dissertation: An Assessment of the Effects of Spiritual and Relational Teaching on Student Learning (2016)” at <http://faithandlearning.byu.edu/research>