# Is Good Teaching at BYU Unique?

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In a previous study we discovered 19 variables representing professor actions and characteristics perceived by students to be most helpful in strengthening them both intellectually and spiritually.[1] We noticed several of these variables are the sort of thing the literature on good teaching recommends.[2] On the other hand, a number of the factors seem to be quite unique to BYU.  We wondered whether the impact on intellectual and spiritual development of BYU students could be largely attributed to general good teaching or whether there are additional positive contributions from faculty actions and/or characteristics that appear to be unique to BYU.

**Unique to BYU**

To pursue our question, we separated the 19 variables used in our previous study into two categories: those variables that are unique to BYU (or which BYU can address in a unique way) and those that embody a more universal standard of good teaching which may be taught and adopted anywhere. To perform this separation, we derived 16 suggestions from Ken Bain's research on what good college teachers do (see Appendix 1) and compared this to our previous list of 19 variables.  Most of our 19 variables were similar to 11 of Bain's suggestions, and only five of our variables were obviously outside the purview of his book, and thus are unique to BYU. These five we called "Unique to BYU," and the others we called "Any Good Teacher."

The Unique to BYU category contains the following variables: "This professor…
- …openly expressed his or her gospel commitment"
- …was a role model of gospel living"
- …brought new insights to the gospel using course content"
- …helped students see the importance of course concepts by connecting them to the gospel"
- …used the gospel to help us understand secular subjects more clearly."

The Any Good Teacher category contains the following variables: "This professor…
- …was passionate about the subject matter"
- …shared ways the course content mattered to him or her personally"
- …worked hard to help students really understand the material"
- …believed in my potential"
- …was genuine and authentic"
- …shared meaningful personal experiences"
- …demonstrated Christ-like love for students"

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[1] Wilkins and Dixon (2016) "What Distinguishes the Most from the Least Effective Faculty in Being Both Spiritually and Intellectually Strengthening?" (see at faithandlearning.byu.edu under research)
[2] *What the Best college teachers do*, Ken Bain, (2004), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

- …helped students develop a Christian community that supported and corrected one another with love"
- …made an effort to learn student names"
- …helped students understand how course topics can help them make a contribution to the world"
- …showed interest in students' personal lives and career goals"
- …related course content to the interest of the students"
- …helped students understand why they should care about the course content."

Only one of the 19 variables from the previous study was left out of this analysis-- "this professor helped students understand how the course relates to the big questions of life." For the purposes of separating teaching that is unique to BYU this variable is ambiguous. It could be the "big questions" have to do with a specifically LDS interpretation of what is "big" or a more generally shared interpretation. Our sense of this ambiguity was confirmed when we discovered that both regression models fit better with this variable removed. These two categories, therefore, are combinations of the remaining 18 variables.

We also note many variables in the Any Good Teacher category could actually be capturing unique BYU approaches. Nevertheless, we put them there because we don't know whether they were performed in a way truly unique to BYU. For example, "This professor shared ways the course mattered to him or her personally" may have included times when professors shared connections to their faith, spiritual impressions, ways the pursuit of this subject has helped them strengthen the Church, etc. Several other variables could similarly have included gospel-related specifics (e.g., "…personal experiences," "…why they should care about the course content," etc.). Similarly, we felt some questions, while containing verbiage seeming to indicate religious teaching, did not necessarily describe something that could not be done by any good teacher anywhere. For example, demonstrating Christ-like love for students or helping students develop a community that supports and corrects each other with love don't need to be religiously affiliated or affiliated with a particular religion, and so are not unique to BYU. On the other hand, they could have been performed in ways indeed unique to BYU. We nevertheless sought to be conservative in assigning factors to the BYU only category. Thus, we believe the Unique to BYU category underestimates the actual impact of factors unique to BYU.

After separating our variables into "Unique to BYU" and "Any Good Teacher" groups, we performed two regressions to consider the influence of each of these categories on the student rating of a professor being intellectually enlarging (model 1) and secondly on their rating of being spiritually strengthening (model 2). Table 1 reports the results of these two regressions.[3]

Model 1

Model 1 measures the effects of the two categories on student ratings of the professors' ability to be intellectually enlarging. The model shows both categories to be statistically significant. The category,

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[3] Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model

Any Good Teacher is, not surprisingly, associated with the strongest positive effect on the intellectually enlarging metric. The unstandardized regression coefficient for this description is .077, suggesting that for each additional rating increase of one point on this scale or category there is a .077 rating increase in the intellectually enlarging metric when controlling for a number of other factors which can be seen in Table 1. This is a statistically significant effect at the .001 level. The category, Unique to BYU is also positively associated with the intellectually enlarging metric. The unstandardized regression coefficient for this description is .025, statistically significant at the .05 level.

Of the variables we controlled for only course level and GE course were statistically significant.[4] The adjusted r-squared for model 1 is .770, indicating the model fits the data very well.

Model 2

Model 2 measures the effects of the two categories on the professors' rating as being spiritually strengthening. Both categories again demonstrate a statistically significant influence. However, in this model the "Unique to BYU" category is the most strongly associated with being spiritually strengthening. It has an unstandardized coefficient of .144, about double the next strongest influence in either model, and is more than four times the size of the influence of the "Any Good Teacher" variable (coefficient of .034) on being rated as spiritually strengthening. Both variables are statistically significant at the .001 level.

In Model 2 only the GE control variable was statistically significant. The adjusted r-squared for model 2 is .847, indicating the model fits the data very well.

**Table 1. Effects of Professor Attributes on Intellectually Enlarging and Spiritually Strengthening Ratings grouped by uniqueness to BYU. N=633 (Standard error in brackets).[5]**

| Variable | Intellectually Enlarging (Model 1) | Spiritually Strengthening (Model 2) |
|---|---|---|
| **Independent Variables** | | |
| Unique to BYU | 0.025* | 0.144*** |
| | [0.010] | [0.009] |
| Any Good Teacher | 0.077*** | 0.034*** |
| | [0.005] | [0.004] |
| **Controls** | | |

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[4] The unstandardized coefficient for GE is -.273, statistically significant at the .05 level. Course level has an unstandardized coefficient of -.152, significant at the .05 level, indicating that each level of course higher is associated with a .152 drop in the intellectually enlarging metric. The adjusted r-squared for model 1 is .770, indicating the model fits the data very well.

[5] We tested for multicollinearity and did not find any evidence that would bias the data.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Age | 0.010 | -0.0002 |
| | [0.012] | [0.010] |
| Sex (male) | 0.135 | 0.104 |
| | [0.107] | [0.090] |
| Class Size | 0.0006 | 0.0002 |
| | [0.0003] | [0.0002] |
| Course Level (100-600) | -0.152* | -0.010 |
| | [0.075] | [0.063] |
| Years Since Class | -0.039 | 0.074 |
| | [0.051] | [0.043] |
| Grade Received | 0.028 | -0.003 |
| | [0.019] | [0.046] |
| GE (vs. Non GE) | -0.273* | -0.238* |
| | [0.127] | [0.107] |
| Honors Class(vs. Regular) | 0.309 | 0.438* |
| | [0.250] | [0.210] |
| Major Elective (vs. Maj Required) | 0.159 | -0.079 |
| | [0.188] | [0.158] |
| Not Required for Major (vs. Maj Required) | 0.092 | 0.100 |
| | [0.125] | [0.106] |
| Winter Semester (vs Fall) | -0.206 | 0.100 |
| | [0.121] | [0.102] |
| Spring Term (vs Fall) | -0.192 | 0.107 |
| | [0.323] | [0.272] |
| Summer Term (vs Fall) | -0.337 | 0.255 |
| | [0.342] | [0.288] |
| Constant | -0.972* | -1.730*** |
| | [0.413] | [0.348] |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | .770 | .847 |

*$p$<.05    **$p$<.01   ***$p$<.001  two-tailed tests

**Discussion:**

Interestingly, though both categories demonstrated statistically significant relationships, the coefficient for general good teaching's impact on being spiritually strengthening was very small.  In fact, the 5 variables combined into the Unique to BYU category quadrupled the impact of all 13 other variables in the Any Good Teacher category combined.  For intellectually enlarging, the Unique to BYU category had a smaller but nevertheless statistically significant influence.  However, the Any Good Teacher category, while having a stronger impact than the Unique to BYU category was just about half of the influence on intellectually enlarging that the Unique to BYU category had on spiritually strengthening.

Good teaching approaches noted in studies outside of BYU clearly have some influence on whether a professor is rated as intellectually enlarging.  Those approaches contribute as well to students rating their BYU professors as spiritually strengthening.  Nevertheless, professors at BYU are more likely to be rated intellectually enlarging if they also engage in practices and display characteristics found in our Unique to BYU category.  Further, they are significantly more likely to be rated as spiritually strengthening when they implement Unique to BYU practices and characteristics.

We again note that our Any Good Teacher category probably contains some influence that is unique to BYU.  We didn't set out to make sharp distinctions between Unique to BYU and Any Good Teacher variables so our measures are less precise than they might be if we had designed them to do so.  Our analysis thus likely underestimates the impact of unique-to-BYU approaches and professor characteristics.

This analysis gives us significant confidence that teaching which is seen by BYU students as spiritually strengthening looks very different than teaching at any other non-Church Education System (LDS) university.  Of course, BYU's Aims include an emphasis on being both intellectually enlarging and spiritually strengthening (in ways that encourage the development of character and lifelong learning and service).  Thus we suggest that faculty ought to take advantage of the best research outside of BYU on student learning and development.  However, our findings suggest that we should also invest significant attention and effort to learning how to teach in BYU's unique environment.  Fortunately, most of our faculty come to BYU because of the opportunity to do just that.

## Appendix 1
Suggestions from Research on Good College Teaching[6]

1. Violate expectations from current student schemas
2. Ask good questions to invite student exploration, discovery of new schema and their application
3. *Find and help students find why they should care about a goal, question
4. Reinforce/praise persistence, task-accomplishing behavior rather than praising the person
5. *Build collaborative rather than competitive learning groups
6. *Express faith in student abilities and allow students as much control as possible showing strong interest in their learning
7. *Provide challenging tasks that foster a sense of accomplishment and help students see their improvement in ability.
8. Stress opportunities to improve, don't grade on curve, but give everyone the opportunity to achieve the highest grades
9. *Make high demands but with plentiful opportunities to revise and improve.
10. *Share enthusiasm for the issues in the material; help students see your sense of calling or purpose in your subject.
11. *Invite rather than command. Don't use grades to motivate but rather demonstrate the importance of the subject, the questions it raises, and the promises it makes to learners.
12. *Help students connect to the big questions, why anyone should care about this subject—its deep human issues, paradoxical, and emotional aspects and the associated joy of discovery.
13. Create natural critical learning environment by providing authentic tasks to arouse curiosity and challenge students to rethink their assumptions.
14. *Care about students as learners, invest in them. If they don't learn, take responsibility for your contribution to that failure. Develop bond of trust— "I will do all I can to help you learn if you will invest fully in this effort."
15. *Share yourself: the ups and downs, the frustrations and failures, the joys of your own learning journey.
16. *Encourage students to feel comfortable to disagree with you. Be humble. Acknowledge that you are learning and have questions; that your learning comes from perseverance rather than special talent.

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[6] Bain, 2004, op. cit.