

The Aims of a BYU Education

Education is the power to think clearly, the power to act well in the world's work, and the power to appreciate life.
— Brigham Young¹

The mission of Brigham Young University is “to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life” (“The Mission Statement of Brigham Young University” [hereafter Mission Statement]). To this end, BYU 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. These are the common aims of all education at BYU. Both those who teach in the classroom and those who direct activities outside the classroom are responsible for contributing to this complete educational vision.

The statement that follows reaffirms and expands on the earlier and more general Mission Statement adopted in 1981. As the quotations under each heading suggest, this document also draws on the religious and educational teachings of the university’s founding prophet, Brigham Young. Quotations within the text come from the scriptures and from the counsel of modern prophets, whose teachings about BYU lay the foundation of the university’s mission.

The following four sections discuss the expected outcomes of the BYU experience. A BYU education should be (1) spiritually strengthening, (2) intellectually enlarging, and (3) character building, leading to (4) lifelong learning and service. Because BYU is a large university with a complex curriculum, the intellectual aims are presented here in somewhat greater detail than the other aims. Yet they are deliberately placed within a larger context. The sequence flows from a conscious intent to envelop BYU’s intellectual aims within a more complete, even eternal, perspective that begins with spiritual knowledge and ends with knowledge applied to the practical tasks of living and serving.

Spiritually Strengthening

Brother Maeser, I want you to remember that you ought not to teach even the alphabet or the multiplication tables without the Spirit of God.
— Brigham Young²

The founding charge of BYU is to teach every subject with the Spirit. It is not intended “that all of the faculty should be categorically teaching religion constantly in their classes, but . . . that every . . . teacher in this institution would keep his subject matter bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel.”³

This ideal arises from the common purpose of all education at BYU—to build testimonies of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. A shared desire to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118) knits BYU into a unique educational community. The students, faculty, and staff in this community possess a remarkable diversity of gifts, but they all think of themselves as brothers and sisters seeking together to master the academic disciplines while remaining mastered by the higher claims of discipleship to the Savior.

A spiritually strengthening education warms and enlightens students by the bright fire of their teachers’ faith while enlarging their minds with knowledge. It also makes students responsible for developing their own testimonies by strenuous effort. Joseph Smith’s words apply equally to faculty and students at BYU: “Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity—thou must commune with God.”⁴ Students need not ignore difficult and important questions. Rather, they should frame their questions in prayerful, faithful ways, leading them to answers that equip them to give “a reason of the hope that is in” them (1 Peter 3:15) and to

articulate honestly and thoughtfully their commitments to Christ and to his Church.

Intellectually Enlarging

Every accomplishment, every polished grace, every useful attainment in mathematics, music, and in all science and art belong to the Saints, and they should avail themselves as expeditiously as possible of the wealth of knowledge the sciences offer to every diligent and persevering scholar.
—Brigham Young⁵

The intellectual range of a BYU education is the result of an ambitious commitment to pursue truth. Members of the BYU community rigorously study academic subjects in the light of divine truth. An eternal perspective shapes not only *how* students are taught but *what* they are taught. 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. Further graduate studies build on this foundation.

Undergraduate

1. Skills. BYU undergraduates should acquire the basic tools needed to learn. The essential academic learning skills are the abilities to think soundly, to communicate effectively, and to reason proficiently in quantitative terms. To these ends, a BYU bachelor’s degree should lead to:

- *Sound thinking*—reasoning abilities that prepare students to understand and solve a wide variety of problems, both theoretical and practical. Such skills include the ability to keep a proper perspective when comparing the things that matter most with things of lesser import. They also include the ability to engage successfully in logical reasoning, critical analysis, moral discrimination, creative imagination, and independent thought.
- *Effective communication*—language abilities that enable students to listen, speak, read, and write well; to communicate effectively with a wide range of audiences in one’s area of expertise as well as on general subjects. For many students this includes communicating in a second language.
- *Quantitative reasoning*—numerical abilities that equip students with the capacity to understand and explain the world in quantitative terms; to interpret numerical data; and to evaluate arguments that rely on quantitative information and approaches.

2. Breadth. BYU undergraduates should also understand the most important developments in human thought as represented by the broad domains of knowledge. The gospel provides the chief source of such breadth because it encompasses the most comprehensive explanation of life and the cosmos, supplying the perspective from which all other knowledge is best understood and measured. The Lord has asked his children to “become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people” (D&C 90:15); to understand “things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations . . . ; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms” (D&C 88:79).

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“Because the gospel encourages the pursuit of all truth, students at BYU should receive a broad university education [that will help them] understand important ideas in their own cultural tradition as well as that of others” (Mission Statement). Specifically, BYU undergraduate students should be educated in the following broad areas of human knowledge:

- *Religion*—the doctrines, the covenants, the ordinances, the standard works, and the history of the restored gospel, as well as an awareness of other religious traditions.
- *Historical perspective*—the development of human civilization, appreciation for the unique contributions of America to modern civilization, and a general historical perspective, including perspective on one’s own discipline.
- *Science*—The basic concepts of the physical, biological, and social sciences, and a recognition of the power and limitations of the scientific method—preferably through laboratory or field experience.
- *Arts and letters*—lively appreciation of the artistic, literary, and intellectual achievements of human cultures—including Western culture and, ideally, non-Western as well.
- *Global awareness*—informed awareness of the peoples, cultures, languages, and nations of the world.

3. Depth. BYU undergraduates should develop competence in at least one area of concentration. Competence generally demands study in depth. Such in-depth study helps prepare students for their life’s work; it also teaches them that genuine understanding of any subject requires exploring it fully. Students normally acquire such depth from their major and minor fields. BYU’s religion requirement also asks all students to develop depth in scriptural studies and religion.

Depth does not result merely from taking many courses in a field. Indeed, excessive course coverage requirements may discourage rather than enhance depth. Depth comes when students realize “the effect of rigorous, coherent, and progressively more sophisticated study.” Depth helps students distinguish between what is fundamental and what is only peripheral; it requires focus, provides intense concentration, and encourages a “lean and taut” degree that has a “meaningful core” and a purposefully designed structure (Memorandum to the Faculty No. 13). In addition to describing carefully structured academic majors, this description applies to well-designed BYU courses of all kinds.

The chief result of depth is competence. BYU’s students should be “capable of competing with the best students in their field” (Mission Statement). Even so, undergraduate study should be targeted at entrance-level, not expert-level, abilities. The desire for depth should not lead to bachelor’s degrees that try to teach students everything they will need to know after graduation. Students should be able to complete their degrees within about four years.

Undergraduate programs should prepare students to enter the world of work or to pursue further study. Often this requires educational activities that help upperclassmen culminate their studies by integrating them in a capstone project, honors thesis, senior seminar, or internship. By the time they graduate, students should grasp their discipline’s essential knowledge and skills (such as mathematical reasoning, statistical analysis, computer literacy, foreign language fluency, laboratory techniques, library research, and teaching methods), and many should have participated in scholarly or creative activities that let them demonstrate their mastery.

Graduate

Building on the foundation of a strong bachelor’s degree, graduate education at BYU asks for even greater competency. Graduate studies may be either academic or professional and at either the master’s or doctoral level. In all cases, BYU graduate programs, like undergraduate programs, should be spiritually strengthening as well as intellectually enlarging.

Graduate programs should help students achieve excellence in the discipline by engaging its primary sources; mastering its literature, techniques, and methodologies; and undertaking

advanced systematic study—all at a depth that clearly exceeds the undergraduate level. In addition, graduate programs should prepare students to contribute to their disciplines through their own original insights, designs, applications, expressions, and discoveries. Graduate study should thereby enable a variety of contributions—such as teaching complex knowledge and skills, conducting original research, producing creative work that applies advanced learning in the everyday world, and extending professional service to the discipline and to society.

These intellectual aims of a BYU education are intended to give students understanding, perspective, motivation, and interpersonal abilities—not just information and academic skills. BYU should furnish students with the practical advantage of an education that integrates academic skills with abstract theories, real-world applications, and gospel perspectives. Such an education prepares students who can make a difference in the world, who can draw on their academic preparation to participate more effectively in the arenas of daily life. They are parents, Church leaders, citizens, and compassionate human beings who are able to improve the moral, social, and ecological environment in which they and their families live. They are scientists and engineers who can work effectively in teams and whose work reflects intellectual and moral integrity; historians who write well and whose profound understanding of human nature and of divine influences informs their interpretation of human events; teachers whose love for their students as children of God is enriched by global awareness and foreign language skill; artists whose performances seek to be flawless in both technique and inspiration; business leaders whose economic judgments and management styles see financial reward not as an end but as a means to higher ends. BYU graduates thus draw on an educated intellect to enhance not only what they *know* but also what they *do* and, ultimately, what they *are*.

Character Building

A firm, unchangeable course of righteousness through life is what secures to a person true intelligence. —Brigham Young⁶

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. Beyond this, BYU aims not merely to teach students a code of ethics but to help them become partakers of the divine nature. It aspires to develop in its students character traits that flow from the long-term application of gospel teachings to their lives. This process begins with understanding humankind’s eternal nature and ends with the blessing of eternal life, when human character reflects in fully flowered form the attributes of godliness. Along the way, the fruits of a well-disciplined life are augmented and fulfilled by the fruits of the spirit of Jesus Christ—such as charity, a Christlike love for others, which God “hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ” (Moroni 7:48). Students thus perfect their quest for character development by coming unto Christ through faith, repentance, and righteous living. Then their character begins to resemble his, not just because they think it should but because that is the way they are.

President David O. McKay taught that character is the highest aim of education: above knowledge is wisdom, and above wisdom is character. “True education,” he explained, “seeks to make men and women not only good mathematicians, proficient linguists, profound scientists, or brilliant literary lights, but also honest men with virtue, temperance, and brotherly love.”⁷ Consequently, a BYU education should bring together the intellectual integrity of fine academic discipline with the spiritual integrity of personal righteousness. The result is competence that

reflects the highest professional and academic standards—strengthened and ennobled by Christlike attributes.

Thus understood, the development of character is so important that BYU “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—men and women who will become stalwarts in the Kingdom and bear witness of the . . . divinity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is not justified on an academic basis only.”⁸ Rather, it fulfills its promise when “the morality of the graduates of this University provide[s] the music of hope for the inhabitants of this planet.”⁹

Every part of the BYU experience should therefore strengthen character—academic integrity in taking a test or writing a research paper; sportsmanship on the playing field; the honest reporting of research findings in a laboratory; careful use of university funds derived from the tithes of Church members; treating all other people with dignity and fairness; and wholehearted acceptance of commitments made to bishops and parents. Character is constructed by small decisions. At this personal level of detail, BYU will realize its hope of teaching “those moral virtues which characterize the life and teachings of the Son of God” (Mission Statement).

Lifelong Learning and Service

We might ask, when shall we cease to learn? I will give you my opinion about it; never, never. . . . We shall never cease to learn, unless we apostatize from the religion of Jesus Christ. —Brigham Young¹⁰

Our education should be such as to improve our minds and fit us for increased usefulness; to make us of greater service to the human family. —Brigham Young¹¹

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” (Mission Statement).

1. Continual Learning. BYU should inspire students to keep alive their curiosity and prepare them to continue learning throughout their lives. BYU should produce careful readers, prayerful thinkers, and active participants in solving family, professional, religious, and social problems. They will then be like Abraham of old, who had been “a follower of righteousness, desiring also to be one who possessed great knowledge, and to be a greater follower of righteousness, and to possess a greater knowledge, . . . desiring to receive instructions, and to keep the commandments of God.” In this lifelong quest, they, like Abraham, will find “greater happiness and peace and rest” (Abraham 1:2). Thus a BYU diploma is a beginning, not an end, pointing the way to a habit of constant learning. In an era of rapid changes in technology and information, the knowledge and skills learned this year may require renewal the next. Therefore, a BYU degree should educate students in how to learn, teach them that there is much still to learn, and implant in them a love of learning “by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118).

2. Service. Since a decreasing fraction of the Church membership can be admitted to study at BYU, it is ever more important that those who are admitted use their talents to build the kingdom of God on the earth. Hence, BYU should nurture in its students the desire to use their knowledge and skills not only to enrich their own lives but also to bless their families, their communities, the Church, and the larger society. Students should learn, then demonstrate, that their ultimate allegiance is to higher values, principles, and human commitments rather than to mere self-interest. By doing this, BYU graduates can counter the destructive and often materialistic self-centeredness and worldliness that afflict modern society. A service ethic should permeate every part of BYU’s activities—from the admissions process through the curriculum and extracurricular experiences to the moment of graduation. This ethic should also permeate each

student’s heart, leading him or her to the ultimate wellspring of charity—the love for others that Christ bestows on his followers.

Conclusion

Education is a good thing, and blessed is the man who has it, and can use it for the dissemination of the Gospel without being puffed up with pride. —Brigham Young¹²

These are the aims of a BYU education. Taken together, they should lead students toward wholeness: “the balanced development of the total person” (Mission Statement). These aims aspire to promote an education that helps students integrate all parts of their university experience into a fundamentally sacred way of life—their faith and reasoning, their knowledge and conduct, their public lives and private convictions. Ultimately, complete wholeness comes only through the Atonement of him who said, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). Yet a university education, guided by eternal principles, can greatly “assist individuals in their quest for” that abundant “eternal life” (Mission Statement).

A commitment to this kind of education has inspired the prophets of the past to found Church schools, like BYU, on the principle that “to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God” (2 Nephi 9:29). These prophets have known the risks of such an enterprise, for “that happiness which is prepared for the saints” shall be hid forever from those “who are puffed up because of their learning, and their wisdom” (see 2 Nephi 9:42–43). Yet they have also known that education plays a vital role in realizing the promises of the Restoration; that a broad vision of education for self-reliance and personal growth is at the very heart of the gospel when the gospel is at the heart of education. To the degree that BYU achieves its aims, the lives of its students will confirm Brigham Young’s confidence that education is indeed “a good thing,” blessing all those who humbly and faithfully use it to bless others.

Notes

1. Brigham Young, quoted by George H. Brimhall in “The Brigham Young University,” *Improvement Era*, vol. 23, no. 9 (July 1920), p. 831.

2. Brigham Young, in Reinhard Maeser, *Karl G. Maeser: A Biography* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1928), p. 79.

3. Spencer W. Kimball, “Education for Eternity,” Preschool Address to BYU Faculty and Staff, 12 September 1967, p. 11.

4. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1972), p. 137.

5. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* (hereafter *JD*), vol. 10 (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), p. 224.

6. Brigham Young, *JD* 8:32.

7. David O. McKay, “Why Education?” *Improvement Era*, vol. 70, no. 9 (September 1967), p. 3.

8. Spencer W. Kimball, “On My Honor,” in *Speeches of the Year, 1978* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1979), p. 137.

9. Spencer W. Kimball, “Second Century Address and Dedication of Carillon Tower and Bells,” Brigham Young University, 10 October 1975, p. 12.

10. Brigham Young, *JD* 3:203.

11. Brigham Young, *JD* 14:83.

12. Brigham Young, *JD* 11:214.

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