

The Real Value of a BYU Education

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On February 1 of this year, I had the opportunity to participate in a panel at the annual conference of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities—or CCCU, as it is known. It was an interfaith panel featuring presidents of universities from different faiths. In addition to me, panelists included Ari Berman, president of Yeshiva University—a Jewish university in New York City; Father John P. Fitzgibbons, president of Regis University—a Jesuit Catholic university in Denver, Colorado; Hamza Yusuf, president of Zaytuna College in Berkeley, California—the only accredited Muslim institution of higher education in the United States; and Shirley A. Mullen, president of Houghton College—a Christian liberal arts college in Upstate New York.

It was a wonderful opportunity to talk about the challenges and benefits of religiously affiliated universities. Some important truths were shared, including the observation that

the very existence of this diverse panel demonstrated that people who disagree about important issues—even issues that are of the most profound significance to them, like religious beliefs and who is God—can still interact, converse, and cooperate to achieve their distinctive goals. And they can do so without compromising their core beliefs or requiring that others agree with their views on those core beliefs. I hope we can share and model that important truth with our students and others with whom we come in contact, both on and off campus. In the highly polarized environment in which we live, in which the ability to address and resolve difficult issues sometimes seems in short supply, we at Brigham Young University should be examples of civility, respect, and optimism.

The panel members presented some very interesting and innovative ideas about how to achieve their distinctive faith-based missions. One idea in particular caught my attention.

Kevin J Worthen, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this university conference address on August 26, 2019.

The moderator asked President Yusuf to identify the biggest challenge facing his university, the Muslim university in Berkeley, California.

President Yusuf: *The biggest problem we have and the biggest challenge we have are the costs to our students and the financing of their education.*

At that point, the question turned to President Berman from Yeshiva University. I want you to listen to his response:

Moderator: *President Berman, how about you—the greatest threat to the education and admission and how it works?*

President Berman: *Let me just start off with costs for a second, which is not insignificant. This concept of meeting with and speaking with presidents of faith-based universities is something that I thought would be very important to me. And in my first year as president—I have been Yeshiva University's president for a year and a half—I visited a number of different presidents in faith-based universities, including a trip to Salt Lake City, where I visited Kevin Worthen. And I was told that BYU's education, I think, costs \$5,000. Tuition is \$5,000. This is a top-line education that is \$5,000. I asked Kevin, "How is it only \$5,000?" And he told me that everyone in the church tithes, and it goes to a central bank. And they subsidize the education, which then made me realize that I had a genius idea: We are going to make Yeshiva University a new branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I am still speaking to my trustees about this. And I think he is too.¹*

I confess that I have still not formally presented the idea of BYU–New York to our board of trustees.

President Berman is not alone in recognizing the incredible value that Brigham Young University provides to its students. In April of this year, *Forbes* magazine issued a ranking of what it called the "best value colleges" of 2019.² You will notice that number one is BYU, just ahead of Princeton. The rankings

were based on the quality of the university, the net cost of the university, the net debt of the students coming out of the university, the average mid-career earnings of graduates, the graduation rate, and also access for low-income students. Using those metrics, Brigham Young University is the best value college in the United States. Now I understand that there are other metrics that might be used and that there is some subjectivity even in these metrics, but you don't have to look very far across campus to see a number of accomplishments and recognitions that provide evidence of the remarkable value we provide to our students.

In February, *College Magazine*, which is primarily catered to and written by students, ranked the various advertising programs in the nation. Again, BYU is number one. The accompanying write-up discussed the kind of research that goes on in that program, as well as the experiential learning opportunities it provides, and indicated that the BYU students learn in such a way that they are ready to be involved in the industry right from the beginning.³

Here is another example. In January of this year, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published an article on foreign language programs in the United States and ranked them according to the number of foreign language degrees conferred. BYU is number three. BYU is the only private school in the top ten. And BYU produces more graduates in Russian, Arabic, and Portuguese than any other university.⁴ Had the researchers gone on to consider not just the number of students *graduating* with a foreign language degree but also the number of students who *take* a foreign language class and the number of languages in which classes are offered, BYU would have clearly been number one.

The examples could go on and on. In literally every college on campus, students, faculty, and staff are regularly exemplifying excellence in education—providing additional evidence of the extraordinary value of a BYU education.

The Unrecognized Value of Faith-Based Education

But these examples do not come close to capturing or portraying the real value, the long-lasting value, of a BYU education. The real value that BYU has to offer its students is sometimes hard to quantify or even fully describe, but some get close to the matter. In 2016, the keynote speaker at the annual conference of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities was David Brooks. Brooks is a *New York Times* columnist who was raised in a secular Jewish home and who has taught for several years at Yale University. He comes from a world that is in many ways far removed from that found on the campuses of most CCCU members. Perhaps because of this different perspective, Brooks shed light on the often unrecognized value of the kind of faith-based education that CCCU schools—and BYU—can provide. Brooks stated:

*You have what everybody else is desperate to have: a way of talking about and educating the human person in a way that integrates faith, emotion and intellect. You have a recipe to nurture human beings who have a devoted heart, a courageous mind and a purposeful soul. Almost no other set of institutions in American society has that, and everyone wants it. From my point of view, you're ahead of everybody else and have the potential to influence American culture in a way that could be magnificent.*⁵

Education That Engages and Improves the Whole Person

Let me elaborate a bit on two points Brooks made—points that shed light on the real value of a BYU education. First, notice that Brooks stated that faith-based colleges, such as BYU, have “a way of talking about and educating the human person in a way that integrates faith, emotion and intellect. You have a recipe to nurture human beings who have a devoted heart, a courageous mind and a purposeful soul.”

This statement fairly describes one part of the real value of a BYU education. It is an

education that engages and improves the whole person. Brooks could just as well have cited *The Aims of a BYU Education* in describing the kind of distinctive education that faith-based universities can provide. A BYU education is to “be (1) spiritually strengthening, (2) intellectually enlarging, and (3) character building, leading to (4) lifelong learning and service.”⁶

A BYU education does not focus solely on the acquisition of knowledge, as important as that is. As our mission statement makes clear, a BYU education focuses on “the full realization of human potential.”⁷ And modern-day prophets, who direct this university, have emphasized that that potential is much greater than most people understand. Each of our students—indeed, each human being in all the world—“is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny.”⁸ If we can help our students understand and act on the deep truths in that simple sentence, it will transform and increase the value of their BYU education in ways that no earthly ranking system can measure. It will give them confidence to do hard things. It will cause them to love all whom they encounter—even those who are different from them or who dogmatically disagree with them. It will enable them to be community builders and national leaders. Understanding those truths, which are at the foundation of God’s plan of happiness for His children, will help them realize not only who they really are but what they can become in this life and in the next.

But that remarkable kind of education that, according to Brooks, everybody is desperate to have will happen only if we are willing to fully engage in the unique kind of conversations that can happen only at a place like BYU—only if, to use Brooks’s language, we have “a way of talking about and educating the human person in a way that integrates faith, emotion and intellect.” If we don’t do that, we will be just like other universities—good, maybe even

great in some respects—but we will not be providing the full value we are uniquely qualified to provide. For example, if we don't “keep [our] subject matter bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel,”⁹ as President Spencer W. Kimball implored us to do, we will miss our unique opportunity “to nurture human beings who have a devoted heart, a courageous mind and a purposeful soul.” So I challenge each of us to be more diligent in considering how the truths of the plan of happiness can be modeled, taught, and expressly discussed to a greater degree—not only in our classrooms but also in every situation in which we encounter students.

This challenge extends beyond the faculty to everyone who interacts with students, no matter the particular responsibility. This example from BYU Dining Services shows what can happen when we focus on students and not just on the task at hand:

Student Driver: *Alright, so picture this: Every Monday through Saturday, every week, we are moving about 140,000 gallons of milk, more than 5,000 half-gallons of ice cream, ingredients for about 13,000 mint brownies, and food for more than 180,000 meals—all before BYU wakes up. I haven't slept in two years.*

Claudia: *It is pretty amazing when you think about it: thousands of students working around the clock every day to feed the campus. And it is more than just making a lot of food. The meals are made with the person in mind. The day-to-day work here is a huge undertaking.*

Student Driver: *Dining Services does everything food for BYU. We are in charge of providing food for more than 40,000 hungry students, faculty, and members of the community every day.*

Chef John McDonald: *People call me Chef John. I am the executive chef for BYU Dining. I supervise all BYU chefs, and I am in charge of planning every dish and meal that goes through BYU Dining. And I wouldn't be able to do any of it without our student employees.*

Claudia: *BYU Dining has more than 2,000 student employees. Our workforce represents students from 158 different majors, coming from thirty-seven countries and all fifty states. That makes us both the largest and most diverse student dining workforce in the world. And our jobs are just as varied.*

Student Driver: *So I work with the culinary support center delivery team as a driver employee, which means that I pretty much organize the food and deliver it all over campus.*

Claudia: *I am Claudia, and I supervise fifteen retailers in the world as well as the Blue Line Deli and the Museum of Art Café. And I am a full-time student. It is crazy, but I get tons of experience and I love the people I work with.*

Chef John: *Most universities wouldn't imagine having their students take on the jobs that we have ours do, especially on such a large scale. But with the leadership of our full-time staff, they get it all done.*

Student Driver: *So we do everything from menu planning, food preparation, retail dining, delivery, receiving, event logistics, accounting, budgeting, dietetics, and nutrition planning.*

Chef John: *We form a pretty good team. Simply put, BYU Dining is chef driven and student powered. It is important to keep in mind that what we do here is about more than just the food.*

Claudia: *One of my favorite things about working here at BYU is a special spirit that lifts me up at work, and I wouldn't have that experience working anywhere else.*

Student Driver: *It has taught me to take initiative in my work and everything I do. It really teaches us self-reliance, which is preparing for our future.*

Chef John: *So really what we do every day is somewhat of a miracle. We feed tens of thousands and nourish the one.¹⁰*

I love the line “We feed tens of thousands and nourish the one.” When we really believe that our students are sons and daughters of Heavenly Parents with a divine nature and destiny, we trust them to do things that others would think beyond the capacity of young,

inexperienced college students—things that our students themselves may think they cannot do, both inside and outside the classroom. That in turns inspires them and causes them to feel differently about their work and about themselves. It also helps them to develop Christlike characteristics. This does not require that we have scripture study before every class or work assignment—though such references are always in order—but it does require that we continually focus on student development and that we be purposeful in helping students see how the truths of the restored gospel can influence all we do, even in preparing and delivering meals. That is the kind of education “that integrates faith, emotion and intellect” and nurtures “human beings who have a devoted heart, a courageous mind and a purposeful soul.” That is real value added.

Education That Can Have an Impact on the World

The second thing that I wish to emphasize from Brooks’s observation concerns the impact that this holistic educational effort can have on the world. Speaking of the kind of whole-soul education that places like BYU can provide, Brooks said, “Almost no other set of institutions . . . has that, and everyone wants it.” Because of that, he said, we “have the potential to influence American culture in a way that could be magnificent.”

If we provide an education that engages the full intellectual and spiritual capacities of our students, we will not only help them improve their individual lives but also equip them to make a profound difference in the world around them. They will be capable of addressing the world’s problems, great and small, and they will have a deep-seated desire to do so as they come to understand that those around them are also sons and daughters of God. That is something that the world not only wants but desperately needs. The world needs solutions to a lot of problems, and individuals in the world hunger for the soul-filling joy that comes from solving those problems through selfless service. And we can help them find

examples of this in the education we provide our students.

This past year a group of engineering students was asked to come up with a solution to a serious air pollution problem in Mongolia. In 2016 there were more than 3,000 deaths in Mongolia attributable to air pollution—caused diseases; the majority of victims were children under the age of five. One of the principal sources of the pollution is the tons of coal that Mongolians burn each year to heat their traditional homes, known as *gers*, or yurts. After the BYU students were given the assignment to solve that problem, here is what happened to them as a result:

Alternating Voices (Ivy Running, Austin Boyce, Dylan Sellers, Ivy Running, Austin Boyce, Ivy Running): *When we began this project, we didn’t expect to go see the Mongolian countryside, to be on national television, to be taking Mongolian lessons from ten-year-olds, to meet the prime minister, to be so cold.*

Ivy Running: *We didn’t expect that we would be making friends halfway across the world.*

Dylan Sellers: *Ulaanbaatar is the coldest capital in the whole world.*

Ivy Running: *One of the biggest problems in Ulaanbaatar is the air pollution. Most of the pollution in the winter comes from the ger districts. Ger is the Mongolian word for yurt, which is their traditional tent. Coal stoves are some of the only sources of heat that these people have in the winter.*

Elder Peter F. Meurs [Deseret International Charities]: *Everyone is breathing this smoke-filled air. As we started to look at that problem, we thought maybe we could do something about it. So we approached the BYU Capstone team and said, “Here is the problem. Can you solve it?”*

Dylan Sellers: *There are two teams here in Capstone that are trying to solve the same problem. The solution that we landed on was an electric heater that would replace the coal-burning stove.*

Adjunct Professor Amy Wood: *With the current insulation they have—the felt—it would take about six electric heaters to produce enough heat to keep it that warm constantly.*

Ivy Running: *As we improve the insulation, they will be able to use electricity more for their heating—less coal and less pollution.*

Dylan Sellers: *It wasn't until we landed in Mongolia in Ulaanbaatar that we actually understood the scope of our project.*

Amy Wood: *Because the coal stove is in the center of the home, a lot of those pollutants don't go up the chimney—they stay within the home.*

Dylan Sellers: *The World Health Organization standard for PM2.5, or particulate matter, is twenty-five micrograms per cubic meter. The concentration that we measured was over 400 inside the homes of these families.*

Amy Wood: *One team's approach was to insulate the current ger so that we could replace the coal stove with an electric heater.*

Ivy Running: *And then we covered the outside of the ger in a radiant barrier, and what that does is it reflects back the radiative heat that would otherwise be lost.*

Amy Wood: *It only works if there is a gap of air in between, and so we also used foam to make that gap, and that allows it to reflect back in.*

Professor Brian Mazzeo: *The students realize that this is real: seeing how the design decisions you made thousands of miles away are actually being implemented in the field.*

Alternating Voices (Dylan Sellers, Amy Wood, Dylan Sellers): *After we finished our first retrofit, we came back the next morning to test the results. Walking in, we immediately felt a wave of heat hit us. We were able to read the data, and we saw that while it dipped outside below 7 degrees Fahrenheit, inside it stayed a constant 82 degrees Fahrenheit.*

Dylan Sellers (to the homeowner of the test ger): *So you will save more money every year from now on.*

Ivy Running: *It worked, and I kind of teared up a little bit. It was really a miracle.*

Amy Wood: *They were so excited that this thing we had been working on so hard actually worked.*

Elder Meurs: *We have a real solution, and we have proven that we can modify a ger and heat it for about \$400. The next step now is to fully test*

that solution, and we will do that with 100 to 120 modified gers this summer in preparation for winter testing.

Dylan Sellers: *I hope that we not only see the world as our campus but start to see the world's problems as our problems. Every family we convince, we immediately impact their lives for good. We immediately influence their health and improve their quality of life. And so it is enough if one family adopts this. To expand to tens of thousands of homes retrofitted is the dream.¹¹*

The last line of the BYU mission statement proclaims our firm belief that “the earnest pursuit of this institutional mission . . . will greatly enlarge Brigham Young University’s influence in a world we wish to improve.”¹² I offer this as exhibit A of the fulfillment of what I think is a prophecy. As of the first of this month, Deseret International Charities was ready to launch phase two of the project, with the expectation that they would insulate about 130 gers and build ten alternative structures in the next four weeks. And there are discussions about the potential of having 5,000 to 10,000 gers ready in 2020.

Education That Is Inspiring Learning

But saving and improving the lives of thousands—as important and impactful as that accomplishment is—does not capture the full value of the experience. Our ultimate measure of success is the impact on our students—on what happens to them as a result of their time at BYU. Professor Brian Mazzeo, one of the faculty members working with the group in Mongolia, described what can, and will, happen as we combine faith and study in the unique BYU learning process:

Students need to get inspiration as they are actually trying to execute a project like this. There is no way that they have all the information, and so they have to seek inspiration from the Lord. There is no other way. At the same time, I believe that they are trying to inspire others to be able to take solutions

out into the world. And, in particular here, it is to inspire others to be able to actually use the designs that they have created. So I see that as a kind of two-fold process of both receiving inspiration and inspiring others. And in the process they are learning so many skills and methods and processes that allow them to be just more effective people—not just as engineers but just more effective as people and citizens of the world in all that they do.¹³

That is what inspiring learning looks like. And the students involved in the project in Mongolia experienced it. One student, Prabhakar Ramaraj, stated:

When you hit a roadblock and . . . don't know what to do, . . . there are a few things [you rely] on. . . . For a BYU student, those things are . . . knowledge, . . . wisdom, and the spiritual aspect of prayer . . . , trying to receive revelation. . . . On this project [I have] been able to experience those things. . . . We have definitely been inspired.¹⁴

Another student, Austin Boyce, reported spending several sleepless nights in the Crabtree Building trying to figure out how to build an exterior door that would be both energy efficient and fit into the nonagon structure of a ger. In facing those and other problems, he stated:

We as a team . . . just . . . had a lot of faith, to be honest. . . . [And] we had the whole service center there in Mongolia fasting and praying for us as a team. It was pretty amazing to . . . have everything come together. . . . Our biggest surprise . . . was the . . . impact that [we] had. . . . It is something that we hadn't even imagined because we were just . . . [some] BYU students trying to fix a problem.¹⁵

They were just some BYU students trying to fix a problem. Yet in doing that in the BYU way, they blessed the lives of thousands, changed their own lives, and increased their own capacities to serve, forever.

A Value Beyond Price

Our mission statement indicates that our graduates are to be

broadly prepared [individuals who] will not only be capable of meeting personal challenge and change but will also bring strength to others in the tasks of home and family life, social relationships, civic duty, and service to mankind.¹⁶

We do not provide an education at BYU solely to prepare students for their first job, although we are interested in that. We do not provide an education to prepare them for their last job, although we are interested in that as well. In the end, we are not preparing students for jobs; we are preparing them for their eternal destiny as sons and daughters of Heavenly Parents. Our mission is to assist them “in their quest for perfection and eternal life.”¹⁷ That is real value, and it is a value beyond price.

At the April 2018 commencement ceremony, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland—in his inimitable, articulate way—described for our students a vision of what they can become and the kind of magnificent impact they can have as a result of the education they receive here at BYU:

You leave BYU to enter a political, social, and economic world your parents never knew and your grandparents could never have dreamed of. Perhaps that is true of each succeeding generation in history, but in my old age, I, for one, could not have imagined as a BYU student more than half a century ago the world you now go forth to experience. So much of that world is stunningly beautiful and rewarding. . . .

*I do **not** agree that “the best lack all conviction” because you, seated before me . . . , and a host of good people across the earth like you prove otherwise. I believe you to be the **very** best, and I am counting on you to be consumed with conviction. . . .*

. . . So go out there and light a candle. Be a ray of light. Be your best self and let your character shine. Cherish the gospel of Jesus Christ and live it. The world needs you, and surely your Father in Heaven

needs you if His blessed purposes for His children are to prevail. You have entered to learn. Now go forth to serve and strengthen. If correcting all the world's ills seems a daunting task, so be it. Go out there and be undaunted. If we cannot look to you to change the world, tell me to whom we should look. . . .

Congratulations on your very significant achievement. . . . May the sun always be at full noon for you, banishing every shadow that might otherwise mar your happiness. I express our pride in you and wish you Godspeed for the exciting journey you now undertake.¹⁸

That is the best value in higher education today. It is a holistic education that is grounded in classrooms in which true principles are taught, in which the Holy Ghost is present, and in which the joy of learning is palpable. It is an education in which that same kind of joyful learning extends beyond the classroom to student-centered research, informal conversations, and student employment. It is, as President Kimball stated, an “education for eternity.”

So as our university conference theme encourages us to do, “let us cheerfully do all things that lie in our power” to provide that kind of education. Then, as that scripture promises, we can “stand still, with the utmost assurance, to see the salvation of God, and for his arm to be revealed.”¹⁹

I bear you my witness that this university is part of the rolling forth of the kingdom of God on the earth. We, through our students, can have a *magnificent* impact on the world around us. That is our mission and our destiny, if we work toward it. I am grateful to each of you for what you do, for who you are, and for the impact you have on our remarkable students. I urge you to do a little more, to be a little better, with a promise that your lives and the lives of so many others will be richer and more joyful as a result. I bear you that witness in the holy name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. A video excerpt was shown from the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) Presidents Conference, 30 January–1 February 2019, Washington, DC.

2. See Caroline Howard, ed., “America’s Best Value Colleges 2019: The Definitive Guide for Those Looking for an Excellent Return on Their College Investment,” Editor’s Pick, *Forbes*, 24 April 2019, forbes.com/best-value-colleges/#60afd530245b.

3. See Selina Scott, “The 10 Best Colleges for Advertising,” *College Rankings*, *College Magazine*, 7 February 2019, collegemagazine.com/the-10-best-colleges-for-advertising.

4. “Which Colleges Grant the Most Bachelor’s Degrees in Foreign Languages?” *The Chronicle List*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 29 January 2019, chronicle.com/article/Which-Colleges-Grant-the-Most/245567; also published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* 65, no. 21 (8 February 2019).

5. David Brooks, “The Cultural Value of Christian Higher Education,” keynote speech given at the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities 40th Anniversary Celebration Gala, Washington, DC, 27 January 2016; published in *Advance* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 48.

6. *The Aims of a BYU Education* (1 March 1995).

7. *The Mission of Brigham Young University* (4 November 1981).

8. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (23 September 1995).

9. Spencer W. Kimball, “Education for Eternity,” pre-school address to BYU faculty and staff, 12 September 1967, 11.

10. Excerpted from “BYU Dining Services: Feeding the Thousands, Nourishing the One,” BYU Dining Services, 24 October 2017, YouTube video, youtube.com/watch?v=6FsTEUTAGXA.

11. “In Mongolia, BYU’s \$400 Retrofit Could Reduce Toxic Air Pollution,” *Brigham*

Young University, 29 August 2019, YouTube video, [youtube.com/watch?v=KQUu-Yvfe90](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQUu-Yvfe90); see also “One Ger at a Time, BYU Engineers Help Clear Mongolia’s Toxic Air (Extended Version),” Brigham Young University, 5 September 2019, YouTube video, [youtube.com/watch?v=sDKyGL26tiQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDKyGL26tiQ).

12. The Mission of BYU.

13. Brian Mazzeo, 2019 interview with BYU University Communications.

14. Prabhakar Ramaraj, 2019 interview with BYU University Communications.

15. Austin Boyce, 2019 interview with BYU University Communications.

16. The Mission of BYU.

17. The Mission of BYU.

18. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Banishing All Shadows,” BYU commencement address, 26 April 2018; emphasis in original. Elder Holland was referring to something he had previously quoted in his commencement address:

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

. . . the centre cannot hold; . . .

. . . everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

[William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming” (1921), stanza 1]

19. D&C 123:17.