

Prospects for the New Professoriate at Brigham Young University

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Brigham Young University (BYU) annually matriculates approximately 40,000 undergraduate students at its three campuses and approximately 3,000 graduate (master's and PhD students) at one of those campuses and is, by Carnegie classification, a Doctoral/Research University-Extensive (McCormick, 2001). It is unique within that classification because of its exclusive ownership by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter, LDS Church). The question posed here is whether the fact of that ownership has unique implications for those in the new professoriate who aspire to join the BYU Psychology faculty in a tenure-track position. In other words, are there unique qualifications of acceptable applicants that are distinct from the qualifications sought by psychology departments at other institutions in the U.S. owned by, sponsored by, or otherwise affiliated with formal religious organizations?

The short answer is yes. To be an acceptable applicant—at least at present and in the foreseeable future—one is preferably a member in good standing of the LDS Church. Although other institutions may have a similar insistence where their own adherents are concerned, it may be worth inquiring whether BYU's Psychology Department is otherwise unique in its practice of faculty hiring. This question prompts a longer answer.

The University's mission is succinct: "to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life" (Brigham Young University Bulletin, 2004, p. 12). It seeks "the balanced development of the total person" in an "environment enlightened by living prophets and sustained by those moral virtues which characterize the life and teachings of the Son of God." The success of the mission rides on four goals: that every student be "taught the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ," that students "receive a broad education," that students also "receive

instruction in the special fields of their choice,” and that “scholarly endeavor among both faculty and students” be both essential and encouraged.

As a complement to the mission statement, the University has also articulated four aims of a BYU education. The first is that it be “spiritually strengthening.” Specifically, each faculty member should “keep his subject matter bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel” (Brigham Young University Bulletin, 2004, p. 13). Doing so is consistent with the “common purpose of all education at BYU—to build testimonies of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.” All at the University are “brothers and sisters, seeking together to master the academic disciplines while remaining mastered by the higher claims of discipleship to the Savior.”

The second aim is an “intellectually enlightening” education. Specifically, “members of the BYU community rigorously study academic subjects in the light of divine truth” (p. 13). Third among the aims is an education that is “character building”: “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” (p. 14). Ultimately, students’ “character begins to resemble [Christ’s], not just because they think it should but because that is the way they are.” The final aim is “lifelong learning and service.” The University’s success in meeting all four aims means that “the lives of its students will confirm Brigham Young’s [the University’s founder’s] confidence that education is indeed ‘a good thing,’ blessing all those who humbly and faithfully use it to bless others” (p. 15).

The mission statement of the BYU Psychology Department embraces the University’s mission and aims and “honors the restored gospel as vital for psychological theory, as a guide for professional conduct, and as a source of unique insight” (Brigham Young University Bulletin, 2004, p. 321). In doing so, the department “distinguishes itself as a community of scholarship, moral principle, and devotion to the elevation of humankind.” Membership in the Church does not suffice. Integral to the successful applicant’s qualifications are familiarity with the Church’s doctrine and policy and demonstrable adherence to its orthodoxy. The

applicant should not only know the restored gospel and exemplify its precepts but should also espouse its truth and the divinity of its origin. Doing so would qualify the applicant spiritually for the important roles of nurturing students' testimonies while concurrently contributing to both the breadth and the specialization of their BYU education. On this view, BYU is a faithful community that is also scholarly rather than the obverse.

We conducted an informal, anonymous survey of the full-time Psychology faculty; of 32 persons to whom the survey was forwarded, 14 responded. The survey asked them to: (a) rate the desirability of 16 characteristics of potential assistant professors in the department, (b) identify additional desirable characteristics of candidates who would be considered highly qualified, given BYU's religious affiliation; (c) list the characteristics that are currently most influential in the department's hiring decisions, and (d) indicate ways in which those characteristics may be different from the characteristics most influential at other institutions.

Of the 16 characteristics the survey specified, "active research program and publication" rated highest, followed by "demonstrated potential to provide high-quality mentorship for student research," "demonstrated potential for high-quality teaching," and "ability to work in effective scholarly collaborations within the department." "Demonstrated potential to secure extramural funding" and "ability to articulate and pursue the department's mission and vision" were next and tied. Following, and also tied, were "ability to provide leadership within the department" and "demonstrated potential to integrate a religious/spiritual perspective with the formal discipline of psychology."

As to whether faculty appointment within the Psychology Department would require additional characteristics in light of the University's religious affiliation, three respondents said no. Other respondents cited the need for Church membership, personal values and behavior consistent with the Church, collegiality and social skills, a "growing testimony" of the Church, a commitment to Church activity and service, and "abiding faith" in Jesus Christ. One respondent made the point that the highly qualified candidate would "understand that BYU is a Church institution first and university second," that while questioning and

considering had their place, there was a need to “ultimately respect the legitimate authority of the University and Church leadership.”

The three characteristics currently most influential in hiring decisions within the Psychology Department were identified as, first, an active research program and publication (11 respondents), second, a demonstrated potential for high-quality teaching (7 respondents), and, third, membership in the Church and a demonstrated potential to provide high-quality mentorship for student research (tied with 5 respondents each).

Six respondents gave no answer to the final item regarding potential differences between the department and departments at other institutions regarding the most influential considerations in faculty hiring. The remaining respondents pointed to other institutions being “not so interested in personal values and character” and having greater interest in faculty diversity and less interest in faculty mentorship of students. One respondent opined that BYU requires “more loyalty, willingness to sacrifice, support, and mentor, and to work for a cause larger than oneself.”

These results frame the bottom line: Although the scholarly qualifications the department seeks in a successful applicant are resonant with those at many other institutions, they are only operative once the premise of LDS uprightness is secure.

References

Brigham Young University bulletin: Undergraduate catalog, 2004-2005. Provo, UT: BYU Publications and Graphics.

McCormick, A. C. (Ed.). (2001). *The Carnegie classification of institutions of higher education, 2000 edition*. Menlo Park, CA: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.