

SUPPORTING OUR WOMEN STUDENTS AND FACULTY:

FINDING THE SPIRIT OF RICKS THROUGH GENDER EQUITY

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When I was an undergraduate student at Brigham Young University in the late 1980s, I made an early decision to major in history education. I reasoned—as many young Mormon females do—that I could work as a high school teacher until that time that marriage and family would return me to the home. I dreamed of a quiver of intelligent children that I would raise while—of course—my wealthy MBA or medical professional husband would provide well for our family. As our children got older, I could work as a high school teacher *just in case* I needed to supplement the family income, *just in case* my husband got sick or died, or *just in case* I was bored with empty-nest syndrome. High school teaching would be the perfect “*just in case*” profession for balancing motherhood and a career, especially because I could be “home by 4:00.” For many women, the “just in case” motives, or “fall-back plans” for education are not necessarily a negative driving force for higher education. However, I needed to come to a realization of the importance of education for education’s sake, as I now also try to encourage my students to do.

By the time I was a senior ready to graduate, I already knew that I would earn my history degree without a “Mrs.” degree. I had watched innumerable friends and acquaintances date and get married. However, I remained dateless and spouseless, along with many friends who were now faced with the same realities I was. These friends had also chosen their “just in case” majors, but weren’t sure what to do with them, or perhaps weren’t even sure that they enjoyed what they had chosen to begin with. These young women often struggled with identity issues because the dream of finding a spouse at BYU went unfulfilled for them, and they now grappled with not knowing what to do or how to use their “useless” degrees. But as much as I didn’t feel that I was desirable as a potential marriage partner, at least I had my education! During my undergraduate degree, I learned along the way that I actually loved the academic study, research, and writing of history. I entered graduate school, but still not sure what I would do with a Master’s degree, continued to hope for the hypothetical marriage. When I completed my MA and still had no job and no spouse, I felt more confused. In the back of my mind, I dreamed of being a college professor, but I feared the time investment of a doctoral program, and thought, certainly I would be married with a family before I would ever face that decision.

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A far-sighted bishop of a singles ward in Orem, Utah, called me on a mission. I accepted, served and came home, now a returned missionary with an MA in history, still puzzled about what to do next. Like many young single LDS women in their mid- to late-twenties, I assumed the next best step was to move to Utah—or any other concentrated but nebulous population of Mormon young single adults—to be around a larger dating pool. So I taught an adjunct class for Utah Valley State College to further my professional interests, while working full time at a computer support call center to pay the bills, even though it was well below my educational experience. I quickly felt lost and camouflaged among dozens of younger women, and the dates still didn't come. My dreams of being a college professor weren't going anywhere either, so my Utah digression lasted only four months before I knew it was finally time to stop playing the waiting game. I applied for and was accepted to a doctoral program in history at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln at age twenty-seven.

My four years in Nebraska were a period of coming alive for me, of personal, intellectual, and spiritual flowering. I thrived in the academic environment of a major research university, but I also grew spiritually as the older and “motherly” Relief Society president in a singles' ward to much younger sisters.

Well-meaning members I met along the way often gave me sincere, but unsolicited and sometimes even offensive advice. One ward sister suggested that perhaps I wasn't dating because I didn't wear enough make-up. Another said that by pursuing a PhD, I was sending a message to righteous young men that I was only interested in a career. Over time, I tuned out these negative messages and instead listened to sincere friends and Church leaders who recognized that I deserved someone who appreciated me for who I was.. But I also was able to look at how our LDS culture, in spite of our best intentions, might be sending conflicting and damaging messages to our young women. Not only am I relieved I did *not* marry any of those so-called “righteous young men” who were intimidated by my education, but I persist in my hope that as a culture, we might continue to move beyond the stereotypes of either the “marriageable young woman” or the “educated young woman.”

It was here at BYU–Idaho that, at age thirty-four, I finally succeeded in two of my life's goals. One was to be a professor at a Church university where I might have opportunities for mentoring LDS youth, and especially young women in a faithful environment. Another equally important goal was to meet and marry a good and worthy man and be married for eternity—and this wonderful blessing happened as a result of my earlier faithful decisions to fully pursue my education. Without my doctorate and a bit of very fortunate timing, my ultimate arrival in Rexburg and

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introduction to my husband would have been unlikely, if not entirely improbable.

My experience might remind you of a story recently shared by Casey Hurley in a devotional address, in which a single LDS woman found her husband on a deserted island while completing a graduate research project. As Hurley reminded us, the important message about this woman's story is not that she found a husband, but that she sought the Lord's guidance to find His plan for her life. "God's plan for Leslie could have just as easily included life as a righteous single woman."¹ Similarly, the importance of my faithful choice to pursue higher education would not have been lessened or undermined had I never met and married my husband.

I share my own story to illustrate a few important messages about young LDS women's choices. First, all women cannot fit within the same paradigm of choices and outcomes. Second, a good educational choice can produce great fruit and endless possibilities, whereas poor educational choices for a young woman can lead to confusion and the tendency to play what I call "the Waiting Game." I hope to illustrate some of the dangers of bad advising for our female students. The tendency to second-guess students' educational choices in the name of gender stereotypes might cause confusion and damaged feelings of individual worth.

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SUPPORTING OUR WOMEN STUDENTS

Like myself, many young LDS women will not experience cookie-cutter life. It's perfectly normal not to be normal! Let us try to be supportive of our female students' decisions without worrying so much about what *might not* be happening in their lives, or worrying about trying to guarantee a specific outcome for them. The Lord will work in their lives just as he worked in mine. Faith, patience, and some good early decisions regarding education can be absolutely liberating for young women. Education for women is encouraged by both Church doctrine and leaders. However, the confusion for young women might come in how that direction is given. Further, although the doctrine is quite clear on the importance of women's education, I continue to be surprised at the numbers of our young women who believe they don't need to pursue a substantive education, because "I'm just going to be a wife and mother." That there still exists a disconnection between what young women are taught in the doctrine and what they actually absorb in their personal lives shows the need for improved counseling of our female students.

EDUCATION AS A FALL-BACK PLAN

Our first emphasis for the importance of education for LDS women is and should be "education to be a better mother." Righteous parenting

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is certainly the most worthy and noble motive for any woman *or man* to pursue education. However, I often find that many of our young women do not imagine or plan for their educated mothering role past about when their children turn eight or nine years old. Do they see ahead to adolescence and young adulthood, where as a mother, they will be required to offer guidance for financial decisions, health problems, political choices based upon current events or social issues, sound doctrinal and scriptural knowledge, and their children’s own educational, mission, and marital choices? I believe that too often, they do not. As faculty members, advisors, ward leaders, and especially as parents, let us continue to encourage students toward more substantive forms of spiritual and secular education, especially through diverse course offerings that will prepare them fully for *all* of their future parenting responsibilities.

A second emphasis for women’s education that we often refer to in our LDS culture is the “education as a fall-back plan” for if a woman never marries, or her husband dies or becomes disabled. I affectionately refer to these motives as the Four D’s for women: Divorce, Death, Disability, and Dumping. I could add a fifth “Destitution” to cover the possibility of poverty that many couples might face in their married lives. Indeed, Church leaders have often emphasized the importance of women’s education for these reasons. Most recently, President Thomas S. Monson counseled women to “Study diligently”:

Beyond our study of spiritual matters, secular learning is also essential. Often the future is unknown; therefore, it behooves us to prepare for uncertainties. Statistics reveal that at some time, because of the illness or death of a husband or because of economic necessity, you may find yourself in the role of financial provider. Some of you already occupy that role. I urge you to pursue your education—if you are not already doing so or have not done so—that you might be prepared to provide if circumstances necessitate such.

President Monson also reminded women of the first priority of education for better parenting: “Your talents will expand as you study and learn. You will be able to better assist your families in their learning, and you will have peace of mind in knowing that you have prepared yourself for the eventualities that you may encounter in life.”²

Certainly current economic conditions reinforce these timely messages behind “education as a fall-back plan.” Most LDS women will have to work in either part-time or full-time employment at some point during their married lives. Although the counsels against women working outside the home are sometimes couched in terms of avoiding greed and materialism, usually there are more exigent factors affecting women’s decisions to work outside the home. Some working-class Mormon families struggle to meet basic needs or to recover from indebtedness. Families are also

increasingly strapped by financial difficulties arising from the current economic conditions, from declining real estate values and retirement portfolios to rising health care, food and energy costs. In 1985, Elder James E. Faust counseled women BYU students about the realities of poverty: “It is unfortunate that it is taking so long to bring full economic justice to women. The feminization of poverty is both real and tragic. That is why you should work very hard to prepare for your future by gaining some marketable skills.”³ Women need to be fully prepared for these eventualities by pursuing the most complete and sensible education they can. It is far better to have an education and career that one can pursue even part time, than to limit one’s education, and then have to work at someone else’s will and wages in low-paying jobs.

Casey Hurley has recently suggested some possibilities in *Perspective* for advising our female students toward more diverse occupations that may be fulfilling for both single and married women, which also balance with family responsibilities. Women should be encouraged to pursue the areas where they have aptitudes and talents, and that offer flexibility of schedule and salary, and not just “fall back” programs. One of my colleagues in elementary education has related that many of their entering female students are surprised to discover that their love for young children and desires for motherhood do not necessarily translate into an aptitude for elementary school teaching. Of course, education is always an adaptable profession, because of possibilities for flexible scheduling, as well as substituting, coaching, and tutoring. Still, better advising of our female students will help expose them to “less traditionally feminine” options that they might not have considered to begin with, like law, accounting, journalism, and computer technology, or even construction and automotive fields. Hurley predicts positive results from this: “Some of these areas may never be especially appealing to women, but I believe we would see some shifts in the numbers if our students had more information about the opportunities some of these majors offer to women.”⁴ Students might also look to some of their own female faculty members for examples of how to choose an educational path that will allow for a greater flexibility of time for balancing work and family. Since becoming a new mother, I have benefitted from BYU–Idaho’s generous maternity leave policy, as well as the option of adapting the 75 percent contract to fit my own needs. I have also enjoyed the technology options that have afforded me a greater freedom of course preparation and professor-student interaction from my home. I personally have felt a great amount of administrative and departmental support for my own strategies to balance my mothering role with my faculty responsibilities.

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EDUCATION AS A CENTRAL AIM

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The preparation for life's eventualities is certainly a worthy and important aim for anyone's education, but I would like to see us move beyond this to a more nuanced and liberating motive for young LDS women's educational aspirations. I once overheard a BYU–Idaho faculty member say, “We need to convince these young women that they are worth educating—even if their husbands *don't* die.” The difference can be subtle, yet important—that women should seek the intrinsic merits of education for their sense of personal worth, satisfaction and divinity, rather than for exclusively “just-in-case” motives. Along these same lines, President Monson recently was asked the purposes for educating women. At the February 4, 2008 press conference announcing President Monson as the new prophet and president of the Church, NPR correspondent Howard Berkes pursued this line of questioning regarding LDS women and education:

Berkes: I recently heard a speech of yours that you gave before the Relief Society Conference in October in which you told women that they should get an education in case their husband dies or they get divorced, and I'm wondering what you would say to Mormon women who may see that the need for an education or career goes beyond those two things.

Monson: Oh, I think that today's world is competitive—more than it's ever been. And I believe men and women need to get a type of education which will enable them to meet the exigencies of life, whether it be the death of a husband or the death of a wife, or moving to this assignment or that assignment.... I believe men and women need to be prepared for a vastly broader scope than we've ever had before—well-educated, too.

Berkes: Education for the sake of education, is worthy other than the notion of being prepared for the death of a spouse?

Monson: Oh, I certainly think so.... I've seen a great expansion and emphasis upon everyone qualifying to educate the mind and to be prepared for any type of exigency that may come into a life, and to have the satisfaction of knowing that you've accomplished something, that you've had a goal and that you've achieved it.⁵

Notice President Monson's original emphasis on education as a preparation for the “death of a husband or the death of a wife,” but then his final conclusion calls attention to “the satisfaction of knowing that you've accomplished something, that you've had a goal and that you've achieved it.” President Monson's counsel hearkens back to an early reminder from President Brigham Young about the importance of higher education in Mormon women's sense of personal, professional and spiritual fulfillment:

We believe that women are useful, not only to sweep houses, wash dishes, make beds and raise babies, but they should stand behind the counter, study law or physic, or become good bookkeepers and be able to do the business in any counting house, and all this to enlarge their sphere of usefulness for the benefit of society at large. In following these things they but answer the design of their creation.⁶

Rather than encouraging education merely as a “back-up” plan for women, education should be a pivotal and central aspect of young women’s identity and character, and for their roles as citizens of a global community. The exclusive emphasis on “education just in case of” sometimes can lead to confusion and guilt. How often have female students sat across from my desk, petrified at the notion of graduating without marriage, going on a mission, or of choosing to attend graduate school at the risk of disappointing their family and friends, or worse—fearing that young men will think that they are not interested in marriage or motherhood. While I am certain that plenty single male students also get anxious at the prospect of leaving church universities unmarried, one wonders whether marriage is more central to a woman’s sense of achievement than it is to a man’s? Herein lies a troubling contradiction for LDS young women: they are encouraged to get as much education as they can, but when they do so, their motives and choices are sometimes questioned. In fact, we tend not to second-guess a man’s commitment to family if he’s planning on an internship or graduate program, but we do inwardly wonder how a woman will “balance” it all. That so many women still feel guilt about their righteous decisions shows that perhaps as a community and a culture, we need to adjust our responses to young women’s pleas for counsel.

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APPROPRIATE COUNSEL

I have noticed that support of young women’s decisions by male leaders, professors, or family members often depends upon the cultural understanding of the person who is delivering the counsel. For example, one young woman approached her BYU–Idaho ward bishop with the desire to serve a mission. He told her, “Why would a pretty girl like you want to serve a mission?” and then gave her some general advice that she should focus on marriage instead. Feeling a bit defeated—especially because she was not dating anyone—she instead approached her home ward bishop, who enthusiastically applauded her decision and helped her along the way to serve her mission. She served and came home a worthy returned missionary, more spiritually and academically prepared to pursue her education and eternal goals of marriage and motherhood. Another student had a bishop who told her that if she were forty pounds heavier, at least she would have an excuse not to be married. From his perspective,

she really had no excuse. How often do conversations similar to these play out in our ecclesiastical and academic offices when we are counseling our young women? While many of us may be well-intentioned in our desires to see these young people happily married with families, perhaps our technique and delivery in these settings reveal some inappropriate attitudes about women that can be even more damaging.

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These experiences (which actually happened to female BYU–Idaho students), indicate that often the support or non-support of a woman’s decision in our LDS society depends upon the attitudes of individual leadership. We need to be very cautious about jumping to conclusions or making assumptions about students’ decisions. Perhaps a student advisee or ward member approaches us with her interest in majoring in biology toward the goal of becoming a pediatrician. Do we find ourselves inwardly wondering, “How can she do that and still be a wife and mother?” and then steer her toward another option? Or perhaps a student has the desire to pursue graduate studies overseas in Europe, an international internship, or volunteer work in a developing nation. Again, do we wonder, “How will she ever find a husband when she’s so far away from LDS populations?” Or “Will this major go well with marriage and family?” Or “If she goes on a mission or to graduate school, might she avoid the possibility of marriage?” I often wonder if there are any differences in the questions we ask to our male and female students in regard to the compatibility of their education/career choices and hopes for family life. As advisors, we might consider more constructive ways to engage this question for both sexes. Because our ideas about the validity of women’s decisions are applied so inconsistently, varying by degree among family members, church leaders, and college professors, it is no wonder that young LDS women often feel confusion about what is expected or allowed, and even feel a bit silenced in their attempts to make choices about their life plans that might diverge from traditional gender expectations. Any advice given by leaders should always include the admonition to ask the Lord for guidance, together with an encouragement for students to follow their own personal inspiration. In fact, for those women who did make the choice to go on a mission or to pursue graduate or professional education, I have never known those decisions to result in negative consequences, or even to prevent their eventual possibilities for marriage.

As faculty members, administrators, and ecclesiastical leaders at BYU–Idaho, let us look for improved methods of responding to our young women students in their educational and spiritual choices. Let us support their righteous choices, whether they be education, mission, or marriage, without questioning their motives or trying to “force the outcome” for that student. Finally, we must learn to avoid stereotyping our young women as a gender role to be fulfilled, and instead see each

as an individual child of God with her own circumstances, choices, and dreams.

In one important talk given to young women in 2001, President Gordon B. Hinckley reminded young women of the importance of education as a preparation for both her own personal worth and for any eventuality she may encounter in life:

Find purpose in your life. Choose the things you would like to do, and educate yourselves to be effective in their pursuit. For most it is very difficult to settle on a vocation. You are hopeful that you will marry and that all will be taken care of. In this day and time, a girl needs an education. *She needs the means and skills by which to earn a living should she find herself in a situation where it becomes necessary to do so.*⁷

President Hinckley's counsel resonates along with similar counsel given to young women by other Church leaders. Still, notice this final statement to the young women of the church:

The whole gamut of human endeavor is now open to women. There is not anything that you cannot do if you will set your mind to it. You can include in the dream of the woman you would like to be a picture of one qualified to serve society and make a significant contribution to the world of which she will be a part.⁸

President Hinckley's hope for our young women is also my hope. I hope for a majority of our young women who can see all of the possibilities for themselves. I hope for young women who will make a significant contribution to their families, their communities, and to the world. I hope for young women who spend more effort on their intellectual substance, spiritual growth, and character than on their appearance, obsession with pop culture, and superficial pursuits. As a female faculty and mentor, my greatest hope is that our women students will recognize and accept the messages of their unique potential, of their limitless educational possibilities, and of their divine and individual worth. In fact, I see a great connection between how we advise our female students and my own experiences as a female faculty member regarding respect and fulfillment. How we react to our female students certainly reflects larger attitudes about women's place in an academic environment. Thus, as we work toward greater gender sensitivity in general, respect for both female students and faculty will increase in positive and spiritually affirming ways.

SUPPORTING OUR WOMEN FACULTY

Some of my academic colleagues at other universities are often quite surprised to hear that I am the only woman in my department, and—before the shifts in college alignments last year—that I was the only full-time female faculty member in an entire college. This is not

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surprising in a relatively traditional religious culture where gender roles are more firmly delineated between male (public/workforce) and female (private/domestic). Because our doctrine emphasizes the important role of a mother in the home, there is just not a large pool of professional LDS female academics to draw upon for full-time employment at Church universities, although the numbers are growing as more young women pursue graduate studies. Still, the fact that the Church continues to hire women faculty at its institutions of higher education indicates some important messages: On a practical level, the schools must try to meet national accrediting standards for gender diversity. Second, and most important for me, I believe that the Church and its leaders accept, support, and encourage women faculty both as educated professionals and as appropriate role models for our college-age youth.

I came to my role as a female faculty member at Brigham Young University–Idaho not quite knowing what to expect, and as someone who had never attended Ricks College or lived in Idaho, I also came with very little institutional connection or loyalty. Honestly, I felt a bit fearful about how I would be received here. As a recent PhD in women’s history and a vocal advocate of women’s equality and educational choices, I expected some culture shock, having heard that Rexburg and BYU–Idaho represented very conservative ideologies and attitudes—even by LDS standards.

At first, many of my misgivings were realized, as I experienced a few personal incidents that revealed some people’s negative attitudes toward women. However, as the only female faculty member in my department, I have felt nothing but appreciation, acceptance, equality, and friendship from my colleagues—feelings which have been mutual and have continued unabated during my almost five years teaching here. My opinions have been sought as equals to equals, with respect for me as a woman and for my gender in general. Knowing that most people at BYU–Idaho share these positive attitudes about the position of female faculty members, but that a handful of students or university associates may harbor some negative stereotypes about women, I want to address a few ideas about how we can bring an even greater spirit of gender equity to our campus.

FEMALE FACULTY AS ROLE MODELS

I have never feared acting as a female “role model”—indeed, it is a unique and pioneering responsibility that I take very seriously. Every day, I hope that I represent to the students that a woman can be educated, assertive, and professional, but also faithful and family-oriented. I also hope that my life and example can teach our students that Mormon women need not be carved out of pre-cut molds. Still, the uniqueness of

my position as the only woman professor in my department also presents me with challenges that are inextricably linked to gender. The greatest challenge might be that the very presence of a full-time female professor at a church university could send a confusing or even contradictory message to students who have been reared with more traditional expectations for women's roles. Some might fear that a woman's employment might act as a counter-example to students; in other words, that a female professor might undermine the Church's messages about a mother's role in the home. This is especially true if the faculty member is—like myself—married and recently a new mother, while also maintaining full-time employment. Students respond to that perceived incongruity with a variety of reactions, some of which I will discuss here.

STUDENT RESPONSES

These reactions range from the relatively innocent level of students taking greater personal liberties with me as an “approachable” female figure to more inappropriate levels of students exhibiting outright challenges to my position as a female professor. For example, female students—and some males—tend to be more concerned with my physical appearance than they are with my male colleagues' looks and dress, often commenting on a changed hair style or new outfit. This is mostly harmless, but still reflective of a larger cultural conditioning toward an emphasis on female physicality and attractiveness. Still, most students soon learn to overlook physical appearance and focus instead on the substance of what I am teaching. I do consider myself fortunate to feel much safer from overt and threatening sexual harassment here, especially in the forms of students or male colleagues making inappropriate sexual comments or uninvited overtures. In fact, the spirit of righteous covenant-keeping among a majority of our students and faculty certainly precludes the more blatant forms of harassment that faculty at other colleges and universities might experience.

On a more troubling level of student interaction, I have found that in a few cases, students have difficulty accepting the direction of a female authority figure. This lack of respect might manifest in both subtle and more obvious ways. A student might consistently and disrespectfully question a professor's grading standard or objectivity, or might exhibit a negative attitude in the classroom through disengagement, sour expressions, lack of participation and attendance, or impolite comments in and out of class. Readers might wonder how one could tell the difference between general student disrespect as opposed to something that more specifically looks like gender harassment, “which includes both verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are insulting, degrading, or hostile.”⁹ One determinant could be that as professors share their student experiences

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within a department, they find that the female faculty members are experiencing negative student interactions that are not consistent with how men are interacting with those same students. Another might be through following the informal student “hallway discussions” about their reactions to various professors. Disrespect based upon gender occasionally takes on even more sinister tones, like a student openly and consistently defying a professor in the classroom and office consultations; a student sending harassing emails, anonymous office correspondence, or even spreading malicious, gender-based nicknames for a professor among the other students. Fortunately, these represent a small minority of student reactions. Unfortunately, I have experienced all of the above scenarios here at BYU–Idaho. Students have even erroneously prejudged me as a “radical feminist” simply because I hyphenate my last name.

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Some researchers have found that the most insidious form of gender harassment by students against female faculty is that performed anonymously. Anonymous harassment can make a person feel especially vulnerable, because without knowing the perpetrator, one might question the motives of everyone. One study has described how

Anonymity is often used in the harassment of faculty, especially female faculty. . . . [A]nonymity may be the students’ way of holding power in a relationship where generally they would have none. A student writing sexist remarks on teaching evaluation forms is an example. In this case, students know that their comments will be read by both the teacher and higher ranking members of the faculty as a means of determining how well a teacher has been doing. . . . Since professors cannot punish the unknown offender, they are powerless to keep the same act from reoccurring.¹⁰

Student evaluations represent the most quantifiable indicators of the differences in males’ and females’ responses to female faculty. A study performed at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania has shown how “[t]he ratings of male professors are unaffected by student gender, but female professors frequently receive lower ratings from their male students and higher ratings from their female students.”¹¹ These differences from the Lafayette study invite some analysis. One compelling reason might ring especially familiar for a largely LDS community:

[P]eople who violate expectations generally are rated more negatively than people who behave as expected. To receive good evaluations, male professors simply must demonstrate their competence and knowledge; that is, they need to fulfill their stereotypical gender role expectations. But female professors bear a double burden: they must fulfill both their gender role by being nurturant and warm, as well as their professional role by being competent and knowledgeable.¹²

I asked Scott Bergstrom to compile similar comparisons between male and female students' evaluations of BYU–Idaho faculty members. The results, taken from 2007 evaluations of full-time faculty, showed only slight differences between male and female students. According to Brother Bergstrom, “male students do give slightly lower ratings to their female instructors than do the female students, but this difference is not statistically significant. . . . Male and female students give virtually identical overall instructor ratings to their male instructors.”¹³ This difference between the LaFayette results and those of BYU–Idaho might indicate the need for further long-term data collection at BYU–Idaho, or that LDS students tend to apply a gospel-motivated charity and generosity in their evaluations of all professors, regardless of gender.

Because Mormon women have an added cultural expectation for the gentling and nurturing qualities mentioned above, LDS female faculty may feel the “double burden” even more acutely. Some male faculty striving to personify the Spirit of Ricks might feel a similar pressure to be masculine in their competence level as well as loving and nurturing in their student interactions. In my case, while I do act on my nurturing impulses with students, I also have been able to compensate for any perceived lack of respect by being firm in my requirements and policies. I leave it to others to determine whether I have adopted “masculine” traits in an effort to win more respect, or whether I just have a strong and commanding personality and professional character. These small adjustments aside, I have found that any professor—male or female—will earn the respect of students because of classroom presence and confidence, consistency and fairness in policies, confidence in the subject matter, and a bit of humor. A majority of my students have responded to me with great respect and affirmation. Even though cases of gender harassment represent a small minority of my own professor-student interactions, the fact that they occur at all among young Church members should invite discussion within our university community about how to encourage greater respect for female students and faculty.

SOME TROUBLING STUDENT ATTITUDES

As we prepare our students to go into the world to become disciple-leaders, we should consider how we might prepare them sufficiently for diverse interactions in the workforce, where they will come into contact with—and perhaps even work under the authority of—women CEOs, law partners, retail bosses, school principals, and other administrators, managers or co-workers. In my own contact with a female administrator at a junior high school in Southeast Idaho, she expressed her reluctance at taking on male student teachers from BYU–Idaho. She recalled how one student had expressed his personal goal to someday become a school

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administrator so that he could “hire more male teachers,” because men are the ones who really need to support their families. Assuming from this one incident that all male LDS students were chauvinists, she told me of her discomfort at accepting more male student teachers. Fortunately, I was able to reassure her that this experience was an anomaly that hopefully represented only a minority of student opinions.

Similarly, a law school professor at BYU shared an incident with me in which she overheard male law students chastising their female colleagues for taking up spaces in law school that rightly belonged to men, as men would be the ones actually providing for their families. These students also invoked LDS cultural requirements about the place of women in order to reject the female students’ educational choices.

Another incident I relate with the permission of a department colleague, indicated a similar reaction by students to women in the workforce. This professor taught a class in which he introduced the value of micro-loans to developing nations. Micro-loan programs have recently gained international attention for their importance to small business owners trying to expand their personal economic base. In many developing countries, female business owners are the primary beneficiaries of micro-loans, as women seek to gain independence from poverty, abusive institutions and family situations. Further, many women, because of losing husbands and children to AIDS or other circumstances, are now saddled with the responsibilities of rearing children and grandchildren without much-needed financial support. During this discussion in class, one male student questioned whether by encouraging micro-loans to women recipients, this was implicitly undermining Church directives for women to stay at home as primary nurturers of their children. His response first indicates a problem of ethnocentrism in trying to impose middle-class Mormon cultural structures on other societies. It also suggests a tendency for some students to rigidly and dogmatically interpret expectations for LDS women as justification to “keep women in their place.”

To clarify, LDS teachings assign a primarily nurturing role to women in the context of family life, and this important spiritual and earthly responsibility should be respected, and not be seen as a “lesser role” than men’s roles. Still, some members’ tendency toward a rigid cultural interpretation of women’s divine role at times leaves women open to possible criticism if they step outside of that exclusive role. All cultures (including their LDS members) do not share common cultural, practical, and economic necessities. Thus, not only do these stories illustrate some inherent contradictions in the educational expectations for young LDS women, they also demonstrate that some of our youth are uncomfortable responding to diversity in women’s choices and life realities. These narrow attitudes will certainly be a disservice to students as they enter the

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workforce and engage with people of varied experiences and backgrounds. Finally, these stories indicate the danger within our culture to see women as a *role* rather than as human beings with individual circumstances, choices, and dreams.

ENCOURAGING STUDENT RESPECT

The following suggestions are intended to open a dialogue on how the university might better encourage student respect for female faculty members and students. Greater gender understanding can also benefit our students as they will go out to interact with a diverse world, both in Church callings and in their professions. First, faculty should include a statement against gender harassment in their syllabus, together with a discussion early in the semester about what constitutes sex-based discrimination and/or harassment. Students can be taught that although BYU–Idaho is a private, religious institution, it still must abide by federal standards regarding gender equality and protection against harassment. But these standards ought to be upheld in principle, and not just as arbitrary expectations of a politically correct bureaucracy. Further, sexual harassment is not limited solely to inappropriate and unwelcome sexual contact—that is the relatively easy stuff to avoid, especially in a devout religious culture. More difficult for students to recognize and overcome is that sexual discrimination may include any form of intimidation, exclusion, punishment, or hostile behavior—verbal or physical—directed toward a student or faculty member because of gender. Note BYU–Idaho’s own statement against Sexual Harassment, as quoted from the Student Handbook:

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment refers to unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature. Sexual harassment may include 1) unwelcome sexual advances, 2) requests for sexual favors, and 3) other verbal, non-verbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Sexual harassment may also include denying or limiting, on the basis of sex, the student’s ability to participate in or receive benefits, services, or opportunities in university programs. BYU–Idaho’s policy against sexual harassment extends not only to employment situations, but to academic situations well. If you feel that you have encountered sexual harassment, gender based discrimination, or need assistance or information related to allegations of sexual harassment, contact the Dean of Students Office in 270 Kimball or call 496-1120.¹⁴

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TEACHING GENDER SENSITIVITY

What strategies might help BYU–Idaho faculty to teach students about gender sensitivity? First, an appropriate discussion of gender harassment

that is initiated at the beginning of a semester and maintained throughout a class might go a long way to encourage students to evaluate any of their own prejudices, stereotypes, and even anger about the opposite sex. This can be especially powerful coming from sympathetic male faculty members, to whom some students might not respond as defensively as they would a female faculty member who is similarly trying to teach gender sensitivity. How might this instruction occur without taking away from the “real” purpose and spirit of a class? I believe that gender respect is a thread that can be woven throughout a course when appropriate teaching moments arise, similar to how a professor might teach students to resist racism, materialism, dishonesty, or immorality. When inappropriate gender-based attitudes are expressed, the tendency by a faculty member might be to let it go, often because of a desire for non-confrontation with students, or maybe because the faculty member shares those same ideas. Most likely, a faculty member might not be aware of exactly *how* to respond to a student.

So where should students be taught to overcome their negative gender biases? Should it be done only when individual teaching moments arise? What if a professor harbors his or her own gender biases or stereotypes that are expressed in front of students? For example, one student overheard a professor condescend upon a female student who happened to be very beautiful. She asked a question to which the professor responded, “Sounds like someone should have gone to beauty school.” As a response to these overt gender biases by both professors and students, should there be university or college-wide trainings? Should we expect a gradual change over time as students readjust their preconceptions through exposure to education and a diverse world? Should we rely on teaching by example? All of these are appropriate options to be considered. Where the gender-based disrespect is much more aggressive and sinister, I believe that students and professors should be held accountable. This might involve a one-on-one interview with the professor, department chair, college dean, or even the Dean of Students. I was surprised to discover that one of my experiences with an anonymous and serious form of gender harassment was actually deserving of law enforcement intervention. The university might consider any of these strategies as possible responses for teaching both our students and faculty about the gravity of sexual harassment, and the faculty would also greatly benefit from any training of this type.

POSITIVE EXAMPLES

A second method for our university to engage in gender understanding is to expose students more often to positive examples of women in faculty or leadership positions. While BYU–Idaho is working toward greater gender diversity in its hiring of faculty, much can still be done

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in certain departments, wherever there might be pools of available and qualified female candidates for hiring consideration. I have felt particularly optimistic at the numbers of female faculty, administrative personnel and general women officers of the Church who are invited to speak at forums, devotionals, and commencement exercises. We might also continue to work toward greater female representation on the administrative level so that the university can better demonstrate male and female faculty and administration doing what Elder M. Russell Ballard has called “counseling together with our councils.”¹⁵ Students will benefit from this modeling, especially as female faculty members are consulted more directly to offer their input on university policies and decisions.

CURRICULAR REFERENCES

Third, faculty can be more conscious of all of their references to men and women in their teaching. For example, a hypothetical case study used in a class that refers to a “boss” or other authority figure ought to place women in this role as often as men. Likewise, exams, assignments, role plays, and discussions can all be examined for gender-bias. We can do much by our own example to help students avoid the tendency to always refer to a boss as “he” or to a nurse as “she.” One faculty member gave a final where students were told “you are starting a business,” with a question about the students’ own hypothetical experience. All the male students answered with “I would...” An alarming percentage of female students began their responses with “He would...” The same professor later gave a speech assignment about business communications, where almost every student referred to a future boss as “he.” These experiences invite the faculty to reconsider where we might encourage this type of thinking by referring to male pronouns in our class discussions. Our female students need to be able to envision themselves in any of these diverse roles if they are going to be successful in their families, education, missions, and professions.

I hope that my expressions here have been accepted in the spirit of honesty and love that is sincerely intended. My goals have been two-fold: first, that these ideas may serve to open an important dialogue here at BYU–Idaho about how professors, administrators and ecclesiastical leaders can better support our female students as they prepare and set goals for their individual life plans. Second, as a female faculty member and mentor, I also hope for our university community to continue in the positive direction of combating negative gender bias and creating a harmonious environment of gender equity where the Spirit of Ricks may flourish. ☺

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NOTES

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- 4 Casey Hurley, “What if ‘Plan A’ Doesn’t Work?,” *Perspective* volume 7.2 (Autumn 2007): 77–85.
- 5 Howard Berkes and Thomas S. Monson, press conference interview, 4 February 2008; digital sound recording accessed at <http://video.aol.com/video-detail/press-conference-naming-monson-new-lds-leader/3809388485>; 10 July 2008; transcript in possession of the author.
- 6 Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 13:61 (18 July 1869).
- 7 Gordon B. Hinckley, “How Can I Become the Woman of Whom I Dream?” *Ensign* (May 2001): 93. Italics added.
- 8 Ibid.
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- 10 Matchen and DeSouza, “The Sexual Harassment of Faculty Members by Students,” 1–2.
- 11 Susan Basow, “Student Ratings of Professors are not Gender Blind,” *AWM Newsletter*, vol. 24, No. 5 (Sept.–Oct. 1994), 1; accessed at www.awm-math.org/newsletter/199409/basow.html.
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- 14 “Sexual Harassment,” Brigham Young University–Idaho Student Handbook, A to Z Listings; accessed at http://www.byui.edu/handbook/general_information2.html; 8 July 2008.
- 15 M. Russell Ballard, *Counseling With Our Councils: Learning to Minister Together in the Church and in the Family* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997).