

Facilitating and Measuring Faith Integration

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Abstract

Christian universities are unique in that they not only have academic aspirations for each student but also spiritual ones. The problem is that spiritual growth is difficult to measure, so while a school may have clear data to justify graduation and career readiness, there often are no mechanisms in place for quantifying whether the spiritual element of their mission has been accomplished. Since nearly all Christian university mission statements claim spiritual growth and/or spiritual impact as a core value, schools must come up with a means to both facilitate and measure the effectiveness of their programs in this regard. The purpose of this article is to explore the problem and then provide practical ideas to assist professors and administrators in the process of implementation, thus ensuring the full mission of each Christian university is fully realized.

Keywords: university mission, spiritual assessments, measuring effectiveness, faith integration

Introduction

Christian colleges and universities across the United States make it clear that their central mission is to train students to follow Christ and integrate a biblical worldview as a way of life. A cursory review of thirty-five Christian university websites¹ makes this point clear and can be represented by the following examples:

Liberty University: “Liberty University develops Christ-centered men and women with the values, knowledge, and skills essential to impact the world” (Liberty University, 2025).

California Baptist University: “California Baptist University believes each person has been created for a purpose. CBU helps students understand and engage in this purpose by providing a Christ-centered educational experience integrating academics with spiritual and social development opportunities. Graduates are challenged to become individuals whose skills, integrity, and sense of purpose glorify God and distinguish them in the workplace and the world” (California Baptist University, 2025).

Biola University: “The mission of Biola University is biblically centered education, scholarship, and service — equipping men and women in mind and character to impact the world for the Lord Jesus Christ” (Biola University, 2025).

These thirty-five Christian universities are scattered across 15 states and thus can be considered broadly representative of the Christian university mosaic. Without exception, each of these Christian universities recognize that a significant part of their mission involves integrating faith into the education experience. This stands in stark contrast to the mission of three of the top state schools in the United States:

The Ohio State University: “The University is dedicated to: Creating and discovering knowledge to improve the well-being of our local, state, regional, national and global communities; Educating students through a comprehensive array of distinguished academic programs; Preparing a diverse student body to be leaders and engaged citizens; Fostering a culture of engagement and service. We understand that diversity and inclusion are essential components of our excellence” (Ohio State University, 2025).

University of California: “The distinctive mission of the University is to serve society as a center of higher learning, providing long-term societal benefits through transmitting advanced knowledge, discovering new knowledge, and functioning as an active working repository of organized knowledge. That obligation, more specifically, includes undergraduate education, graduate and professional education, research, and other kinds of public service, which are shaped and bounded by the central pervasive

becoming increasingly important that mechanisms be incorporated to ensure the spiritual mission is being accomplished. Redden (2007) states, “As the accountability pressures on higher education grow, and words like ‘measurable outcomes’ become common parlance in academe, religious colleges are increasingly embracing a need to measure the spiritual and moral outcomes they promise in their mission statements to deliver” (para. 3). She quotes Randall Bell, associate director for the Association for Biblical Higher Education: “What we tell schools is that you are supposed to articulate your intentions and then examine the results of your activities to see if they’re commensurate with your intentions. Most of our schools intend to help our students grow spiritually, so if that’s one of their intentions, they’re looking for ways to assess if that’s in fact happening or not” (para. 4).

Tood Hall (2010), a professor at Biola University, attempted to measure the spiritual growth of college students and admits, “very little research has been done on what kind of growth is happening in their spiritual lives” (para. 2). He conducted two research projects, one that tracked the spiritual development of 500 Christian college students from freshmen to senior year and the other that allowed colleges to measure the spiritual growth of 3,000 students from over 40 Christian colleges. The results led him to draw five conclusions: 1) Students are secure but unpracticed spiritually; 2) Seniors report lower overall spiritual vitality than freshmen; 3) Relationships are students’ top struggle; 4) Students tend to fit one of five Christian spirituality types (Secure and engaged; Distant yet engaged; Average security and engagement; Anxious and disengaged; Insecure and disengaged); and, 5) Relationships, theology, and suffering play important roles in spiritual growth.

The church’s primary mission is similar to the spiritual component that Christian universities are attempting to integrate; thus, a specific church model is helpful to consider. Founding pastor of Saddleback Church, Rick Warren, attempted to create measurements of spiritual growth as discussed in his bestselling book, *The Purpose Driven Church*. This was illustrated as a baseball diamond and included the following bases (Warren, 1995, p. 144):

First Base: Knowing Christ—Committed to Membership
Second Base: Growing in Christ—Committed to Maturity
Third Base: Serving Christ—Committed to Ministry
Home Base: Sharing Christ—Committed to Missions

The illustration and strategy Warren created is helpful because it provides specific steps, awareness of one’s status, and mechanisms for measuring completion. Of course, every illustration contains flaws, and Saddleback’s model has been criticized. The greatest drawback of

Warren’s model, however, is the subjective nature of spirituality, making it elusive to quantify. Redden (2007) appropriately frames the challenge: “How to make the seemingly subjective experience of faith objective, to measure a college student’s spiritual growth as you would a child’s height, with penciled marks noting an inch here, an inch there, on a four-foot paper ruler taped to the president’s door?” (para. 2).

While elements of spirituality are subjective and difficult to measure, objective elements can be found in thoughts, words, and actions that should manifest in the life of a maturing Christian. Part of the challenge, however, is the reality that engaging in specific actions does not inherently confer spirituality; rather, a spiritual individual naturally produces certain behaviors. For instance, believers who are progressing in their faith will center their lives around God (Rom. 12:1), share their faith with others (Mat. 9:35-38), integrate God’s principles into their lives (2 Cor. 3:18), and leave an impactful mark through their existence (Eph. 2:10). Other outward marks of a believer include “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). In short, “by their fruit you will recognize them” (Mat. 7:20).

Clearly, a growing Christian will display godly characteristics, but the conundrum persists: Engaging in particular actions will not inherently render one spiritual, but a spiritually inclined person naturally embraces specific actions. The Scriptures offer discernible markers of spiritual maturity, yet these are more akin to indicators or gauges rather than a strict blueprint. For example, the fruit of the Spirit found in Galatians 5:22-23 signify that the Christian life’s essence and emerge from the transformative power of the gospel within a believer’s life. However, attempting to follow a program mechanistically might not organically lead to these outcomes.

The goal of the Christian educator, then, must not be to solely focus on a checklist of prescribed spiritual actions, nor is it to focus on the attainment of theological knowledge; rather, the progression of spiritual markers will serve as an indicator of faith integration. Unlike testing for knowledge and demonstrating skill proficiency within a student’s specific discipline, a Christian university will not be able to quantify the full extent and scope of a student’s spiritual growth. However, adding specific steps into each degree program will help to facilitate the process and ensure student engagement.

Practical Steps

1. Add Spiritual Application Components to Assignments

If a Christian university expects students to graduate with an understanding of how to integrate a biblical worldview into all facets of their lives, then faculty need to build this component into course assignments. In essence, doing so will create basic case studies for students that mirror real life. For example, business majors should not merely describe how to solve a problem; rather, they should describe how they would solve a problem based on academic principles related to their field *plus* a biblical worldview. Likewise, an education major should receive opportunities to explain how a biblical worldview will inform and guide their philosophy and approach. Doing so will not only allow students to practice faith integration, but it will also provide opportunities for professors to evaluate and provide mentoring feedback.

2. Add Periodic Self-Assessments

The stages of personal growth include “self-awareness, openness to experiencing and change, existential courage, autonomy/internal locus of control, taking responsibility for the self and others, self-compassion, and compassion towards others” (Maurer, Maurer, Hoff, & Daukantaitė, 2023, p. 1). Essentially, this means that for change to take place, individuals must have an awareness of where they are at, they must desire change, they must be willing to change, and they must personally engage in the process. Christian universities can help to facilitate the change process by strategically incorporating opportunities for self-reflection and personal assessment. If faith integration is what Christian universities desire as an end product, assignments must go beyond testing for knowledge attainment and skill development within one’s discipline. Reflection assignments, for example, will influence students to honestly assess their current stage and allow them to engage in critical analysis. For example, a professor might ask students to consider and write on the following prompt: If Artificial Intelligence was able to catalog every thought you had and every word you said over the past month, based on a 1-10 scale, to what extent would you reflect the standards as set forth in Philippians 4:8?² This serves as a simple, yet effective method of proactively integrating faith into the classroom environment.

3. View the Degree Program as a Journey with Set Milestones

Spiritual growth is difficult to measure, particularly for a single professor working within an eight-week or even a semester construct. While specific assignments can help a professor contribute to a student’s spiritual growth, the larger academic ecosystem must also be designed to

facilitate that growth as well. One way to accomplish this goal is to view each degree program as a journey with set milestones. Most university degree programs contain a semester-based course sequence to help students complete their program within an ideal timeframe. While some courses may allow some flexibility when they are taken by a student, in most cases, the sequencing is purposeful and must be followed. Thus, it would not be difficult to implement specific spiritual milestones at various stages throughout a student’s degree program. For example, a three-year degree program might have three established milestones, one at the end of each year. Each spiritual milestone could be assessed in the final class of each respective year, ensuring both exposure and assessment of markers the University wishes to emphasize.

4. Leverage Capstone Courses to Measure Both Academic Skills and Spiritual Growth

Most degree programs require a capstone class toward the end of a student’s degree program, which provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate skill proficiency and for faculty to assess graduation and career readiness. Rather than merely assessing a student’s competency within their discipline, faculty should also provide a forum for students to demonstrate spiritual growth. This may take the form of personal reflection as they consider where they were when they started the program and how far they have advanced, or it could involve some assessment where students are asked how they would apply their faith within specific scenarios. Regardless of the method, capstone classes should be utilized to measure the totality of the University’s mission and not merely knowledge and skill competency.

Summary and Conclusion

The majority of, if not all, Christian universities serve a common purpose in that each desire to turn out students who actively live out and apply a biblical worldview within their personal lives and their career fields. While these universities do a great job of assessing whether a student is ready to graduate in terms of knowledge and skill proficiency, there often are no mechanisms in place to ensure the spiritual element of their mission has taken root. Since spirituality is so difficult to quantify, Christian universities may be overestimating their effectiveness in this regard and thus must take proactive steps to facilitate and assess the spiritual growth of their students. This can take place by strategically leveraging systems that are already in place. Adding some spiritual reflection opportunities and assessments within courses and the overall degree program, will help Christian universities better assess their effectiveness in this regard.

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¹ Universities include Abilene Christian University, Azusa Pacific University, Baylor University, Belmont University, Biola University, Boyce College, Cairn University, California Baptist University, Cedarville University, Cornerstone University, Erskine College, Geneva College, Gordon College, Grand Canyon University, Greenville University, Judson University, Kentucky Christian University, Lancaster Bible College, Lee University, Liberty University, Lipscomb University, Malone University, Messiah University, Ohio Christian University, Ouachita Baptist University, Palm Beach Atlantic University,

² “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (Phi. 4:8, NIV).