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## Faith Integration in the Higher Education Online Classroom: Perspectives and Practice

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# Faith Integration in the Higher Education Online Classroom: Perspectives and Practice

## Abstract

Online instruction in higher education has grown dramatically in recent years, and more faith-based colleges and universities are including online courses as a part of their educational offerings. The integration of faith in learning is an important goal in many of these faith-based institutions; however, the practice of faith integration in online settings presents unique challenges for faculty members. The purpose of this article is to provide support for faculty members teaching online in Christian colleges and universities with faith integration by presenting a series of strategies for their use. Approaches to faith integration are grouped utilizing a model presented by Dulaney et al. (2015) and adapted here for online contexts. Recommendations for working with students of differing faith backgrounds are also provided.

## Keywords

faith integration; online education

## Authors

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### Introduction:

In addition to academic achievement, the spiritual development of students is a critical goal in faith-based higher education institutions. The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (“CCCU Christian Mission,” n.d.), an association of over 180 Christian institutions of learning around the world, describes this approach to teaching and learning one in which “the development of the mind, spirit, body, and emotions are seamlessly woven together in the quest not just for knowledge but also for wisdom” (para. 2). As professors in faith-based institutions, we are challenged with providing curriculum that contributes to the development of students academically and spiritually (“Azusa Pacific University Faith Integration Faculty Guidebook,” n.d.). While explicit learning objectives may inform the academic curriculum and instruction, in many Christian universities there are no explicit or specific spiritual learning objectives in non-theology courses. In addition, while students are usually placed in courses, which they are academically prepared for, there is no secondary system for assessing their fluency in biblical studies. Students in any given classroom have a broad spectrum of familiarity with Christian biblical principles. Some have none at all, and have minimal interest in learning more; others are very mature in their faith walk. This variance in biblical literacy among students in the same class poses a challenge for professors with regard to implementing effective strategies for faith integration.

For faculty teaching courses in online programs, meeting the goal of faith integration can be associated with challenges. The unique nature of

asynchronous online teaching has certainly challenged faculty members to develop innovative pedagogical practices to engage students to successfully meet course objectives based on the core subject matter; however, faculty members teaching online in faith-based higher education settings have the additional task of integrating faith in a manner that is effective and engaging for online students. The goal of this essay is to present to current and potential Christian faculty a series of strategies for effectively integrating faith in online courses.

### Purpose

Faculty in faith-based colleges and universities can be guided by the scriptural call from Peter 3:13–16 to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” In light of the call to explain our beliefs respectfully and courageously,

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this essay will explore some strategies for effective faith integration for faculty teaching online in faith-based higher education settings. Perspectives are provided by a cadre of online professors in the Department of Education at a Christian university in Southern California. The identification of these strategies arose from the desire of current online Christian faculty to integrate faith into their courses in a way that was meaningful, engaging, and prompted spiritual development and growth in their students. One professor remarked, "We do not always know if our students are Christians or not, and further, some of them are Biblically fluent, while others are new to faith and scripture - and so the challenge is providing accessible, relevant, and robust experiences." Another professor shared, "In some discipline areas it is easier to make those faith connections than others. We are constantly looking for ways to authentically connect the dots between faith/learning/discipline. This takes careful planning, especially for the online educator." Another common sentiment was the notion that it feels easier and more natural to share personal testimony in face-to-face interpersonal interactions with students. Several faculty members said that the absence of face-to-face interaction with students posed a barrier to meaningful faith integration due to an innate feeling of separation.

These frequent, shared questions and concerns fueled the authors' desire to outline effective strategies for faith integration. The presentation of these strategies is prefaced with a brief discussion of related literature that provides background for the discussion. Following are a series of strategies organized around a framework outlining types of faith integration in the classroom published by Dulaney et al. (2015) and adapted here for the online context. Special attention will be focused on working with students from diverse faith backgrounds. While determining what to teach with regards to faith integration will differ depending on the faith tradition of the institution, the professor, the content area, and the students, the goal in this essay is to focus on strategies for how to approach the task of faith integration in the online context from a practical perspective.

## Background

Historically, the integration of faith was central to the foundation of American higher education

curriculum. "In its formative years, higher education in the United States was shaped by a worldview which directly correlated to the prominent Christian faith" (Dulaney et al., 2015, p. 55). Over time, however, the focus of higher education has shifted to center on a more diverse and secular worldview, and the integration of faith has been widely replaced with an emphasis on the use of a scientific lens to view knowledge. The ability of faculty members to integrate faith concepts is critically important to the mission of the faith-based institution and comprises "a key way to create distinction from secular education" (Dulaney et al. 2015, p. 56). For example, at our Christian university, many students choose to apply and attend our programs because of our Christian mission, and they expect their professors to both model the Christian life as well as actively integrate faith into the learning experience.

Although faith integration is important to the mission of faith-based institutions, the definition of faith integration lacks consensus in higher education. In summarizing the existing body of research on faith-learning integration, Bailey (2012) concluded that it is "devoted, in large part, to attempts to refine and reach consensus on exactly what the integration of faith and learning is" (p. 154). Ultimately, he labeled faith integration as a "multi-dimensional family of concepts" which are consistent with the "multi-dimensional nature of human experience and faith" (p. 155). This underscores the idea that what comprises appropriate faith integration in higher education may differ depending on factors such as the college or university, the specific faith tradition or denomination, the subject matter, the learning context (face to face, online, or hybrid), the individual faculty member, and the student.

Questions on how faculty should integrate faith in the online classroom to promote engagement, learning, and spiritual development are even more nuanced. The majority of the research on faith integration is more theoretical than practical in nature. As Lawrence, Burton, and Nwosu (2005) pointed out, discussions about faith integration often take place in "the very heights of an ivory tower," with an emphasis on "the actions of teachers or institutions" (p. 18) rather than the needs, behaviors, or perspectives of students. In

addition, the literature has been focused mostly on students in traditional, face-to-face university settings, not students in online classes (Appiah & Wa-Mbaleka, 2015). Students in online classes can have different needs and characteristics than students in traditional degree programs; they may be older, have more life experience, and are often already employed, which can mean that their learning needs and expectations are different. Moreover, because they are educated online, the nature and breadth of their learning experience as a whole can differ fundamentally from students in a traditional college or university setting. Traditional campus students regularly interact in-person with faculty and other students in the classroom, where faith topics can be a seamless part of class discussion and learning activities. Further, they also have access to campus activities, such as chapel services or Bible studies, that can support their spiritual development. Most often, online students do not have access to the same variety of supportive and spiritually enriching in-person experiences.

The challenges associated with online faith integration have led some to conclude that the Christian higher education mission might be compromised for online students, and to question whether faith integration is even possible in the online learning context (Appiah & Wa-Mbaleka, 2015; Casimiro, 2017; Shelton, Saltsman, & Bikis, 2017). The authors' collective experience teaching online in a Christian higher education institution has led them to conclude that many faculty members need knowledge of and access to the tools and techniques for effective faith integration online, especially given the unique needs of the online student population. This paper seeks to provide faculty members teaching online in a faith-based college or university with strategies that will assist them with implementing effective faith integration in the online classroom.

## **Tools for Online Faith Integration**

Engaging in meaningful faith integration, a process which is not only unique based on academic content, but many times also highly relational and personal, can be a daunting task in the online classroom. As Dockery (2012) explained, the work of faith integration extends far beyond matching scripture with academic course content, explaining that a faith-based education "also means the shaping of character,

and it moves towards the development and construction of a convictional way of seeing the world by which we can see, learn, and interpret life from the vantage point of God's revelation to us" (p. 5). In the absence of regular face-to-face interactions with students, meeting such goals for online students requires creativity and a fresh perspective on traditional approaches to faith integration. In the balance of this paper, we discuss Dulaney et al.'s (2015) framework for faith and learning integration, along with specific ideas for how faculty might approach meaningful faith integration in their work with online students.

## **A Framework for Faith Integration**

Several models have been developed to describe and support the various types of faith integration. In this paper, the model used to organize the presentation of approaches and strategies for faith integration was published by Dulaney et al. (2015). Although other models of faith integration exist, some of which are more comprehensive, this model was selected because it most accurately captures the nature of faith integration in our current online courses. Dulaney et al. categorized the types of faith integration into three dimensions: inside integration, outside integration, and mentoring. In the sections below, we define each of the three dimensions of faith integration, and provide suggestions for the use of each type in online courses.

### **Inside Faith Integration: Explicit Connection to Content**

Dulaney et al. (2015) stated that inside integration centers on the professor's intention to "create a curriculum capitalizing on opportunities to relate course material to faith" (p. 57). They further cited the research findings of Burton and Nwosu (2003), who concluded that inside integration "begins with value judgments and an analysis of facts" and ultimately leads to "an investigation of God's purpose in the subject at hand" (p. 57). To begin the process of inside faith integration, faculty members should take time to examine personal assumptions about faith, teaching and learning, and to critically analyze the connections between course content and their personal faith principles. It is also important to consider the

mission of the college or university as well as the course and program learning objectives connected to the course. Careful engagement with these three components will allow faculty members to identify important formal opportunities for faith integration within each course and each assignment as appropriate.

**Making scriptural connections evident online.**

In a traditional face-to-face course, the professor most likely discusses the explicit connections between a Christian worldview and course content during class lectures and discussion. These conversations between students and faculty are also likely to occur in informal campus settings. In the absence of these in-person opportunities, online faculty members have to create opportunities purposefully to facilitate active consideration of connections to faith. Professors can begin with careful design of the course based on the selected online learning platform. This will enable them to leverage the variety of technological tools and resources available to present course content and develop course assignments that contain a clear faith integration component.

**Managing course design.** One important step is the identification of specific, explicit faith-based learning objectives in online courses. Both professor and students can be aware of faith-based learning goals and be encouraged to reflect on mastery of these goals as they proceed through the course. Faculty members can support this process by including written faith-based goals in the syllabus, as well as corresponding faith-based learning objectives and requirements in assignments.

In addition, creating assignments grounded in active learning approaches that ask probing questions requiring critical thinking and evaluation of faith principles provides a greater opportunity to engage the online learner because analysis, synthesis and evaluation are primary facets of active learning (Middleton 2012; Stuckey & Kring, 2007). Rather than relying on passive assignments like true/false or multiple-choice tests or quizzes, which emphasize rote memorization or basic knowledge, experiential learning activities requiring critical thinking, (such as case studies, group discussion, problem

solving, and fieldwork), will provide greater opportunity for meaningful examination and application of biblical principles.

**Leveraging content through technology-based resources.**

Faculty are also encouraged to locate, create, and embed content-based multimedia resources in their online courses as a way of going beyond text-based faith integration. A simple example of this would be the addition of a relevant, short devotional video embedded within an assignment or learning module. The video devotional can be related to course content, current events, or challenges faced by students in the course. Faculty can identify inspirational videos related to their content area by searching YouTube and TeacherTube. Faculty can also create their own media-rich resources by using free, Web-based screen capture or voice over software (such as Screencast-O-Matic or Jing) to enhance their own printed course materials. The addition of voice-over lectures or recorded videos allows faculty to add personalized audio or video related to faith integration on a regular basis in the online classroom. For example, one professor teaching organizational leadership within a cohort of government employees is able to virtually lecture and convey connections and parallels between secular leadership theories and the teachings of Christ. Further, the professor includes specific bible verses on how Jesus exemplified leadership principles. Student feedback for these videos has indicated that students appreciate explanation of these connections, which they might not otherwise have noted on their own. Surprisingly, while these students are often not able to share their faith at work in public organizations, they enjoy and thrive when given the opportunity to share their faith in assignments and classroom discussions.

**Developing course assignments.** When assignments rely on faith-based textbooks and articles, it is easy to follow up with related activities to promote outside integration. For example, in our online course introducing students to the field of education, we invite our online students to think about how Jesus went about his teaching. Students are assigned reading from Keller's (1998) Jesus as Teacher article to gain insights into the details of Jesus' charismatic teaching style, and then asked to compare this

with best practices in contemporary classrooms in a short paper. However, faith integration in many other content areas may not be as direct as this.

For assignments not quite as clearly connected with a faith-based element, professors teaching online might add elements to individual assignments that include an emphasis on faith, crafting questions related to course topics that encourage reflection and application. Discussion board postings and wiki or blog-type assignments asking students to consider course content through the lens of a Christian worldview are excellent venues for meaningful faith integration in the online classroom, particularly because they encourage dialogue and interaction with others. For these assignments, it is recommended that faculty go beyond asking students to provide simple scriptural connections, and also to avoid posing questions that have straightforward answers or encouraging students to focus on expressing the least controversial response. Because questions like these may elicit personal and/or controversial commentary, professors can be ready to participate in and monitor these interactive exercises to be sure they remain respectful and collegial. Ultimately, faculty can ensure that students in an online classroom participate in active learning activities that encourage the use of higher-level critical thinking skills, learning from other students and their professor, and the careful reflection on their personal beliefs.

In addition to outlining strategies for inside integration, Dulaney et al. (2015) discussed a second type of faith integration. The authors provided an explanation of outside faith integration, which goes beyond the intentional connection of faith concepts to course content found in inside integration. Instead, outside faith integration involves the provision of real-life experiences for students that are both intimately connected to the course content and contain a faith integration element as well.

### **Outside Faith Integration: Linking Knowledge and Experience**

The second facet of Dulaney et al.'s (2015) dimensions of faith integration is outside integration, which is a key supplement to the

inside faith integration activities carefully facilitated by the professor. Outside integration is comprised of discipline-specific enhancements to the curriculum which are designed to provide students with an opportunity to explore faith in action through outside experiences relevant to professional practice. Faculty in Christian colleges who consider this aspect of Dulaney et al.'s framework are committed to ensuring that distance learners do not miss out on these valuable opportunities for outside faith integration. Knowles' (1984) work on theories of adult learning made clear the need to provide adult learners with opportunities to engage with and participate in relevant and meaningful experiences as part of the learning process. In addition to connecting students to the realities of practitioner-based work outside of the classroom, the addition of a faith integration component enables students to analyze and consider the connections between their faith and professional practice. Examples of outside experiences that can be used as tools for faith integration include fieldwork experiences, interviews, observations, shadowing, and service learning. Some of these experiences can be virtual in nature, whereby professors bring them within the context of the online course; others require student access to appropriate real-world contexts.

#### **Facilitating virtual outside experiences.**

Including discipline-specific experts and guest speakers into the online classroom setting through video, audio, or the addition of Web-based resources is an excellent way to provide outside faith integration (Dulaney et al., 2015). Bringing outside professionals into the learning experience, or integrating other supportive content developed by experts, provides students valuable time with industry professionals in a way that is accessible in the online format. Experts from the field provide worthwhile stories, examples, and applications regarding how they demonstrate their faith or values in action as a working professional. If possible, it is important to include professionals with experience in faith-based as well as non-faith-based settings. In online settings, speaker presentations are typically embedded within the learning module. Videos can be recorded with any multimedia tool, such as Zoom, Skype, or video tools within the online

Learning Management Software. Students can develop questions and topics for the speaker ahead of time to organize the session for an online environment.

Another way for students to access the knowledge and expertise of guest speakers is for faculty to utilize podcasts. Podcasts allow students to listen to sessions from professionals addressing specific topics related to faith and professional practice. Video and podcast options have the benefit of allowing students to access course material asynchronously as their schedule permits. Faculty can also create their own podcasts to post in online classes. Faculty can reach out to colleagues, local businesses, schools, and organizations to schedule and facilitate these guest speaker opportunities. Free Web-based tools such as PodBean, TalkShoe, or VozMe are all good options for faculty interested in podcasting. Dr. Sung, an Assistant Professor of English, for example, uses podcasts to record lectures for his online English courses. Using this format to record interviews from experts from the field offers students a flexible and convenient way to access outside expertise. Faculty can consider the use of multimedia tools that include ways to provide a transcript or speech-to-text option to meet the specific needs of all learners.

Professors might also make use of the many excellent multimedia resources available online to provide students with access to real-world experts by adding their own faith integration component. TED Talks, for instance, can be found on a wide variety of topics and can be included to supplement the textbook and lecture materials included in the course. For those teaching education courses, the resources available online from the IRIS Center are high-quality and comprehensive. After accessing expert content in the online course, a debrief or written reflection activity designed to help students make meaningful connections to faith and practice is an essential part of the process.

**Going beyond the classroom.** If possible, online faculty can provide opportunities for students to observe, shadow, interview practitioners, or complete supervised fieldwork in both faith-based and secular professional settings. It is important for faculty members to intentionally embed the

time needed for these experiences within the assignments planned for the online course. It is also essential to provide an opportunity for students to address expectations and assumptions prior to the field experience and to reflect after the experience. Some students may be able to find their own local placement for these experiences; however, professional networking is important for connecting students with opportunities. Colleagues and churches can serve as valuable resources to connect students with the appropriate professional.

Service learning opportunities are another valued part of the overall learning experience in many colleges and universities. With careful planning, the logistics aspect of service learning need not be a barrier for students in online settings. These activities are intentionally designed with structured participation, allowing students to serve in their local communities or on a supervised trip nationally or abroad. These community-based experiences promote serving others and the importance of civic engagement. For Christian colleges and universities, they are often discipline-related, while challenging students to synthesize faith, service, theory, and practice. Students can locate their own local service learning sites or faculty can help connect them with non-profit organizations, churches, or schools in their communities. A growing and unique component of service learning takes place when the service and the instructional content and practice converge online. An example of this is a service learning opportunity involving students volunteering as online grant writers for a non-profit organization (Waldner, McGorry, & Widener, 2012). It is suggested that the service learning activities include an opportunity for students to reflect and critically examine how they synthesized their faith, theory, and discipline as part of their experience. These reflections can be used as formative tools requiring students to submit written, video, or audio journals or diaries about their service experience.

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**Harnessing the power of reflection.** Mouw (2014) advocated providing safe spaces for students to explore their faith and questions about spirituality. Introspective reflection before and after a student engaging in an outside experience can allow students the opportunity to consider how their faith informs their experience and to address met or unmet expectations related to the outside faith integration activity. Additionally, students can be encouraged to unpack the assumptions associated with how their faith translates outside of the classroom before, during, and after participating in outside faith integration experiences. In a meta-analysis of online learning studies by the United States Department of Education (2009), researchers concluded that the practice of promoting reflection of learning, “leads to more positive online learning outcomes” (p. 45). Additional research supports that there is a positive relationship between self-regulation, (which can be attained through introspective reflection), and academic performance (Lawanto 2014; Lehmann 2014). Student reflection assignments can be in the form of online journaling, peer-to-peer-discussion forums, or learning assessments.

In short, designing and implementing outside faith integration activities within the online learning environment is a rewarding and necessary endeavor. It involves careful planning, access to reliable technology tools, differentiation, and time considerations embedded into the overall course structure. These outside activities are an important supplement to the course content because they emphasize the real-world application of faith and course concepts.

### **Mentoring Faith Integration: Modeling and Building Relationships with Students**

The third dimension of faith integration “involves a fusion of dimensions one and two” which centers on “developing and enabling one-on-one mentoring relationships with students” (Dulaney et al., 2015, p. 58). These mentoring relationships

are critical to supporting students’ faith development. Faculty in faith-based institutions have a unique opportunity to share the love of the Lord through the lives they lead and the things they say and do every day. Mentoring often happens frequently and naturally in face-to-face courses. Although the nature of mentoring is different when teaching online, opportunities do exist for online faculty to develop meaningful relationships with their students. This can be accomplished by intentionally creating and nurturing conditions for successful mentoring and the formation of supportive relationships among faculty and peers within the online classroom.

**Ensuring responsive and reciprocal communication.** Frequent and timely communication is important for successful mentoring experiences. Contacting students several weeks prior to the course start date is helpful for shaping the context of the faith environment of the course: welcoming them to the course, introducing yourself and your background, and providing some personal information about yourself are effective strategies. Once the course begins, setting up a forum for robust introductions that include video, audio and images is crucial. To accelerate the development of a mentoring relationship, faculty can provide information about themselves and their faith as a way to encourage self-disclosure and discussion at a level they are comfortable with, as well as creating a culture of relational honesty among the students. In this way, students come to know their professor at a deeper level. It is also helpful to encourage students to go beyond stating basic information in their own introductions, and to recommend that they also add video and pictures to their introductions.

Faculty should respond to and welcome all students individually, and students should be expected to welcome at least a few of their classmates with some additional postings. This provides students with the opportunity to develop bonds based on common experiences, and to meet others who have had completely different experiences. Further, this kind of activity provides faculty with the opportunity to better know the students. As the opportunity arises, this knowledge can be used to provide students with comments or resources that can extend and

enhance their learning in the course. This strategy can be invaluable to personalizing the experience of online learning, and can allow faculty to gather information to strengthen mentoring relationships as well.

Regardless of the instructional delivery format, staying in touch on a regular basis can go a long way to promoting student success and develop more robust relationships. This strategy is especially true for online courses. Students should be encouraged to reach out with questions, concerns, or problems, and faculty ought to respond to these efforts in a prompt and friendly manner. Professors can also support student success and build relationships by reaching out to students by phone or email when students miss deadlines or appear to struggle with assignments. Developing and presenting a policy for regular effective contact and prescribed response times lays a foundation for relationship-building and mentoring in online courses. In the authors' online division, for example, faculty and students are expected to check email daily and respond within 24 hours, excluding weekends and holidays. This type of reliable communication contributes much to the relational nature of our work.

**Making your faith visible.** Within these regular communications, professors can strive to make their faith visible. Weekly emails and videos not only keep students in touch with expectations, but also offer the faculty the opportunity to pray for students and provide inspirational scripture or devotionals. Creating the conditions for students to be open to listening to a faith message is one of the most critical components of effective online faith-based courses. Faculty can take the best of themselves using the repertoire of strategies from the face-to-face relationships they maintain in the traditional classroom, and use the online tools for relationship building to create effective and personal relationships with their online students. It is in the context of these relationships that the genuine sharing of faith can occur.

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*Creating the conditions for students to be open to listening to a faith message is one of the most critical components of*

*effective online faith-based courses.*

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One of the most important ways of modeling faith is by treating all students with respect and compassion. Remembering the Great Commandments to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mk 12:28-34), make sure students know you are there to serve them and to help them, as well as educate them. This is especially important for adult learners who are typically balancing any number of life responsibilities in addition to their coursework. Showing grace when life emergencies force students to ask for extended due dates can be lifesaving to them. Posting a brief video or a photo album that shows you as a professor doing community service, participating in athletic events, being active at your own church, or attending an event with your family gives your students a chance to see what a Christian professor does outside the classroom.

**Building a faith community.** Students can learn about faith and be inspired through interactions with other students, as well as those they have with their professor. In the authors' experience, some students in the online classroom have a great deal to offer others with respect to sharing their life experience and faith walk. The use of discussion board assignments and peer review activities can be an excellent approach for building relationships and creating opportunities for mentoring. We have found that creating open-ended discussion board prompts which ask students to reflect and apply their faith and values is an excellent means of stimulating active online conversations. However, in the same way as the teacher's presence in a traditional classroom is important to guide group discussions, the online classroom requires teacher presence to facilitate and guide the instruction. Threads and discussions boards require regular monitoring and presence from the teaching faculty, especially in circumstances in which conflict arises between students or the subject matter is sensitive, such as child abuse, domestic violence, or trauma.

One final suggestion to aid in fostering a faith community for online students is to provide for a

specific discussion board, blog or other digital forum that can be used for students and faculty to uplift and pray for each other. Dulaney et al. (2015) supported this idea, noting that “prayer is also a universal way to encourage students to actively integrate faith into their personal lives” (p. 59). Although this is not part of a graded classroom assignment, students can be encouraged to participate when they have an issue arise and need prayer, or when they are simply seeking general support for struggles and challenges. Each of these methods mentioned replicate the active mentoring that occurs in the face-to-face classroom, and support Christian believers as well as expose seekers to the scriptures.

### Strategies for Inclusivity of Varying Worldviews

Many Christian universities today accept non-Christian students, so that students holding beliefs of other faiths or even no faith will likely be in our classrooms. As we read in Timothy 2:11, as faculty members we are appointed a herald and an apostle and teacher and must remain mindful that when we teach in Christian universities, we accept the challenge to integrate teaching with ministry to reach those who do not share our beliefs. In addition, we must be aware that even Christian students are at various points within their walk with Christ, and that some may have little familiarity with the Bible and Christian principles. In some cases, faculty will experience positive outcomes from the process of faith integration, but that is not always the case. “Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear” (Matthew 13: 8-9, NIV).

For those students who are unfamiliar or do not share our Christian beliefs, it is important to proceed with care and respect. Being mindful of not alienating students who may be self-conscious or insecure in navigating and interpreting the Bible is important to promote student success in the classroom as well as fostering overall student retention (Patton & Rice 2009; Rood, 2009). Several strategies for promoting inclusivity to be discussed below include using inclusive language,

emphasizing shared values, and establishing clear and fair grading policies.

### Using Inclusive Language

The majority of content delivery in online education is done through written form. Thus, the choice of terms and phrasing requires special attention, both in formal communication such as assignment instructions, as well as in routine or conversational communication within the discussion boards. Using inclusive language in course materials, which is defined in this paper as language that welcomes and includes all students, can be helpful to avoid alienating students from different faiths. Relying solely on Bible verses or biblical terms and concepts can inadvertently isolate students who are not secure in navigating or interpreting the Bible. Instead of relying exclusively on scripture when making ethical references or prompting ethical examination in assignments or discussion forums, online educators can also add prompts which ask students to reflect on their moral reasoning based on general principles of right and wrong.

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*Using inclusive language in course materials, which is defined in this paper as language that welcomes and includes all students, can be helpful to avoid alienating students from different faiths.*

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White’s (1988) article, for example, identified a shared ethical emphasis that could be used, in which he stated that something is wrong if it goes against one’s deepest personal beliefs, causes guilty feelings, interferes with the lives of others, breaks the laws or traditions of society, causes physical or emotional harm to someone, or violates the rights of others. The author went on to identify common sense categories of harmful consequences and inappropriate actions that can guide personal professional behavior. First, are harmful consequences, which White defined as doing something that hurts somebody, such as causing physical or emotional harm, or violating confidentiality. Second, inappropriate actions, are

defined as those interfering with the lives of other people, or violating someone's rights or autonomy. Finally, general standards, refer to behaviors conflicting with personal beliefs or violating social norms (White, 1988).

Referring to these more general definitions of key ethical constructs can communicate a shared understanding of moral reasoning that is aligned with biblical teachings without the risk of isolating students who are not familiar with the Bible. Adding some of this language in assignment instructions invites all students to address the requirement regardless of their faith and/or their understanding and ability to interpret the Bible. The use of inclusive language can also foster more meaningful discussion in online discussion forums. This can benefit students who might not have otherwise felt comfortable participating, as well enhance the breadth and depth of the class discussion.

### **Emphasizing Common Shared Values Across Faiths**

As previously stated, because the majority of communication in online learning is through written form, naturally occurring dynamics that result from in-person interactions are somewhat absent. While professors and students can communicate and foster a warm, inclusive and accepting climate in the face-to-face classroom as a result of naturally-occurring rapport, the online environment requires a more conscientious effort to convey an environment of acceptance. If an online student is already feeling insecure, those feelings might become worse as a result of being physically separated from the faculty member and other students. In this way, the perceived gap between Christian students and others can be disproportionately magnified in the online environment. Again, these perceived instances of not fitting in can lead to students not fully engaging in online discussion forums, or skipping parts of assignments.

Faculty can remind students that Christian-based values are, in fact, much-aligned with the values of a multitude of other faiths and even secular socially-shared values. In addition to including biblical language, professors can integrate inclusive ethical language that is universally

recognized and shared based on the principles previously outlined. Faculty members can also use inclusive language in assignment instructions and requirements. For example, instructions that might read, "Reflect on how your Christian beliefs shape your analysis of..." could be modified in this way: "Reflect on how your personal sense of integrity, ethics, and family-instilled values shapes your analysis of..." By removing the sole reliance on Christian faith and opening the invitation to include consideration of a personal code of ethics, faculty members invite students who might have feelings of insecurity or disagreement with the Bible to support their moral analysis. This can also remove the misperception that introspective reflection of how values shape our perceptions can only be made by students of Christian faith. Again, by increasing engagement of students who might have otherwise opted out of engaging, discussions can grow deeper and individual academic achievement can be enhanced.

### **Establishing Clear and Open Assessment Practices**

The issue of grading assignments with a faith integration component requires mention. When delineating assignment requirements, creating rubrics, or engaging in assessment of assignments, we strive to provide space for students to disagree or have divergent opinions without fearing they will receive lower grades. Occasionally, students have inquired as to whether their grades on assignments requiring a faith integration component will be affected if they are not Christian or do not agree with the opinions of the professor or other classmates. In these cases, our goal is to reassure students that agreement is not a requirement for success. With small adaptations, most assignments can be structured to easily allow divergent perspectives without affecting student grading outcomes. If Christian educators are to be successful, they must be prepared to integrate faith-based learning that engages and calls for students to be an example of His love and a reflection of His light. "We have been called to be the salt and light of the earth" (Matthew 5: 13-16). Fostering a warm classroom climate that is respectful of diverse ideas benefits all students.

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## Conclusion

Online faculty who seek to prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century can face a daunting task when it comes to faith integration. Yet, with careful planning and the creative use of the right tools, quality faith integration in online environments is possible. Ideally, faculty will establish an inclusive tone and strive to engage in both inside and outside faith integration, leading to mentoring activities with students, as they teach their online classes. In fact, striving for a combination of these three types of faith integration, across courses and assignments is a worthwhile goal. Dulaney et al. (2015) provided a series of content-specific assignments containing components of each faith integration dimension in face-to-face settings. With some slight alterations, professors can develop assignments for online students which include an inside, outside, and mentoring component for the purposes of faith integration.

The tools and strategies for effective and meaningful faith integration discussed in this essay are applicable to a wide spectrum of disciplines and can be applied to diverse online teaching contexts. As faculty working in the online education department of a Christian university, we believe that attention to active faith integration online is especially critical for those faculty training future educators and leaders. Christian leaders and educators have been called to serve at the highest level by leading and educating the next generation, and their work is many times underpaid and undervalued. Many of our students, particularly those who will eventually be employed in public school settings or secular organizations, will not continue to have the support afforded by working in an environment that nurtures their faith. In fact, they will be called upon to serve and lead others by example. "We are not to be separate from society, but rather we have a responsibility to influence society for good" (Dockery, 2012, p. 455). For

these reasons, we feel it is critical for faculty to model faith in action and support students' spiritual development through meaningful faith integration. It is our hope that the strategies discussed in this essay will inspire and support faculty in faith-based colleges and universities as they take on the sacred responsibility of integrating faith and learning for the future leaders and educators in their online classes.

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