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## Making the SWU Course Uniquely Christian

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Southern Wesleyan University exists to help men and women become all God intends them to be. Therefore, the central factor that distinguishes a course at SWU from courses at other institutions is the Christian perspective integrated into the learning experience. Most faculty have few models as to how to effectively do this type of integration. You might be in this same boat. However, if, as you are planning to teach your course, you ask yourself the following nine questions, you will find ample opportunity to create excellent SWU learning experiences.

Note that as a university, SWU is committed to the search for truth in a manner that promotes free and open inquiry. As such, we are about liberating minds to experiment with diverse viewpoints and to explore opposing explanations. We are not about indoctrination or the presentation of only a single “right” answer. But because we are a *Christian* university we allow the Christian faith and its implicit worldview a place at the table. The implications of Christ and His Kingdom must be presented, explored and critically evaluated in addition to competing frameworks.

The questions and suggestions below are not meant to be a list of requirements, nor are they exhaustive in any way. They are just mental tools each instructor can use to suggest ways their courses could better integrate faith, living, and learning. No single course will likely provide opportunity for every dimension listed below. However, every SWU course should have at least some integrative elements – even those, like math or chemistry, which perhaps pose more of a challenge.

### How will I create a course environment that supports Christian growth and reflection?

At many educational institutions talk of religion is excluded as inappropriate. Students are encouraged both verbally and by culture to refrain from bringing their beliefs into the classroom. SWU is the opposite in this regard. If understandings shaped by faith do not find their way into the classroom, we fail in our unique mission. Because the dominant educational culture avoids the topic, the faculty member must overtly do some things to make sure students are comfortable bringing their faith to class.

1. Start with devotions and/or prayer.
2. Set ground-rules stating that everyone’s beliefs should be respected and that all discussion should be civil and free from personal attack (encourage free thought).
3. Be encouraging, non-judgmental and supportive when a student shares religious viewpoints (even while challenging them to think more deeply).
4. Find places in class, in learning teams, and in assignments where students are encouraged to express their religious views.

### **How will I allow students to see elements of my own faith journey?**

Some of the most powerful forces in an individual's spiritual formation are not books or sermons or activities. They are the lives of real people. It is by watching how others live out their faith that we understand both the amazing transformative power of the Holy Spirit and the way in which our own faith might work its way into our actions.

1. Review your own walk with Christ. Have you submitted yourself completely to Jesus' lordship? Are you truly seeking to grow in your own faith? Are the tenets of your faith becoming "incarnational" in your own life?
2. Make sure your words, actions, and overall disposition honor Christ and express love before your students. This would include caring deeply about the quality of your own teaching, grading, feedback, and responsiveness to student concerns.
3. Use relevant illustrations from your own professional life where your faith has intersected with your work.
4. Consider if there is an appropriate point in the course to briefly share your testimony.

### **How will I create "space" for the Holy Spirit to visibly act within the lives of the students?**

One of the amazing elements of our work at SWU is how often God chooses to do something remarkable in our midst. Often He works behind the scenes or within the natural order of things. But every so often He chooses to reveal Himself in the remarkable. At such times, students often are compelled to respond to His reality. Generally, prayer is the key ingredient and catalyst for these events.

1. Consider taking *specific* prayer requests before praying in class.
2. Incorporate a time where students can give thanks for prayers that have been answered.
3. Allow students to share faith stories that are relevant to the topic under discussion.

### **How will I help students understand the foundational concepts of the gospel?**

Many students come to us with an incomplete knowledge of the basic message of Scripture. While at the undergraduate level, all students are required to take New Testament, Old Testament, and Basic Christian Beliefs, there is still need to re-tell, remind, and reinforce the basic elements of the gospel.

1. Use your devotional time to emphasize a key component of Christian thought.
2. Whenever relevant to the teaching moment, explore fundamental Christian concepts of
  - a. The nature of God
  - b. Creation
  - c. Sin/Fall
  - d. Redemptive history
  - e. Christ's atoning sacrifice
  - f. Transformational redemption/full salvation
  - g. Holy living
  - h. Ultimate re-creation

## How will I help students think *Christianly* about the ethical dimensions of the topic under study?

Almost any subject area will provide opportunities to reflect on “the right thing to do.” Answers to ethical questions depend on one’s understanding of how the world works, personal values hierarchies, and a framework for how to deal with the dilemma of competing values. Each of these elements provides opportunity for helping students not only construct a more Christian worldview, but also to learn how to live as a Christ-follower in the midst of a fallen and broken world.

1. Look for places in your subject area where the “morally right” thing to do is not obvious. Discussion of such topics can open avenues to explore “why” questions and worldview questions.
2. Often professional discipline areas have a particular *Code of Ethics*. Take the time to look at the elements of such a code and to discuss a Christian rationale.
3. Identify three or four foundational principles of your discipline. Now consider how Scripture, either by its specific teaching (instructions/commands) or in biblical examples, may have something to say about these principles.
4. Historic events and case studies often have ethical dimensions which can be explored.
5. Ask students to reflect on how culture, contemporary ideas, history, and ethnic background, in addition to religious beliefs, all work to shape individual values. Often this can be done by looking at individuals or vignettes from history. Use these tools to help students critically assess their own values.

## How will I help students think *Christianly* about the metaphysical dimension of the topic under study?

“Metaphysics” is the term used by Christian philosophers to describe questions of what is real and how the world works. Some such questions can certainly be informed by the natural sciences, yet there is a limit to what science can help with. For example, the existence of God and His nature are not open to scientific investigation.

1. Look for ways to explore the **assumptions** made by a theory, author, or commentator regarding such things as:
  - a. The existence or nature of God (e.g. What does this author assume about whether God exists or what He is like? Does it matter with respect to the theory espoused?)
  - b. The nature of the universe (e.g. Does the field of study generally assume that only the elements of our surrounding world that can be objectively experienced or observed exist? How does the spiritual realm fit into that assumed universe?)
  - c. The nature of human nature (e.g. What does this author believe about people? Does it conflict with a biblical view?)

- d. Free will vs. determinism (e.g. Does the author assume individuals control their own destiny? If not, what drives humans? Can the view be reconciled with a Christian view?)
  - e. The nature of self (e.g. What does the author assume about the elements of personhood and identity? How do these views relate to a Christian perspective?)
  - f. Distinctions between mind/body, humans/animals, being/doing, change/stasis (e.g. Are assumptions in these areas consistent with Christian perspectives?)
2. Critically evaluate views on such metaphysical topics from different perspectives – including Christian perspective(s). Push students to form their own, informed view.
  3. Ask students to reflect on how culture, contemporary ideas, history, and ethnic background, in addition to religious beliefs, all work to shape individual understanding of what is real and how the world works. Often this can be done by looking at individuals or vignettes from history. Use these tools to help students critically assess their own metaphysical assumptions.

**How will I help students think *Christianly* about the epistemological dimensions of the topic under study?**

“Epistemology” relates to how we know things, whether we can know things, and the degree to which we can be sure. Because Christianity is supported by a view that there is truth and God has “revealed” certain aspects of it to us, the battleground of epistemology is crucial to address. At one end of the spectrum are individuals who naively think that there is no truth, but that everything is subjective opinion. At the other end is the view that truth is objective, black and white, and obvious to all who have the brains to look. As a faculty member, it is important to help students think through the many options in between and to critically assess their own perspective.

1. Look for ways to explore the assumptions made by a theory, author, or commentator regarding such things as:
  - a. How knowledge in the field is derived (e.g. Does the field restrict “knowledge” to what can be experientially or empirically inferred?)
  - b. How we come to know the metaphysical, ethical, or teleological underpinnings of the field. (e.g. Is reason the only valid source of knowledge?)
  - c. How questions about the nature of reality are answered (e.g. Do all answers contain subjective elements?)
  - d. Why one viewpoint is stronger than a competing viewpoint (e.g. How does the author or field determine what is “true?”)
2. Find examples of competing theories or approaches and talk through how we decide between them.
3. When presenting or exploring a Christian viewpoint, discuss the basis for asserting that viewpoint over a competing one. Why might it be accepted as superior?

## How will I help students think *Christianly* about the teleological dimensions of the topic under study?

In his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey advises readers to “begin with the end in mind.”<sup>1</sup> It is this admonition that is the focus of what philosophers term, “teleology.” What is the purpose, goal, or meaning of something? Viktor Frankl has identified the search for meaning as the primary motivational force of the human race.<sup>2</sup> It certainly has bearing on the majority of our actions. And apart from grappling with the question of life purpose, a Christian worldview cannot be formed.

1. Drill into assumptions related to meaning and purpose by finding ways to ask “Why?” Often the question must be asked multiple times before you arrive at the fundamental level.
2. Have students speculate on the purposes that animated historical leaders and innovators in the field of study. What drove them to do the things they did?
3. Provide opportunity for students to critically evaluate differing purposes or goals based on their own views of meaning and purpose.

## How do I encourage students to act in a manner consistent with their thinking and beliefs?

Knowing and doing are often interconnected. Sometimes knowing leads to doing. Sometimes doing leads to knowing. Each tends to reinforce the other. And one remains incomplete without the other. Because SWU seeks to provide a holistic education, we cannot solely look to the cognitive elements of the Christian faith but must take the steps necessary to encourage their practical integration into all of life.

1. Is there a service-learning or *praxis* element that can be incorporated into the course?
2. Is there a project that requires application (and justification from a Christian perspective) that can be required?
3. Can students be asked to provide a case study from their own life experience and to reflect on it critically from a Christian perspective?

Right believing leads to right living.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 95ff.

<sup>22</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, rev. ed (New York: Pocket Books, 1984), 121.