

“The Mismeasure of Man”

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Welcome to a new semester! It’s wonderful to be with you BYU-Pathway students as you gather from all over the world.

It may not have looked like it then, but as a young boy, I had great ambitions of future glory. I confessed to my mother that I could not decide whether to become an astronaut or a professional athlete. Unfortunately, some of those ambitions faded — not because they were unrealistic, but because I began believing early measures of my academic performance. In a grade school just like this, I started to lose confidence. I had a hard time focusing, and I struggled academically. I even applied to my school’s honors program unsuccessfully three separate times. What made it even more painful was that my younger siblings had already been accepted. I knew I could do more, but I just didn’t know how.

There are intense debates as to whether human potential is fixed or whether it can expand over time.¹ Some scholars claim student capacity is capped, based solely on inherited intelligence, and inflexible over time. Other scholars argue that our potential is expansive, coachable, and can increase over time. I am so glad my lifelong potential was not fixed in grade school. I believe a constrained view of human potential is a mismeasurement of man. But even those who see our more increased possibilities far too often miss our divine potential as children of God.

In those early years when my academic performance was low, I began to develop study skills and academic grit because I lacked intellectual confidence. Eventually I developed better time-management and other organizational skills, which together led to a modest academic improvement. But the real transformation in my development came as a missionary. I brought the same discipline I had developed in school, but something was different. I soon realized that heaven was expanding my capacity. The Spirit helped me learn at an accelerated pace more than simply relying on my own efforts. I was developing a growth mindset that looked at expanded possibilities, but it was based on something more. It was based on my divine potential and not just my personal efforts.

This experience echoes a pattern that is repeated for BYU-Pathway students across the world. Ian Kila, a student in the southern United States, describes his path of learning: “I didn’t have the ability to finish high school.... Many nights I went to bed heartbroken, praying and hoping that the Lord hadn’t forgotten me. It was my dream to be smart like those around me.... I learned about [BYU-Pathway] and the opportunity it gave.... I enrolled [and] learned about self-reliance, critical thinking, ... math and communication skills. Of all these blessings, one of the greatest was the ability to ... be guided by the Spirit.”

Lehi Santana, from Mexico, describes how his learning changed him: “[BYU-Pathway] has made it possible for me to discover things about myself that I didn’t know were there.”

Florencia Molina, from Argentina, explains: “I realized that the most important progress I made was spiritual. I was able to understand my divine potential and become who my Heavenly Father expects me to be.”

Each of these students initially felt their potential was capped based on prior academic experience. As they developed life skills through BYU-Pathway, their abilities grew. But when they grounded their study in a deeper purpose, the Holy Ghost accelerated their learning, and their divine potential began to shine through.

¹ The title of the talk and the reference to the literature on human potential draws research by Stephen Jay Gould, titled *The Mismeasure of Man* (1996). While there is a broader body of research on this subject, Gould’s analysis is often framed as a counterpoint to research by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray on human intelligence and class structure, summarized in *The Bell Curve* (1994).

As BYU-Pathway students, you will acquire study skills, organization, and time management. You also learn how to overcome thinking errors, develop a growth mindset, and build a capacity to persevere. BYU-Pathway curriculum draws on proven research in academic development.² But even scholars who study these developmental skills often mismeasure our real expansive potential in God. BYU-Pathway students “seek learning, even by study and also by faith.”³ To do this, it is critical to:

1. Recognize your divine potential
2. Anchor on a higher purpose
3. Draw on the Holy Ghost as the true teacher

On this first point, the world will try to deny your divine potential. Recall Satan’s efforts to hold back Moses, saying, “Moses, son of man, worship me.”⁴ But Moses knew who he was, responding to Satan, “Who art thou? For behold, I am a son of God, in the similitude of his Only Begotten.”⁵ As a son or daughter of God, you have divine potential and an ability to become more than the world sees.

Second, your divine potential is most fully realized when you align your efforts with the Lord’s deeper purposes. He already wants you to learn and become something more. Last fall, I spoke about the need to align your studies with their deeper spiritual purposes.⁶ When you connect your academic studies to God’s purposes, He will amplify your efforts in powerful and lasting ways.

Finally, Elder David A. Bednar teaches, “[T]he Holy Ghost will greatly improve our learning, understanding, and recall. It is helpful to pray not only at the beginning, but to plead for understanding as you study.”⁷

You have incredible learning resources placed before you. The most obvious may appear to be in the life skills and study skills that are nested in the BYU-Pathway curriculum. But if you look deeper, you will see the ability to realize your divine potential, anchor your learning in a higher cause, and draw on the power of the Holy Ghost. God will amplify your efforts to take you to places you never thought possible. I know this is true from my own experience. I see it in the lives of countless BYU-Pathway students. I so testify, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

² BYU-Pathway curriculum draws on extensive literature on student persistence and success. Selected readings that reflect this research include Angela Duckworth’s *Grit* (2018) and Carol S. Dweck’s *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (2006). PathwayConnect curriculum also draws on the more applied research of Tristan Denley currently captured in Complete College America.

³ [Doctrine and Covenants 88:118](#)

⁴ [Moses 1:12](#)

⁵ [Moses 1:13](#)

⁶ See Clark G. Gilbert, “[By Whom We are Led](#),” (BYU-Pathway devotional, Sept. 22, 2020), byupathway.org/speeches

⁷ David A. Bednar, “[Because We Have Them Before Our Eyes](#),” *New Era*, Apr. 2006, 6