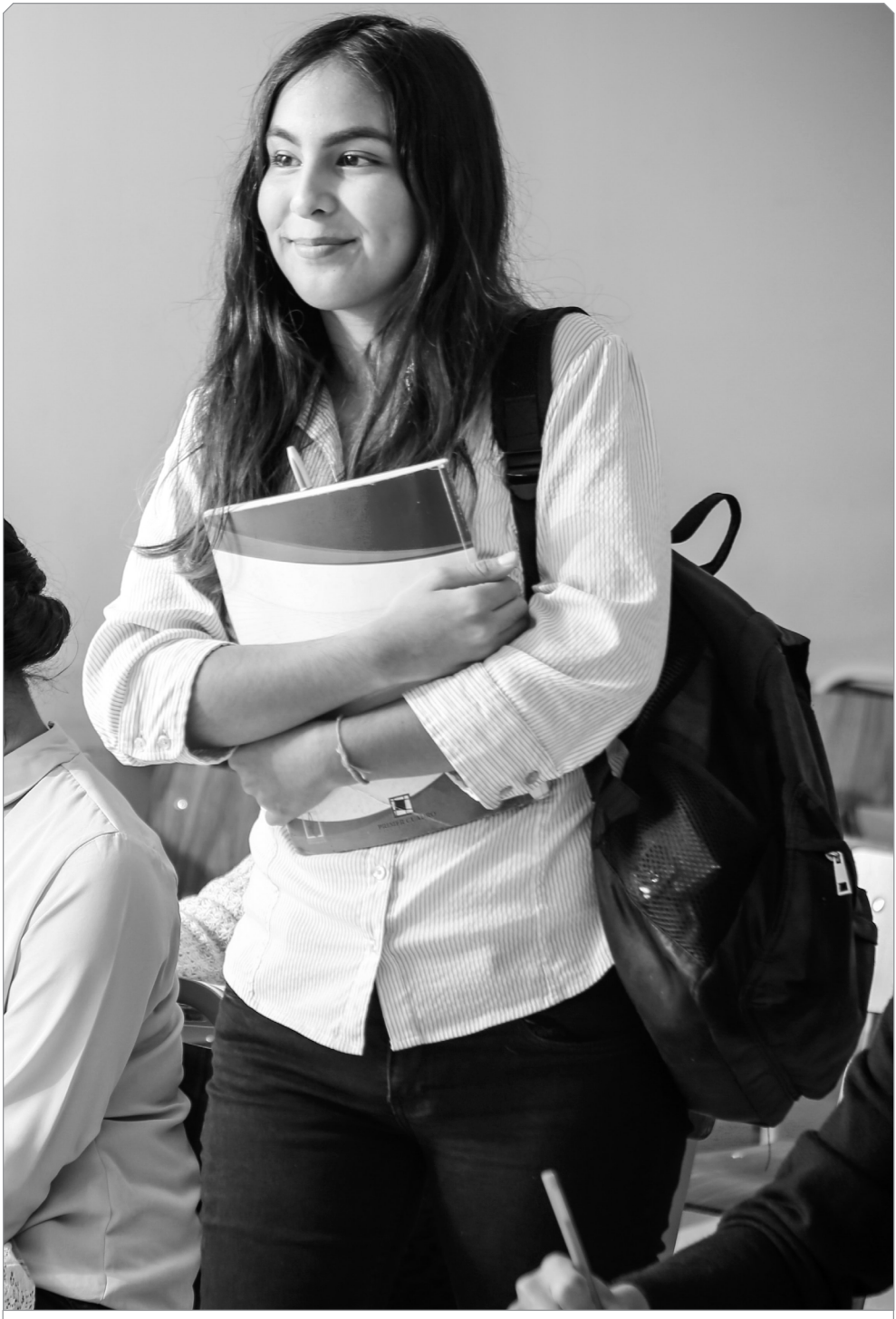

Javier Trueba, Unsplash.com

Elder David Bednar taught that teaching is more than talking and telling; it includes “observing, listening, and discerning” the needs of the students.

Innovating Institute

RYAN J WESSEL

Ryan J Wessel (wesselrj@churchofjesuschrist.org) is a manager in the Seminary and Institute central office.

Seminaries and Institutes (S&I) recently began a process to innovate the institute experience. There was a general concern among the leaders of S&I that while participation in institute seemed to have a meaningful, positive impact on students' lives, the institute experience appealed to too few of the young single adults in the Church. At the time, about half of young adults who participated in the Church enrolled in institute each year. Perhaps institute could be updated to more effectively teach the restored gospel within the context of current technological and demographic trends, and with a greater understanding of students' circumstances and worldview.

To manage the effort, a team was formed composed of individuals with expertise in change management, teaching pedagogy and andragogy, quantitative research methods, online education, communications, and other relevant fields. This group was tasked with conducting research to understand the needs of the latest generation of young adults, develop and test ways to update the institute experience to be more in line with those needs, and recommend changes in all aspects of institute, including curriculum, teaching

methods, physical facilities, hiring practices, branding, delivery platforms, and more.

The intent of this article is to relate the experience and generalized findings of the Innovating Institute team. This article is meant to be a historical account as much as a research report. As such, some references to statistics, specific study results, private data, and internal documents will not be included. It is hoped that readers will gain from this article a clearer understanding of how current religious education students differ from their counterparts of the past and will glean some ideas about how to update their own teaching through reading about the successes and failures of institute field tests.

The Research

To try to understand how institute could better serve the needs of young adults, S&I engaged in multiple rounds of research using professional firms, BYU's AdLab, and the Church's internal research group. These entities engaged in extensive statistical reviews, surveys, in-depth interviews, and design thinking workshops involving thousands of young adults on multiple continents. Information was also gathered from S&I teachers and administrators. While care was taken to gather information from a representative sample of young adults, one focus of these studies was to better understand the specific needs of those young adults not currently attending institute. Many of the concerns and suggested improvements discussed below come from those individuals who, after having participated in institute, decided not to return.

While this research led to many insights, four major areas of potential improvement stood out. In the language used internally by S&I personnel, these areas are conversion, relevance, belonging, and accessibility. Each of these areas is discussed in detail below.

Conversion

Research suggested that students want institute to be a place where they can feel God's love and connect with him regularly. They want an opportunity to strengthen their faith and testimony through regular religious touchpoints and experiences during the week. They want a place where they can reliably connect with God, with religious mentors, and with other students. Institute did well in providing this connecting and converting experience for some students, particularly the segment of the young adult population who regularly participated in institute and most aspects of the Church.[1]

However, many young adults, particularly those who do not regularly participate in institute, did not perceive institute as an important or valuable part of their religious experience. The reasons given for this were varied, but at least one theme emerged. Many young adults, including both those currently attending and those not currently attending, mentioned that their desire to connect with God at institute was inhibited, not enhanced, by a formal academic path with registration, academic semesters, credit, and graduation. In a formal gap analysis, students' perception of the importance of these academic elements of institute was significantly lower than that of teachers and administrators.

One representative interviewee said, "Those who do not attend are looking for ways to interact without the pressure of the traditional classroom. They want to feel encouraged to keep advancing/learning, not fear to fail."[2] While young adults reported that they do want to see growth and progress in their religious education experience, they mentioned a desire for much greater flexibility to choose the nature of that progress, and for that progress to be intrinsically motivated rather than externally required.

Relevance

Young adults generally felt that institute was not sufficiently relevant to their lives. In this context, relevance is measured by the young adults' perception that the institute program sufficiently understands the unique situation of today's young adults to use language, topics, and teaching methods that are relatable to the young adults' lives. Young adults suggested institute could be more relevant to their lives in at least three ways.

First, both current and potential students suggested that institute could be more relevant if the teachers and topics better recognized and adapted to the varied experiences and backgrounds of the students. Many young adults felt that institute content and culture focused on the ideal without sufficiently acknowledging less-than-ideal realities of students' lives. This led to a feeling among many young adults that the program was not intended for students who could not present a near-perfect image (i.e., returned missionary, temple recommend holder, perfect family, and so forth).

One representative interviewee suggested institute try to become a place where "people can be vulnerable . . . [and] share broad and varied perspectives, [where] diversity of thought [is] displayed, accepted, explored."[3] For example, rather than only reviewing the details of the doctrine of eternal marriage in

an institute class, students wanted time dedicated to discussing what that doctrine had to say about nonconforming situations such as divorce, lack of dowry, or homosexuality because these situations were often the relevant reality in students' lives. Merely being reminded of the goal was not perceived as relevant to those who had real, immediate challenges on the path toward that goal.

Second, students suggested that their institute experience would be more relevant if it were a place where they could practice in reality, not just in theory, how to apply the teachings of the gospel in their lives. They suggested that the institute offer experiences in addition to classes, such as studying King Benjamin's teaching about serving others while actually serving in the community. They also suggested that institute teach life skills paired with theological concepts, such as pairing a study of forgiveness with techniques from a professional counselor on how to rebuild trust in a relationship. Many suggested that institute become a place of practice as much as it is a place of discussion.

Third, young adults suggested institute would be more relevant if it were perceived as a safe place to ask sensitive questions and candidly discuss doctrinal, historical, and social issues. One interviewee stated, "[We] want a safe haven where difficult and sensitive topics can be discussed along with doctrine, a judgment-free zone, a place that feels like home, [where we can] find peace and refuge."[4]

Many students felt they did not have any Church-sponsored place where they could honestly express and explore doubts and concerns in a safe, open, and faithful environment. The reaction of teachers and of other students to instances where concerns were shared was often described as uncaring, dogmatic, or dismissive, even when those reactions were intended as expressions of simple faith. The research seemed to indicate that students were not looking for a place to argue about doctrine, nor were they looking to find a community of fellow disbelievers. They were, however, looking for a place where honest questions and doubts could be expressed, understood, and placed in proper context.

Belonging

Many students, particularly those not currently attending institute, reported that institute was not a place where they felt they belonged, nor was it a place where they felt comfortable inviting friends of all backgrounds. One

interviewee said, "Some feel out of place [in institute], segregated, don't fit in [with] the 'singles scene,' cliques, social status, expectation to be perfect, pressure to know more, intimidated."[5] Students reported that they would be more likely to participate if institute were perceived as a positive environment where everyone felt welcome regardless of inward faith or outward appearance.

Some factors that students mentioned as contributing to the feeling that institute is intended only for the institutional member were homogenous teacher characteristics, formal classroom setup, course titles and content, the look and attitude of students regularly at the institute, building architecture and furnishings, and many others. Multiple interviewees brought up the idea that if you are not an "extra-miler" Saint, you do not belong. Surprisingly, the perception of nonbelonging existed even among many of those who fully participated in other aspects of the Church.

Additionally, students reported a general desire to belong to a global community supporting benevolent causes. Local institute programs were perceived as stand-alone entities and not part of a global community, and institute was not seen as a vehicle to support the types of benevolent causes that were important to the young adult community.

Accessibility

Research indicated that institute offerings could be more accessible to students. In this context, accessibility refers to the time and location of classes, the use or nonuse of technology to deliver institute experiences remotely, enrollment procedures, or any other detail related to connecting the student to the institute content.

Students reported that scheduling norms seemed to be built around the convenience of the staff more than the convenience of the students. Statistical studies of enrollment trends revealed that for at least the past ten years, more students attended evening institute courses than daytime courses. However, there was some indication that daytime classes were perceived by faculty as the "real" institute classes, whereas night classes were "extra." Enrollment data showed that night classes, especially in locations with large employed faculties, were most often taught by volunteers or using less-than-ideal student-to-teacher ratios. Students expressed a desire for more late afternoon classes, more Saturday classes, and better weekday evening classes.

Similarly, students in some rural areas reported that class locations were not convenient. Groups of students often had to travel long distances to participate. These students saw very little need for the institute class to be held at the institute building, and suggested that if the teacher came to them, they could hold the class in any number of convenient locations.

Research also indicated that institute was perceived as being slow to adopt online content delivery methods. As of the year 2019, there were no widely available online learning options that allowed institute students to connect to institute offerings asynchronously or across geography. Social media–based content was also virtually nonexistent. Where online content did exist, it was on outdated platforms and was poorly executed. One interviewee said simply, "Develop smart-phone-based learning resources."[6] Another said, "[Young adults] want better access to content and discussions through online resources. Use social media and messaging for recruiting and more touchpoints during the week."[7]

Field Tests

In response to these research findings, S&I personnel identified dozens of potential changes that could be tested in the field to try to respond to students' stated needs. This section of the article will describe some of these field tests and a few lessons that were learned.

Please note that some of these field tests happened in one location with only one teacher and a small group of students. Research about the outcomes of the field tests was formative and not summative. Because of the small sample sizes, non-representative samples, reviewer biases, and a host of other potential research-related problems, the results of these field tests should not be considered generalizable, statistically significant, or externally valid. These field tests are not vindications of the global success or failure of specific ideas. However, the following descriptions may be useful to religious educators in considering how to best interact with their students in S&I classes, university religion courses, Sunday meetings, and other contexts.

Less Formal Physical Environment

Student interviews suggested that the physical environment in which classes were taught was perceived as too formal. Students would perhaps feel a greater sense of belonging and class discussions would be more relevant if students could more often see and interact with each other rather than face a teacher

who was the center of focus and discussions. So a few classrooms at various institute buildings were remodeled to introduce a less formal feel. Seating in front-facing rows was replaced with group seating, flexible furniture on casters, and plush relaxed chairs. The projector was replaced with a television on a rolling cart to allow for the lights to stay on during presentations and to discourage the overuse of PowerPoint by the teacher. In some cases, wall carpet, sisal, and aged chair rails were removed and replaced with more modern wall coverings. In less intrusive field tests, existing nonclassroom furniture such as round tables from the gym and soft seating from the foyer were brought into the classroom. To complete the look of a less formal environment, a small group of institute teachers was invited to wear polo shirts for a semester instead of formal white shirts, ties, and suit coats.

In one test location where a large number of students experienced the less formal classrooms, a survey revealed that more than eight in ten students preferred the less formal environment. Six in ten reported that they were more likely to invite friends to a class held in the less formal environment than to a class held in the traditional environment. Three-quarters suggested that all institute classrooms should be updated to the less formal feel. While a strong majority liked the less formal feel, there was a minority group of students who preferred the more traditional classroom setup.

One interesting lesson learned was that the less formal physical environment nudged teachers and students to create a more student-centered classroom experience. Without specific instruction to change teaching methodology or to adapt curriculum, there was naturally much less lecture by the teacher and much more student-to-student interaction in the less formal environment. Case studies seemed to replace PowerPoint presentations. Exploration of relevance seemed to replace presentation of content.

Courtesy Ryan J Wessel

Institute classrooms that have been remodeled to create a less formal environment.

Classroom discussions seemed to be scattered among independent groups of students rather than controlled by the teacher. This led to more candor and authenticity, presumably because the teacher was not monitoring comments.

The less-formal attire of the teacher seemed to have only a small effect on the perception of students regarding the formality of the classroom. Although students were generally positive toward less formal attire, the dress code of the teacher was not the main driver of positive responses about the environment. The attire did, however, seem to have a significant messaging effect for the teachers, helping them feel authorized to create a classroom experience that was different from what they were used to.

New Course Content

In limited locations and for a specific period, some teachers were given latitude to develop their own curriculum to respond to student needs and interests. Teachers created and tested dozens of new courses to try to present content that was more relevant and accessible, and helped create feelings of conversion and belonging. The most promising of these courses seemed to be the ones that either (1) provided opportunities for students to participate beyond the traditional lesson or (2) focused candidly on issues that related to students' lives.

As an example of providing opportunities for student participation beyond the traditional lesson, one teacher arranged for institute students to mentor seminary students. The institute students would gather one day each week to study the seminary course materials and principles of mentoring and leadership. They would then visit a seminary class to mentor a small group of seminary students in applying the seminary content to their lives. Both seminary and institute students seemed to enjoy this near-peer mentoring interaction, as evidenced by a drastically reduced absence rate. Further, the immediate presence of a young adult rather than a teacher and a small group rather than a large one seemed to help more seminary students feel comfortable enough to express themselves. The institute students reported feeling genuinely needed and fulfilled. In a way, this innovation was as much about changing the seminary experience as it was about the institute experience.

Another institute began offering a course specifically designed for students of different faiths who enrolled in institute. A limited number of

Church members also enrolled. Across one school year, over 120 members of other faiths enrolled in a course designed to be an introduction to restored Christianity. The participants' paraphrased opinions of the course include the following: the class helped me feel close to God; I liked that is was not designed to be a proselyting activity; and I came because of the free parking, but stayed because of the class content. Further, students gained enough of a foundation in Church doctrine, culture, and language to feel more comfortable in subsequent institute classes. Church members in the course liked the opportunity to learn about the faith practices of other believers and how it reminded them of their full-time missions.

To candidly address issues related to students' lives, one institute created a course focused on the Church Newsroom. Class time was dedicated to addressing social and historical issues through the content of Newsroom .ChurchofJesusChrist.org. On weeks where a Church-related topic was in the news, students discussed what society, scriptures, prophetic statements, and the newsroom article had to say about that topic. On weeks where the Church was not in the news, older newsroom subjects such as the name of the Church, Joseph Smith's seer stone, or the Church's relationship with the Black community were discussed. Students reported that this class candidly addressed difficult, relevant questions in a safe environment, and that it helped them feel more comfortable talking about current Church-related issues with their peers. Teachers appreciated that basing the course on the newsroom helped the course to be founded in the words of prophets and not to devolve into an argument of opinions.

Course Titles and Pacing

During research interviews where both young adults and institute employees were present, it became evident that there was a disconnect between what students wanted from courses and what institute teachers thought they were provided in terms of course content. For example, one potential student mentioned his interest in class content that addressed Church history questions. An institute teacher in the room immediately pointed out that he regularly addresses Church history questions in the Foundations of the Restoration course. However, the potential student did not realize that a course called Foundations of the Restoration could help him address Church history concerns, nor was there a perception that the Church history concerns of the

student, rather than a preplanned set of institutional talking points, were a clear driver of the content of the class.

To try to address these concerns, additional research and testing was done to understand how course titles and pacing could be updated to better communicate how each course can meet specific needs. A group of teachers was given latitude to change the titles and pacing of standard courses to relate the purpose of the course to students' needs more clearly. For example, a version of Jesus Christ and the Everlasting Gospel was adapted to the needs of medical school students and renamed Jesus, the Perfect Caregiver. Results of this and related field tests are still pending.

Additionally, students were given survey questions asking them to choose which course titles seemed most appealing. While the rank order of specific alternative titles varied from survey to survey, it did seem that titles that highlight personal application and individual benefit are preferred over titles that highlight the doctrinal content of the course. For example, a hypothetical course called Finding Joy in Family Life was chosen much more often than Doctrines from The Family Proclamation.

To discover how the pacing of curricular content could be crafted to better meet student needs without abandoning core concepts, a few institute teachers were invited to let students help build the course curriculum. On the first day of class, students selected which topics were of most interest and relevance to their lives from a list of potential lesson titles. The class then proceeded through the curriculum following the students' desired emphasis on topics. Although it was a small change, allowing students to co-create the curriculum increased in-class participation and decreased the absence rate. Of all the field tests related to institute course content, allowing the students to determine content and pacing had the most impact on students' positive opinions of the course.

Workshops

The institute of religion program was originally created to be a supplement to a collegiate academic experience. Based on that history, the cadence of institute classes almost always follows the standard academic model of fifteen-week semesters. However, as the institute program has grown to include stake-based institutes and reached many nations, most institute students are no longer co-participating in institute and academia. Many potential students indicated that the formal academic model was

a deterrent to participation because a fifteen-week course was too big of a commitment and would not immediately address questions or concern. Perhaps decoupling the institute calendar from the academic semester in some locations could increase the accessibility and relevance of institute course content.

Institute workshops were created and tested to try to increase accessibility and relevance in response to students who did not feel that they had time to commit to a semester-long course. Workshops were designed as "mini-courses" that allowed institute programs to address students' interests and needs more directly. In one field test, an institute director discovered through surveys that many of his potential students needed help managing stress and anxiety. They also wanted to pair life skills with doctrinal content in a more applicable way. Because many of the potential students were not tied to the cadence of academic semesters, the institute director worked with the local Welfare and Self-Reliance group to create a six-week workshop, beginning midsemester, in which students learned and practiced what the scriptures and mental health professionals have to say about managing stress and anxiety. A survey of the first group of workshop participants indicated that students appreciated the practical nature of the course and the lessened time commitment required.

Additional workshops, which present relevant content in a less-than-a-semester size with topics chosen to response to students needs and interests, are currently beginning in other locations.

Virtual and Hybrid Classes

To increase accessibility, efforts were made to move the institute experience online by offering virtual and hybrid classes. In this context, virtual classes are defined as classes entirely online, where much of the content is delivered asynchronously and students meet weekly in a live video conference to discuss what they learned. Virtual classes can be composed of students in diverse geographic locations. Hybrid classes are here defined as classes with regular face-to-face meetings at brick-and-mortar institutes but much of the content is delivered asynchronously online. Students in hybrid classes are typically in one geographic location.

Virtual class field tests revealed that a purely online environment that did not require going to an institute building appealed to many nontraditional institute students such as young mothers, individuals not currently

participating in the Church, and young adult men who never served a mission. For reasons not fully understood, the percentage of students who had never attended any Church Educational System offering (seminary, institute, BYU) was significantly higher in virtual classes than in traditional institute classes. This may be related to the requirement that Pathway students attend institute courses.

It also became clear through virtual class field tests that curricular activities and teaching methods that are effective in face-to-face settings need to be adapted to work in virtual settings, perhaps even to the point of hiring and training teachers on separate tracks for online and face-to-face delivery.

Virtual classes seemed to create a global institute community. Of the approximately eighteen hundred students in the first virtual class field tests, about 12 percent crossed significant geographic boundaries to take a class that originated from another location. European students took classes based in Australia. Students in Kansas took classes based in Utah. This is perhaps not surprising; in a virtual world, geographic boundaries are less of a factor. In one field test in Spain, the students expressed that they appreciated the opportunity to connect with more young adults from other locations through virtual classes.

Hybrid classes combine asynchronous online content with face-to-face experiences at a brick-and-mortar institute building. At the time of writing, certain teachers had been invited to experiment with delivering content this way, but the global pandemic of 2020 delayed implementation of the plan. No results from these field tests are currently available.

Digital Experiences

In addition to virtual and hybrid classes, short, digital experiences were tested as a way to make institute content more accessible. Digital experiences are here defined as stand-alone digital content that can be consumed whenever and however the student chooses without necessarily enrolling in a class. This includes social media content, curriculum supplements, online open courses, and others.

S&I personnel experimented with many modes of delivering digital experiences through social media. From numerous failures, a few lessons became clear. Some of these lessons, which in hindsight are glaringly simple, include:

- If the organization is tied by policy to a small set of approved social media platforms, it is very difficult for the organization to stay relevant online because the socially relevant platform changes very quickly.
- Social media channels that are personally branded are better received than those that are institutionally branded. For example, content @brother_wessel reaches a larger audience and receives more reactions than similar content @mesa_institute.
- Institute faculty preferences and institute curriculum content are drastically more text-heavy than is appropriate for social media posting. Posting the text of a favorite scripture or quote is less effective than a well-designed meme.

While many locally created social media accounts were a dud, one institute teacher seemed to find the right combination of factors to make @instantinstitute on Instagram a success. Every day at noon he would interview a student about a scriptural concept on IGTV. The process was live, and participants could react, make comments, and ask questions in real time. More than sixty-five hundred individuals followed the page in the first four months, and the videos on the page had about one thousand daily views. A survey of @instantinstitute followers revealed that almost all were young adults and 40 percent of them had never participated in any CES offering.

Another set of institute teachers had success using closed-group messaging apps (GroupMe, Marco Polo, Band, and others) to continue the in-class conversation outside of class. These out-of-class discussions were not required and were open to anyone interested. Across multiple field tests, it became clear that the platform used was not important, but more students participated when the students decided which platform to use. About half of the enrolled students loved the opportunity to continue the conversation online and about half did not want to participate. Also, about 15 percent of the people who participated in the online conversations were not enrolled in the associated class.

Limited field tests were done to explore how local teachers could use podcasts and locally created videos to supplement the classroom experience and reach those not enrolled. A few lessons learned include:

- Digital content is best consumed in small segments. Digital content that takes less than a few minutes to consume will garner more views than longer content. Content that is longer than about fifteen minutes is more likely to be consumed when the student can do so passively (i.e., listening to a podcast while riding a bus).
- Navigating the intricacies of copywrite law and internal policy is difficult.
- Many students who are unwilling to formally register for an institute class are willing to anonymously participate in digitally offered institute content.

Conclusion

With this recent push toward innovation, S&I is not seeking to change its core purpose of teaching the restored gospel through the scriptures and words of the prophets. However, S&I is seeking to fulfill that core purpose in a more effective way given current social, technological, and demographic realities. The prophet Nephi taught that the Lord "speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding" (2 Nephi 31:3). Perhaps the language S&I uses with its students can be updated to better speak to them in their language, unto their understanding. Elder David A. Bednar taught that teaching is more than talking and telling; it includes "observing, listening, and discerning"[8] the needs of the students. At an organizational level, efforts to innovate the institute experience are designed to try to follow this prophetic direction.

The outcomes of the efforts to update the institute experience are not yet known. While great strides have been made in listening to our current and potential students, there is much left to do. The field tests described above mainly involved students who were already attending. How to communicate to nonattenders that institute is striving to be more converting, relevant, open, and accessible is still an open question. Further, discussion about what these results imply for the seminary program are beginning. The effort is ongoing.

Notes

1. S&I enrollment and completion data shows that about 7 percent of young adult Church members perceived institute of high enough value to enroll and complete a course

in 2019. In campus settings with large institute programs, the enrollment and completion percentages were about three times higher.

2. Internal S&I documents. Please contact the author to discuss the availability of these sources.
3. Internal S&I documents.
4. Internal S&I documents.
5. Internal S&I documents.
6. Internal S&I documents.
7. Internal S&I documents.
8. David A. Bednar, "Becoming a *Preach My Gospel* Missionary" (devotional address given at the Provo Missionary Training Center on 24 June 2011), https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2013/10/missionary-preparation/becoming-a-preach-my-gospel-missionary?lang=eng.