

# Teaching Christian Integration in Psychology and Counseling: Current Status and Future Directions

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In this article, we review the current status of theory and research on teaching Christian integration in psychology and counseling. Changes in student characteristics, emerging technologies, and paradigm shifts in the disciplines themselves predict unique opportunities and challenges for the future. We reflect upon directions integration learning theory and pedagogy should take in light of these considerations.

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For over 40 years, evangelical Christian psychology and counseling programs have focused on how to integrate faith and psychology. Numerous models describe the relationship between Christianity and psychology (see examples in Entwistle, 2010). Likewise, sophisticated treatment models have emerged (e.g., Coe & Hall, 2010). This wealth of knowledge stands in contrast to the dearth of models focused on how students actually *learn* integration. Accordingly, we examine the current status and future directions of teaching integration. We consider the present theories, research, opportunities, and challenges involved. Finally, we ponder the future directions integration pedagogy should take.

## Current Theories

Randall Sorenson proposed the lone well-articulated theory of how students learn integration

(Sorenson, Derflinger, Bufford, & McMinn, 2004). He developed his ideas from Bowlby's attachment theory (e.g., Bowlby, 1988). Briefly, attachment theory focuses on how the quality of a person's relational bonds, beginning in infancy, impacts intimacy, relational satisfaction, and emotional health throughout life. For growing infants, the parent's task is to become a *secure base* from which to explore the environment and a *safe haven* for comfort and soothing. People continue to need significant attachment bonds throughout life in order to adapt, grow, and maintain psychological health. Many attachment figures are important across the life span (e.g., parents, siblings, peers, spouses).

In essence, Sorenson proposed that attachment principles relate not only to emotional health, but also to student learning of integration theory and applied skills. He hypothesized that the quality of student attachment with professors serves as the primary mediating pathway that permits meaningful integration learning to occur (Sorenson, Derflinger, Bufford, & McMinn, 2004). If professors want their conceptual integration models to "stick", they must have a relationship with students. Students need to sense the professor's on-going personal relationship with God. While the instructor's Christian worldview certainly impacts the quality of course content, Sorenson proposed that only limited integration learning will take place without attachment.

Psychology and counseling programs contain enormous potential for attachment to occur. Faculty serve as instructors, mentors, clinical supervisors, and chairpersons for students' dissertations. Faculty holistically

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model integration on a personal as well as professional level. In positive relationships, students seek out professors for prayer, support, and to address questions outside of psychology. When effective, faculty-student relationships promote a "secure base" for students in which they can "explore the integration environment," asking hard questions and thoughtfully examining the various models proposed. If students have doubts or struggles, faculty can serve as a "safe haven" for support and encouragement. Sorenson posited that students need at least one meaningful attachment to a professor.

### Current Research

A small literature exists on the teaching of integration in psychology and counseling. Only study findings specifically focused on the teaching of integration will be reported here.

### Research on Faculty

Sorenson conducted a series of four studies in graduate schools of psychology. The first (1994) confirmed the importance of attachment relationships in the integration process, finding that students' therapists had a greater influence than professors. A second study (1997) focusing more explicitly on the role of faculty found that "evidence of a professor's ongoing process in a personal relationship with God is the single most important dimension that accounts for what students found helpful for their own integration of clinical psychology and faith" (p. 541). Two other studies replicated this key finding with different graduate clinical psychology populations (Sorenson et al., 2004; Staton, Sorenson, & Vande Kemp, 1998).

The professor's personality characteristics mattered as well. Sorenson's research repeatedly found two factors as being beneficial. Each took the form of a continuum. The first involved attachment to instructors who served as a "bulwark of the faith" (keeping the traditions of the faith, being people of integrity and pious) on one end and those who exemplified the role of "fellow sojourner" (questioning precepts, struggling with experiences, changing perspectives across time) on the other. A second attachment factor related to perceiving the professor as "emotionally transparent". Some students attached to an emotionally transparent and interpersonally open faculty member. In contrast, other students found the role boundary between faculty and student important for attachment to take place.

Sites, Garzon, Milacci, and Boothe (2009) further explored the personal characteristics of faculty in a phenomenological study of eight professors identified by students as exemplars in teaching integratively. Ma-

zor themes emphasized the inseparability of professors' faith from practice, and the outworking of their faith into their pedagogy and their relationships. Reflecting Sorenson's emphasis on the spiritual life of the faculty, this study highlights the connection between each professor's ontological foundation for integration, and how it is displayed, both in course content and in relationships with students. In a similar investigation at another institution, Matthias (2008) conducted a qualitative study of seven exemplary faculty members. The results echoed Sites et al.'s findings and also found humility to be an important professorial trait.

### Research on Institutional Environment

Ripley, Garzon, Hall, Mangis, and Murphy (2009) extended Sorenson's research in two ways. First, they found evidence for Sorenson's attachment model for graduate students in academic disciplines other than psychology. Further, they found that the institutional environment played an important additional role in facilitating integration. Environmental factors such as university-based and classroom spiritual formation and religious practices were significant in predicting the importance of integration to students.

In a qualitative component of the same study, Hall, Ripley, Garzon, and Mangis (2009) found that factors having to do with the professors (self-revealing, caring, welcoming, dedicated, and open-minded), with the curriculum (intentionality, balance between general and special revelation, presence of diverse opinions on integration, pervasiveness of integration), and with the institutional climate (a context of "no barriers" between Christianity and academics, corporate expressions of Christianity, sense of community) were helpful in learning integration. In addition to confirming the personal characteristics of professors necessary for attachment relationships to occur, these findings highlight the creation of a learning climate that similarly welcomes relational connections and the open and pervasive expression of lived experiences of faith.

### Research on Pedagogy

At the broadest curricular level, Koch and Doughty (1998) demonstrated in a mixed-methods study that integration can be taught across the psychology curriculum through four levels of integration. These include personal integration, discussion of psychological and Christian themes, reading sources that specifically relate Christianity and psychology, and experiencing content with a specific focus on integrating Christian and psychological themes.

Stevenson and Young (1995) examined the charac-

teristics of integration-specific courses at Christian institutions of higher education. They found that most universities had one or more courses dedicated to integration; however, these courses widely varied in content. The authors concluded by wondering if “the lack of guidelines, boundaries, and a clear set of core concepts have discouraged the newcomer and the veteran” (p. 258).

At the most specific curricular level, Burton and Nwosu (2005) and Lawrence, Burton, and Nwosu (2005) advocated for a pedagogical approach that fosters “the design and implementation of specific teaching and learning activities to facilitate student integration of faith and learning” (Burton & Nwosu, p. 107). Using a mixed-methods approach, they found that students placed a greater emphasis on teaching and learning processes than on any other category of response, preferring active involvement and interaction with peers as key elements. These findings are consistent with an attachment perspective, as active teaching and learning strategies provide greater opportunities than traditional lectures for faculty-student connections and for active connections to lived experiences. The presence of an accepting classroom environment, and, as Sorenson would predict, the professor’s “caring attitude” and “exemplary life” were also important.

### Research Conclusions

These studies indicate that the Christian university environment as a whole can either promote or impede the teaching of integration. The broader climate must facilitate a sense of openness, safety, and valuing of the integrative process. The entire curriculum (including traditional courses as well as integration-specific courses), pedagogical strategies, and the person of the professor all play critical roles in integration teaching and learning.

### Opportunities and Challenges

Teaching integration has changed, in part because the world has changed. First, we consider how alterations in the student population impact integration’s future. Next, we reflect on transformations in the academic world.

### Different Student Characteristics

The student population has changed in faith characteristics, demographics, and worldview. Barna surveys (e.g., 2005) suggest that Christians as a whole are much less theologically and doctrinally sound than in previous generations. Public schools and the media have promoted a postmodern worldview. Taken together,

the central Christian truths may strike today’s students as narrow-minded. Apologetics and basic theology therefore may need to be incorporated more into integration curriculum, and students may benefit from the attachment-based modeling of professors who live out orthodox faith in a postmodern environment.

Increasing numbers of students come from divorced, single-parent, or blended family households. More students are older and changing careers. The integration task thus may need to expand to include more emotional support, something quite consistent with Sorenson’s ideas.

### Academic Transformations

The fields of psychology and counseling have experienced a technological revolution while simultaneously undergoing a number of paradigm shifts. Do such changes necessitate new teaching practices?

**Technology.** Technology opens a new world for teaching integration. Internet resources like *YouTube*, *Second Life* (Academic version only), and high quality mental health websites enhance opportunities for pedagogical creativity. We can even “*Skype*” prominent integration guest speakers into our classes. Without exploring new technologies in our teaching, students so used to these resources may see our methods as antiquated. Indeed, hybrid integration programs that combine online and residential learning formats are growing rapidly.

Likewise, students live in the new relational world of *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and other social networking sites. These resources present additional potential avenues for developing the attachment promoted by Sorenson’s theory. Ethical aspects, of course, must carefully be considered.

**Paradigm shifts.** Important changes have occurred in psychology. Without thorough examination of these alterations, students may either conform to or reject disciplinary perspectives without true integrative reflection. Three current emphases include the reexamination of psychological research methods, advances in neuroscience, and the increasing popularity of evolutionary psychology.

Psychology and counseling have changed epistemologically. A diversity of approaches and research methodologies have replaced the logical positivism inherited from the natural sciences. Contemporary critiques, often influenced by postmodernism, have highlighted how worldview assumptions and cultural values impact research methodologies. From a

Christian perspective, several authors (e.g., Hall, 2004) have called for methodologies more consistent with Christian assumptions about the nature of personhood. The implications for the teaching of integration in psychology and counseling are clear: we must become conversant with issues of philosophy of science to evaluate the role of research methodologies in integration.

An explosion of knowledge about how the brain and neurological systems contribute to psychological functioning has also occurred. This has revived interest in the mind-body problem. Thus, Christian scholars are reexamining the monism vs. dualism debate, with integrationists proposing a range of models along the monist-dualist spectrum (e.g., Murphy, 2006).

Evolutionary psychology represents another paradigm shift. This naturalistic anthropology stands in stark contrast with Christian accounts of personhood. In order to prepare students to effectively function in the larger secular field, therefore, our integrative teaching must address this contemporary trend in a sophisticated manner. Clearly, both neuroscience and evolutionary psychology provide fertile ground for exploring worldview issues such as ontology, anthropology, and epistemology.

In another shift, psychology and counseling now acknowledge the importance of spirituality as a dimension of culturally sensitive treatment. In part as a response, integration programs have incorporated more training in Christian spiritual formation as a component of graduate education. This aspect is often intensely experiential, designed to deepen students' relationship with God while simultaneously informing them of potential practices with clients. The courses often take place in retreats or weekend classes. Elements commonly include experience with spiritual disciplines such as meditation on Scripture, solitude, silence, worship, contemplative prayer, Bible study, and corporate celebration combined with readings from classic and contemporary spiritual formation authors. This emphasis brings to the table the possibility of working with students' attachment to God.

This promising addition to traditional integration curriculum also contains some challenges. We noted previously the postmodern, doctrinally limited mindset of many young students. Integration programs therefore are tasked with keeping the above spiritual formation activities firmly planted in the context of sound evangelical Christian theology and doctrine. Without such clear moorings, these classes/retreats could easily encourage individualistic, new age, or east-

ern mystical faith instead of a deepened relationship with Jesus Christ.

### Future Directions

Amidst the opportunities and challenges, several key directions will impact teaching integration in the future. These include advancing the development of integration learning theory, increasing applied integration resources in subject-specific areas, considering integration in secular university settings, and exploring how to use the latest technologies to foster attachment-based integration learning in online and hybrid teaching environments.

Sorenson's theory focuses on the impact of the interpersonal relationship between the professor and student in integration learning; however, the role of spiritual formation experiences while attending integration schools is just starting to be considered (e.g., Coe & Hall, 2010). Similarly, the role of cultural diversity in developing the attachments essential in integration learning has yet to be examined. More work is needed in these important areas.

A continued need exists to move beyond model-building to detailed integration focus in specific psychological subject matter areas as well as to consider how integration is being taught between Christian professors and Christian students in secular university environments. The resources on teaching integration in many subject areas and in the secular setting are nonexistent, limited, or quite dated.

Similarly, online and hybrid programs have expanded the integration pedagogy domain, but resources for teaching integration in these environments are virtually nonexistent. One key question is this: how does one foster the attachment between professors and students so critical for genuine integration learning to take place in the online and hybrid environments? Cultivating mentor relationships at a distance appears challenging. Research must explore this area.

Indeed, the breadth of topics covered in this article attests to the fertile areas for research in the subject of teaching integration. It is our hope that we have spurred instructors and researchers alike in the quest for further knowledge in integration pedagogy and learning. Our students can only benefit from these endeavors.

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