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God's MBAs: Why Mormon Missions Produce Leaders

Many of the men who trained to be Mormon missionaries have gone on to become among the most distinguished persons in American business and civic life

By [Caroline Winter](#)

(Corrects title for Eric Varvel in the third paragraph.)

Before setting out in orderly pairs to spread their gospel door-to-door, nearly all U.S. Mormon missionaries pass through the Provo Missionary Training Center. Inside the sprawling brown-brick complex, thousands of 19- and 20-year-old men in oversized black suits work alongside women in below-the-knee skirts and brightly colored tops. All of them wear name tags.

For one to three months (depending on the language challenge ahead), their days begin at 6:30 a.m. and end at 10:30 p.m., and include 10 hours of class and study time. On their one day off per week, missionaries-to-be do laundry, write home, and stock up on supplies at the training center store where pre-knotted ties (\$15-\$20) and key-chain rings with screw-top vials for carrying consecrated oils (\$3.50) hang beside highlighters, alarm clocks, and hymnbooks translated into roughly 50 foreign languages. The grounds are under tight security, and no one leaves without permission. This is the last stop for roughly 20,000 young Mormons each year before they're driven 45 miles north to Salt Lake City International Airport and whisked off to one of more than 150 countries to make converts.

The Provo Missionary Training Center (MTC) and its curriculum are designed to render all trainees equal servants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), yet many of the men who prepared for their missions here, or at the center's earlier incarnations, have gone on to become among the most distinguished and recognizable faces in American business and civic life. There's Mitt Romney (mission: France), who as of 2007 had amassed an estimated \$190 million to \$250 million as head of Bain Capital, rescued the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics from a corruption scandal, spent four years as the governor of Massachusetts, and announced his second run for President on June 2. His potential rival for the Republican nomination is Jon Huntsman Jr. (Taiwan), a former Utah governor who negotiated dozens of free-trade agreements as a U.S. trade representative and served as ambassador to China from 2009-2011. The list also includes JetBlue ([JBLU](#)) founder David Neeleman (Brazil), Chief Executive Officer of the global Investment Bank of Credit Suisse Eric Varvel (who confirmed training at the Provo MTC but would provide no more information), self-help mogul Stephen Covey (England), author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Kim Clark (Germany), former dean of Harvard Business School, and Gary Crittenden (Germany), who's served as CFO for Citigroup ([C](#)), American Express ([AXP](#)), and Sears Roebuck.

Gary Cornia, dean of Mormon-run Brigham Young University's Marriott School of Management, is often asked what makes Mormons so successful. "I'm not going to say we beat everybody out, but we do have a reputation," says Cornia. "And one of the defining opportunities for young men and young women is the mission experience." Reflecting on his own mission to the mid-Atlantic states, Cornia adds, "When I left, the son of a relatively poor mother and a father who died when I was young, I frankly didn't know if I could do anything. I came back with the confidence that I can accomplish most hard things. I may not have had that otherwise."

The Mormon Church is 181 years old, and its adherents compose less than 2 percent of the U.S. population, according to a 2009 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS). Yet Latter-Day Saints hold, or have held, a seemingly

disproportionate number of top jobs at such major corporations as Marriott International ([MAR](#)), American Express, American Motors, Dell Computers ([DELL](#)), Lufthansa, Fisher-Price ([MAT](#)), Life Re, Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, Madison Square Garden, La Quinta Properties, PricewaterhouseCooper, and Stanley Black & Decker ([SWK](#)). The head of human resources at Citigroup is Mormon, and in 2010 Goldman Sachs ([GS](#)) hired 31 grads from BYU, the same number it hired from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School.

There's a risk of stereotyping in drawing conclusions about any religion based on a sampling of its exceptional adherents, but church leaders and Mormon businessmen embrace the idea that there's a relationship between the missionary experience and success in business. "The mission is like a crucible experience [and] a lot of people come out with the capacity to lead," says Clark, who left HBS in 2005 to preside over BYU-Idaho at the request of the LDS Church's then president, Gordon Hinckley, regarded by Mormons as a living prophet; as Clark tells people, "It was like getting a phone call from Moses."

Almost all of the Mormon businessmen contacted for this story—the teachings of the church encourage women to stay home—see a connection between their faith and their work. (Romney and Huntsman did not respond to interview requests.)

So far the church has sent over 1 million missionaries into the world. All young Mormon men, referred to as "elders," are asked to serve a mission if they are in good standing. Young women, called "sisters," serve voluntarily and make up about 20 percent of the missionary force. Roughly 50 percent of U.S. Mormon missionaries go abroad to countries as disparate as Albania, Ghana, Micronesia, and France, with each individual's placement a matter of "divine inspiration," according to the Provo MTC's director, Richard I. Heaton. Young Mormons submit their medical records and basic CVs to the "Twelve Apostles," who in stature rank just below the church's president. The group then prays to find out where each individual is needed.

Once on site, missionaries pay a \$400 share of their room and board and are required to live as the locals do. "The wonderful thing is that you don't experience Korea from the 25th floor of the Hyatt," says Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen, a Rhodes scholar and board member at India's Tata Consultancy Services ([TCS](#)), who did his mission in Korea from 1971 to 1973. "They don't have air conditioning, you don't have air conditioning; they don't have plumbing, you don't have plumbing."

Each elder or sister spends every moment of every day in tandem with another, sleeping and rising at the same time in a shared room. That companion isn't always American and doesn't necessarily speak English. For the next two years, these "companionships" proselytize for 10 hours a day, six days a week, knocking on doors and offering *The Book of Mormon* to strangers, often in languages the missionaries barely know how to speak. They must persuade people to listen and learn to persevere in the face of near-constant rejection. "I don't think there's any more demanding profession than being a Mormon missionary," says Christensen.

Over the course of a mission, each individual rotates through two or three companions, an experience that forces the development of interpersonal skills, according to Joseph Ogden, assistant dean at BYU's Marriott School. One person is always assigned a senior role, usually on the strength of time served. Sometimes seniority is assigned by church officials' assessment of leadership abilities. Ogden remembers being given senior status over a 26-year-old ex-Green Beret while on his mission to Australia. "I was this lanky teenager ... and you could tell he really wanted to be in charge," says Ogden. "That was a tough one."

Missionaries aren't allowed access to news and are only permitted two phone calls home each year, on Mother's Day and Christmas. Guidelines are laid out in a pocket-sized handbook that Provo MTC President Gordon D. Brown says helps them to focus, stay safe, and integrate faster. The book has instructions on a wide range of activities: Full-court basketball games, for example, are banned, while half-court is permissible. Returned missionaries say that simply abiding by all the rules is enough to impart a sense of accomplishment.

Serving abroad helps Mormons learn languages (around 70 percent of BYU students are bilingual). It also seems to provide them with insight into foreign cultures and economies, an asset many missionaries have used to start businesses and careers. Neeleman served in Brazil and, after founding JetBlue Airways, went on to start Azul Airlines, a domestic Brazilian carrier. L. Todd Budge, chairman of Tokyo Star Bank, used his mission experience in Japan to become the first non-Japanese CEO of a Japanese bank and says he may never have gone abroad at all if the church had not sent him. Allan O'Bryant, now Japan CEO at Reinsurance Group of America, served in Japan and later became the president of AFLAC International.

Mitt Romney served in France from 1966 to 1968, after his freshman year at Stanford University. Widespread anti-American sentiment at the time made proselytizing especially difficult; in a 2007 *New York Times* article, Romney described his mission as humbling, saying it was the only time in his life "when most of what I was trying to do was rejected."

As the son of George Romney, the ex-American Motors CEO who was then governor of Michigan, Mitt Romney enjoyed privileges unheard of for most elders and entered the mission field of Bordeaux and Paris having completed three years of French at Michigan's elite Cranbrook School. Once on site, Romney broke handbook rules to sneak out to the movies and eat coq au vin, and used his father's connections to arrange a meal at the American Embassy, according to the *Times*. Still, Romney has credited the experience with deepening his faith and ambition. Eager to move up through the missionary ranks, he experimented with innovative means of getting out the Mormon Word, like hosting "American night" at a local café and staging an exhibition baseball game. According to *The Washington Post*, he also pitched articles about Mormons to newspapers and even tried proselytizing at bars.

Romney's mission was marred by tragedy. On June 16, 1968, he was asked to chauffeur the couple presiding over the region's missionaries and was at the wheel during a head-on collision that killed the mission president's wife. Romney was left unconscious and so badly mangled that a police officer mistakenly pronounced him dead. He was rushed to the hospital and found to have a concussion, fractured ribs, and a broken arm.

When the mission president returned to the U.S. to bury his wife, Romney was asked to take charge of the region's missionaries, who numbered around 200. He thrived in the position, traveling across France to lead conferences. Under his leadership, France's missionaries exceeded 200 baptisms for the first time in a decade.

Dave Checketts is chairman of the sports, entertainment, and media enterprise SCP Worldwide, the owner of the St. Louis Blues, and a Mormon whose past titles have included CEO of Madison Square Garden. Checketts served his mission in East Los Angeles, mostly walking the streets of neighborhoods such as Compton, Whittier, and Boyle Heights. The hardest part, he says, was splitting from his comparatively comfortable teenage life. "You leave your family, your friends, your car, you don't date for two years, and you're 19 years old," he says. "I missed my freedom, I missed going out to eat—I was suddenly working hard, knocking on doors, trying to find people who would listen, dressing every day in a shirt and tie, whereas before I probably had on a T-shirt and jeans."

In witnessing extreme poverty and wealth, Checketts says he understood that he needed to take responsibility for his future. Upon returning to college, he shot to the top of his class and later became president of the National Basketball Assn.'s Utah Jazz at the age of 28. "What happens on a mission is that you grow up pretty fast," he says. "You're dealing with adult problems and adult issues, because when you're teaching somebody the gospel of Jesus Christ, you're typically meeting people who want to improve their lives ... and you kind of get a sense for how you'd like to live your life; you get serious about life, about school, about work."

Kevin Rollins, the former CEO of Dell Computers and currently a senior adviser to TPG Capital, says the rejections spiked with occasional successes that he experienced during his mission in Alberta and Saskatchewan, Canada, prepared him for entrepreneurship. "When you get into the business world, most of what you try doesn't work either," he says. "And so the notion of having focus and determination, working hard, and leading others along with you, those principles are all things you would look for in a corporate executive, vs. someone who closes his tent after one little

disappointment."

Mormons, who consider their faith to be a Christian denomination, take Biblical exhortations to work hard to the extreme. "Mormonism is kind of like the Puritan ethic on high," says Nathan Furr, assistant professor of entrepreneurship at BYU's Marriott School. "There's total emphasis on self-sufficiency, on working hard."

This aspect of the missionary experience is rooted in the religion's origins and permeates all aspects of Mormon life. Utah Governor Gary R. Herbert, a seventh-generation Mormon whose relatives were among the state's original settlers, admires the Mormons who found Utah after leaving behind New York, Ohio, Illinois, and Missouri. Settlers, in his words, "harnessed the snowpack and built reservoirs and canals and ditches, and ... literally made the desert blossom like a desert rose." Herbert's account could be straight from *The Book of Mormon's* version of how the land of Helam was made fruitful: "And they pitched their tents, and began to till the ground, and began to build buildings; yea, they were industrious, and did labor exceedingly."

Simply belonging to the highly managerial Mormon Church requires work. Mormons depend upon an unpaid "lay" clergy composed of ordinary congregants tapped to lead sermons each week. Congregants don't just go to church on Sunday, they run the church, filling all the positions from Sunday school teacher to bishop, serving an estimated five to 25 hours each week. At the same time, they are expected to pay a 10 percent tithe on their incomes while encouraged to raise large families. Only those who tithe are given "temple recommends," passes which are required to enter Mormon temples.

Church obligations start early. "Children at a very young age begin to learn things that leaders have to do—speak in public, interact with people, teach," says Kim Clark. Public speaking starts with two-minute presentations at the age of three, according to Kim Farah, a spokeswoman for the church. The goal is to "help them internalize their beliefs," she says, and any professional benefits are secondary. Mormons don't undergo grueling Battle-Hymn-of-the-Tiger-Mother upbringings, but teenagers are expected to get up early and attend seminary one hour before school, five days a week. Kids age 12 through 18 progress through hierarchical rings of youth groups, each of which has two or three appointed leaders who learn to hold meetings, take responsibility for their groups, and check on members who aren't attending church regularly. One former Latter-Day Saint, a facial plastic surgeon from Brazil named Marcello Jun de Oliveira, says church commitments are so intense that "when you finally start a job, it's just like churchit's so much work."

Kevin Rollins, whose Mormon roots go back to the religion's founders (and who says he worked 20 hours a week for the church while putting in another 100 hours at Dell), remembers conducting youth group meetings as a child. "You learn by experience that it's better to have an agenda, have a plan, have a structure, have people participating ... and if you have to discipline somebody, you learn to do that in private," he says. When Dell hired him from the consultancy Bain & Co. to head up the company's Americas division—accounting for 70 percent of the company's revenue at the time—Rollins had no prior experience as an executive. "I can still remember, I was at my first meeting at Dell ... and there were, oh, I don't know, 12 executives, and I think they were stunned at how I came in and ran the meeting, knowing how to run a meeting from all the times I had run one as a church member," he says. "I really owe most of that natural instinct there to the training I received as a young kid."

The church itself is a well-run global conglomerate. Ryan T. Cragun, an assistant professor at the University of Tampa and president of the Mormon Social Science Assn., says the church likely owns more acreage than there is in the state of Delaware. In Florida alone, he says, Mormons own 10 times as much land as Walt Disney ([DIS](#)), including a \$1 billion for-profit cattle and citrus ranch. The LDS Church also owns commercial hunting grounds, radio stations, newspapers, real estate developers, shopping centers, and a land management company in Hawaii. Churches in the U.S. are not required to report their finances, and the Mormon Church does not, but the *Financial Times* in 2010 estimated the LDS Church's worth at \$25 billion to \$30 billion.

Mormons insist that self-improvement and self-reliance, not material wealth, are their religious aims, yet the *Book of Mormon* states, "And thus they did prosper and become far more wealthy than those who did not belong to their church" (Alma 1:31). The same passage goes on to explain why non-Mormons fall short: "For those who did not belong to their church did indulge themselves in sorceries, and in idolatry or idleness, and in babblings, and in envyings and strife; wearing costly apparel; being lifted up in the pride of their own eyes." Armand L. Mauss, professor emeritus of Sociology and Religious Studies at Washington State University, notes that "Mormons tend to assume that if they are doing their best in meeting their religious obligations, God will bless their worldly efforts."

In fact, Mormons fall in the middle of the socioeconomic spectrum, their numbers perhaps skewed lower by recent converts who tend to be less educated and less wealthy, according to Furr and others. Even so, Latter-Day Saints are less likely than the general public to be in the lowest income bracket, according to the Pew Research Center.

BYU's Marriott School, housed inside a bland box of tinted glass and gray pebble slabs, is a 10-minute drive from the Missionary Training Center and 2,000 miles from Wall Street. Most high-ranking business schools are located in major urban centers; BYU has Provo, a city of roughly 100,000, laid out on a grid of colossal six-lane streets built up into a maze of housing developments, hotels, and fast-food chains. Still, Dean Cornia says, "[Wall Street finds] it interesting enough to continue to hire. If we weren't producing, I don't think we'd end up there."

BYU's undergraduate business program ranked 11th last year, just behind Georgetown University, according to *Bloomberg Businessweek's* annual rankings. BYU ranks No. 1 for invention disclosures, new patent applications, and startup companies spun out per every \$1 million of research expenditure, according to the Association of University Technology Managers.

Of 127 full-time faculty members, Kristen DeTienne, a professor of organized leadership and strategy, is the sole non-LDS professor and, although she says she doesn't "buy into the religion," she is floored by the Mormon work ethic. "They have this song that they sing all the time, it's called *Put Your Shoulder to the Wheel*." After a shy attempt at the hymn, DeTienne corrals the school's PR manager, Chad Little, to provide a more polished rendition. He obliges in a sweet tenor: "The world has need of willing men/Who wear the worker's seal/Come help the good work move along/Put your shoulder to the wheel."

Non-Mormons who make a point of hiring Latter-Day Saints go back at least as far as Howard Hughes, who surrounded himself with Mormons, trusting them over others because of their reputation as hard-working teetotalers. Ronald Reagan also employed several LDS staffers and once declared, the "Mormon contribution to American life is beyond measuring," according to historian Michael K. Winder. DeTienne says she knows several executives at top companies who express enthusiasm about hiring Mormon employees, in part because they are often faithfully married, which tends to make them "more mature and better at managing their time, establishing priorities, working hard."

Mormon women are partners in those faithful marriages, yet they're almost absent from the business landscape. The Marriott School's MBA class of 2011 is only 12 percent female, compared with HBS's 36 percent, and although LDS spokeswoman Jessica Moody says Mormon women do hold leadership roles at small companies, none have reached the corporate leadership heights of Mormon men. Women are urged by the church to pursue education, but the Mormon Proclamation on the Family, which, according to religion scholar Mauss, attained near-canonical status after its issuance in 1995, says men should provide for families while women should raise children. In his 2007 book *The Mormon Way of Doing Business*, Mormon journalist Jeff Benedict includes a chapter titled "The Secret to Success," dedicated entirely to the stay-at-home wives of famous Mormon CEOs. "The wives' deep commitment to the home" is the glue that keeps Mormon families together, says Benedict, and also "vital to the success of these CEOs' performance at work."

Kevin Rollins stresses that both man and wife must be devoted to the family, but that in "the Mormon model, a woman

would take care of the kids and the husband would assist her and go out and work and make all the money they need to survive." Scholar of Mormonism Melissa Proctor also notes, "A Mormon woman who has post-graduate education is less likely to attend church," perhaps because "an advanced degree does not contribute to an LDS woman's status within the church," whereas the church tends to fill its top positions with professionally successful men.

To some, the Mormon emphasis on success can seem restrictive. John Schultz, a 33-year-old warehouse manager in Toronto, opted for a "voluntary excommunication" in 2003 when his bishop scolded him for failing to tithe and missing Sunday services for work. His resentment toward the church had been building for some time. "Growing up [in the Mormon Church], there was all this focus on the middle-class lifestyle, on going to college," he says, explaining why he felt like a misfit. "You had to look a certain way and act a certain way." Schultz theorizes that the church's insistence on a middle-class appearance is PR to win mainstream acceptance and recognition as a Christian faith. "In religious and theological communities, Mormons are always pushed to the side," says Schultz. "If they're even considered Christian by the Christian majority, they consider that a huge gain. I think that's exactly why there's the pressure to put on this face."

De Oliveira, the Brazilian surgeon, considers himself a secular Mormon. He left the church because of its role in dismantling gay marriage in California and because of what he described as class-ism in his chapel. De Oliveira, who notes that the vast majority of new converts are poor, witnessed the church's influence in making some low-income families upwardly mobile, while several others spoke with him about feeling excluded by wealthier congregants who held all the top leadership positions. "Here in Brazil, I attended a ward [parish] for half a decade where the chapel would literally, and physically, split itself down the aisle," he says.

At the Salt Lake City airport, three teenage elders in white shirts and black suits are headed to Brazil on 24-month missions. Only one of them has been outside the U.S. They say they're fully prepared for their undertaking and have never felt as much love as during their training period at the Provo MTC ("with 3,000 young men dedicated to serving"). Elder Hildebrandt, 19, says he can't wait to be changed by his mission. "It's only two years," he says. "People come back, and they're just totally different ... they don't need mom anymore."

As for the prospect of having two Mormon Presidential candidates in 2012, the elders say they're not generally interested in politics. None have heard of Jon Huntsman, and they don't have much to say about Romney. Upon reflection, though, Elder Hildebrandt says, "One good thing about having a Mormon President—we'll be able to hold him to a higher standard."

Winter is a reporter for Bloomberg Businessweek.