

# *On the Uniqueness of BYU*

C. SHANE REESE

Good morning and welcome to the faculty session of university conference! We are thrilled to be together at the start of another fall semester when students are buzzing around.

I want to extend my warmest greetings and an open-armed welcome to the 109 new members of the faculty! Some join us from other institutions; others are freshly minted PhDs. Every college in the university will welcome new members of the faculty. I am thrilled for the opportunities that await you as you begin your journey at BYU. I invite you to participate fully in the university: attend a cultural event, watch a soccer game, walk around campus, and experience all the “feels” of this amazing place. While the pandemic may necessitate some limitations on these experiences, I remain optimistic and hopeful that those of you who join us this year will be granted a view of what awaits you: a tremendous student body, talented and welcoming faculty, a stunning campus environment, and sweet feelings as you find belonging on this campus. May you find the awe

of participating in the mission of BYU as I have in my twenty years here. In 2017, President Kevin J. Worthen invited graduates in a commencement address to “be awful in its original, unpejorated sense—that you always be aware of things that are awe-inspiring.”<sup>1</sup> Just as he did, I urge “you to be full of awe”<sup>2</sup> as you begin this school year.

With the upcoming semester’s challenges and the ongoing pandemic, we will face yet another opportunity to demonstrate those virtues that make our campus community so fantastic. President Russell M. Nelson has called the vaccines an answer to prayers and a “literal godsend.”<sup>3</sup> I invite you to be vaccinated. Because epidemiological studies have suggested the efficacy of masks in reducing the spread of COVID-19, I invite you to wear masks when you are indoors and physical distancing is not possible. In the discussions that will inevitably happen on campus this school year, I invite you to have those discussions with mutual respect and the humility to admit that the person standing opposite you

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*C. Shane Reese, BYU academic vice president, delivered this address in the faculty session of university conference on August 23, 2021.*

may also be correct. In short, I invite each of us to interact with one another using “those moral virtues which characterize the life and teachings of the Son of God.”<sup>4</sup>

### **A Unique University**

BYU’s Carillon Tower was constructed to commemorate and celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of “the BYU,” and as President Spencer W. Kimball noted in his dedicatory address on October 10, 1975, the carillon bells would play “the great melodies that have motivated the people of the Lord’s church in the past and will lift our hearts and inspire us in the second century—with joy and even greater determination.”<sup>5</sup> I have been lifted with joy and greater determination—and, during the last year, reminded that it was time to begin another Zoom meeting—by those bells ringing, “All is well! All is well!”<sup>6</sup>

President Kimball compared his prophetic vision of the potential of BYU as an institution of higher education to a mountain, describing BYU as an “educational Everest”<sup>7</sup>—that is, the mountain peak that towers above all other mountains. In describing how BYU might establish itself as an educational Everest, he said:

*There are many ways in which BYU can tower above other universities—not simply because of the size of its student body or its beautiful campus, but because of the unique light BYU can send forth into the educational world. Your light must have a special glow, for while you will do many things in the programs of this university that are done elsewhere, these same things can and must be done better here than others do them. You will also do some special things here that are left undone by other institutions.*<sup>8</sup>

In a poignantly prophetic declaration, President Kimball indicated that not only are we to shine a light into the sphere of higher education but that we should shine a “*unique light*” into the sphere of higher education. As a reinforcement of the need to be unique in our efforts, Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said at a recent BYU leadership meeting:

*We should not simply follow the established or emerging patterns of other universities to address the challenges we do now and will yet face. We can, we should, and we must look unto the Savior in every thought to find every solution and to make every decision. At BYU we can truly focus on the spiritual and practical substance of solutions and not just on superficial symbolism. We should be unique in striking at the root of important and timely issues and not be merely one of the thousands hacking at the branches. By looking unto the Lord, we can fulfill our remarkable role and responsibility “in a manner which never had been known.”<sup>9</sup>*

A critical component, then, of the realization of the prophetic vision for the destiny of BYU as a distinctive institution of higher education is the uniqueness of our approach. President Worthen has spoken previously about the unique kind of education that we provide for our students at BYU.<sup>10</sup> Today I want to focus on a few of the aspects of that unique education that distinctly affect us as faculty at BYU.

I find it instructive that the etymology of the word *unique* indicates that modern usage may reflect some loss of the original meaning. As use of the word *unique* has picked up in the nineteenth century, it has devolved to represent concepts such as *remarkable*, *unusual*, or *uncommon*.<sup>11</sup> The Latin root of *unique* is *unicus*, which means “one and only.” Today I would like to focus my remarks on two aspects of the definition of *unique* that are implied by its Latin root: “*one and only*.” How can we be both *one* and *only* as a university? How can we retain our uniqueness when we might be tempted to be more and more like others?

It is notable that President Kimball suggested that even the “things in the programs of this university”—the same academic endeavors that are done elsewhere—will be done better here at BYU. Above and beyond those endeavors that are done elsewhere, President Kimball mentioned the things “left undone” by others. Implicit in this reference, he seems to have been suggesting that these are not merely efforts that others will not undertake but that they are efforts left undone

by others. May I suggest that each of you may be engaged in efforts that are left undone by your colleagues at other prominent institutions around the country and around the world.

Today I want to share a few of the ways in which I view BYU as unique—the ways in which our faculty at BYU are either doing things better than others or doing things that are being left undone by others.

### **Our Use of Gospel Methodologies to Solve Problems**

First, in the language of both President Kimball and Elder Bednar, one of the defining and unique aspects of BYU is that we take peculiar approaches to solving problems. Because we are blessed to be sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and our board of trustees comprises those we sustain not only as Church leaders but also as prophets, seers, and revelators, we can appeal to lessons that we have all learned from our shared tradition in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In solutions grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ, we find both defining aspects of our uniqueness: unity, or oneness, and singularity, or being set apart from others. One way to describe the kinds of solutions based on the teachings of the Great Mediator, Jesus Christ, rather than on the standard practices of other institutions of higher education is that they are “gospel methodologies.”<sup>12</sup> These gospel methodologies are approaches to problems that may not even enter the lexicons of traditional institutions of higher education. While you will certainly come up with appropriate gospel methodologies to solve the problems facing the students, faculty, and staff in your own departments and colleges, some gospel methodologies that can serve our entire university community have been taught to us from a young age and include such revolutionary ideas as forgiveness, repentance, unity, and love. While such methodologies may even be scorned by others, the fact that building faith in the Savior of all mankind is at the core of our mission statement allows us to leverage that common faith to unify us in using principles such as forgiveness, unity,

repentance, and love to address the issues that we will face in the upcoming school year.

The beauty of gospel methodologies as remedies for the ills we will face together is the sense of unity that they create. Take forgiveness, for example. While those who do not have gospel methodologies may view forgiveness as a sign of weakness, we know that the principle of forgiveness is eternal and provides a path for both understanding and reconciliation. What a powerful tool for our campus community in these times that seem to offer opportunities for division at every turn.

Timothy Keller, a prominent Presbyterian pastor in Manhattan, spoke of the sense of community that results when the gospel methodology of forgiveness is applied:

*Christians in community are to never give up on one another, never give up on a relationship, never “write off” another believer and have nothing to do with them. We must never tire of forgiving (and/or repenting!) and seeking to repair our relationships. Matthew 5:23–26 tells us we should go to someone if we know they have something against us. Matthew 18:15–20 says we should approach someone if we know that we have something against them. In short, if any relationship has cooled off or has weakened in any way—it is always your move. It doesn’t matter who started it. God always holds you responsible to reach out to repair a tattered relationship. A Christian is responsible to begin the process of reconciliation, regardless of how the distance or the alienation began.<sup>13</sup>*

Despite a worldly clamor that forgiveness is a sign of weakness, we collectively understand that forgiveness is a path to understanding and a path to healing. In a season of the world when the clamor is loud and we may feel wronged, our ability to forgive and be forgiven will lead to healing and unity as a campus community.

We have need of gospel methodologies to address the pressing issues of our day. Forgiveness is but one of many gospel methodologies that will build unity and distinguish us from our peers during this the second century. As President Kimball put it, “Gospel methodology,

concepts, and insights can help us to do what the world cannot do in its own frame of reference.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, our gospel methodologies, such as forgiveness, will provide a path unseen by other institutions of higher education.

### “Inspiring Learning”

President Worthen reminded us of our unique approach to balancing teaching and research in his seminal address entitled “Inspiring Learning.” In trying to capture the essence of the four aims of a BYU education,<sup>15</sup> he gave the following definition:

*When I use the term “inspiring learning,” I have in mind both meanings of the word inspiring. I hope we inspire our students to learn. And I hope that learning leads to inspiration. When both things happen, inspiring learning occurs, and we can then know we are on the right track to achieve the core goals set forth in our mission statement.*<sup>16</sup>

Notice that this includes not only the lessons learned in classrooms but, more broadly, a wide range of learning that leads to inspiration. Examples include the lessons learned when a student and a faculty member engage in a research project together, when a faculty member shares an insight with a student that improves their character, and when a student interacts with a faculty member on a study abroad program. One of the thrilling aspects of reviewing the reports that students share about their inspiring learning experiences is reading the words they use to describe their inspiring learning—words such as *amazing, life changing, and transformative* and comments such as “This provided opportunities that wouldn’t have been available if I didn’t work with Professor X.” Wow! I am quite certain that we may never know the extent of the influence of our efforts to mentor students, but reading their own descriptions is itself an inspiring exercise.

It goes without saying that President Worthen’s definition of inspiring learning implies that students are at the center of all endeavors at BYU. I get a front-row seat to see and feel the inspiring nature of inspiring learning when I interact

with students. The diverse ways in which faculty engage with students are impressive. From classroom instruction to study abroad experiences to student employment to student service and activities, the inspiring learning on this campus is broad in its manifestation and profound in its influence.

The gold standard for inspiring learning is when a faculty member and a student or a group of students are jointly engaged in a research endeavor. Walking through the portal of discovery together allows for the type of discovery and inquiry that may also happen at other institutions, but research mentoring at BYU also allows students to see how a faculty member increases understanding of her or his academic discipline and simultaneously strives to increase her or his faith in the Savior. This process of discovery and our razor-like focus on students as we pursue the research endeavors are critical components of our unique mission at BYU.

While serving as the president of BYU, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said:

*I am making an unabashed appeal for a distinctly LDS approach to education—an approach best featured on this campus by our present university-wide efforts in religion, honors, and general education.*

*Now I do not want my next statement misunderstood. Please, do **not** misunderstand. I do not believe that Brigham Young University, at least with current policies on both funding and mission, **will** or **should** ever aspire to be a great research university as the world defines research universities. I do believe, however, with all my heart that we should aspire to become the finest undergraduate university on the face of the planet. Now the misunderstanding I don’t want is a knee-jerk, unwarranted assumption that we will therefore have no serious scholarship required of us nor have a significant, albeit careful selection of graduate and professional programs. I did **not** say we would be a four-year college. I said we would be a **university**.*

*But we will never, I think, be an MIT or a Cal Tech—nor should we. However, to be a world-class undergraduate teaching university, we have to be a lot smarter and a lot better than we are now. For the purposes of an absolutely unequalled liberal arts general*

*and religious education, we have to have teachers who investigate and integrate and know something, who are ambitious about godly growth—what Joseph Smith would call “enlargement.” We have to have teachers who are growing in precisely the same manner we expect students to grow—and that means significant scholarship.<sup>17</sup>*

A unifying and singular aspect of our BYU uniqueness is not exclusively the quality or quantity of our scholarship; our uniqueness derives from the motivation for pursuing that high-quality scholarship. Unlike peer institutions that pursue scholarship for accolades from academic peers or increased personal reputation, we pursue scholarship because the investigation and integration develop the quality of the whole person of each of our students.

### **Mission-Fit Hiring**

BYU is only as unique as the faculty who are entrusted with the education, mentoring, and leadership of our students. In speaking about the important role of our faculty, President Worthen has reiterated the following substantive and bold statement in various settings around campus: “The most important decisions that will be made in my tenure as president at BYU are the people we hire.” I am personally prone to overstatement, so making overarching, and perhaps overreaching, statements such as this is not beyond me. President Worthen, however, is a man who measures his words carefully. His wise leadership follows the well-known mantra of carpenters: measure two or three times; cut once. It is notable that given the weight of the many decisions he has been making in the course of his inspired leadership of this university, he considers the decisions on hiring faculty not *among* the most important decisions made at the university but rather *the* most important decisions. While hiring faculty who align closely with the mission of the university is a responsibility that President Worthen feels acutely, it is a responsibility that he shares with not only me, as academic vice president, but also with the faculty.

The primary purpose of faculty work at BYU is to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life. That assistance should provide a period of intensive learning in a stimulating setting where a commitment to excellence is expected and the full realization of human potential is pursued.<sup>18</sup>

In short, our purpose is the exceptional spiritual, intellectual, and emotional development of our students. Indeed, we strive to fulfill President Kimball’s prophetic admonition “that every professor and teacher in this institution would keep his [or her] subject matter bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel.”<sup>19</sup>

Our ability to define and assess and also hire and retain faculty who are well aligned with the mission of the university is vital to the sustainability of our unique and inspired mission and the foundational imperatives shared by our board of trustees. In our hiring stance, we maintain a strong preference to hire faithful members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The distinction between alignment with our mission, or mission fit, and ecclesiastical clearance is worth noting. While mission-fit assessment is our shared responsibility, ecclesiastical clearance is determined by the Church Ecclesiastical Clearance Office. Hiring faculty who have academic credentials, who are committed teachers in their fields of choice, who are invested citizens, and who have essential elements of alignment with the Mission of Brigham Young University is essential to sustaining the mission of BYU. The essential characteristics of faculty who meet the basic academic standards for faculty employment as well as mission alignment standards include

- intentionality in building faith in Jesus Christ and testimony of His restored gospel among members of the BYU community;
- commitment to seek and be led by the Holy Ghost in all aspects of our university assignments;
- student-centeredness above all other professional pursuits;

- excellence in teaching, scholarship, mentoring, and citizenship;
- commitment to a campus culture of unity, love, and belonging;
- a pattern of exemplary conduct that combines spiritual values and personal integrity in conducting work in a professional manner consistent with the values espoused by the university and the Church;
- a pattern of public expression that faithfully promotes the mission and doctrines of the Church and is devoid of contradicting or opposing Church doctrines, policies, and general leaders; and refrain from expressions and behaviors that are dishonest, unchaste, profane, or disrespectful of others.

Each of these characteristics reinforces the uniqueness of BYU in the ecosphere of institutions of higher education. I invite faculty colleagues to engage in dialogue about how we prepare, recruit, attract, hire, and retain faculty who align closely with the mission of BYU. In these discussions, I anticipate that we will be blessed with revelation about how to proceed in ways that we may not now see clearly. It is both the act of seeking those with such strong qualifications and drawing on the inspiration needed to find those prepared with these qualifications that make our faculty unique, or “one and only.”

### **The Intersection of General Education and Disciplinary Rigor**

Today I wish to express my appreciation to colleagues from around campus for a continuing effort to evaluate our current general education offerings at BYU. Discussions around the world happen regularly, and because they touch on so many areas that we treasure, these are often discussions that include unavoidable conflicting and competing demands. As Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf put it so well in his recent devotional address, “Conflict is inevitable and contention is a choice.”<sup>20</sup> The colleagues working so diligently on a proposal for general education have chosen to make the process distinctly uncontentious. We look forward to the continued dialogue as they near completing a proposal to improve the general education of our

students, all while balancing the important and strong pull to preserve the disciplinary standards that have been erected over time.

Interestingly, Elder Holland discussed the intersection of general education and disciplinary rigor in 1988, when he said:

*As for the Honors and General Education programs themselves, I consider them to be crown jewels at the very heart of the most important contributions BYU can make to the world of higher education. A great deal that is very exciting to me is happening in these university-wide programs, and more will happen. Our sisterhood and brotherhood and gospel-based goodwill here give us a distinct GE advantage at BYU in our ability to cross disciplinary and departmental lines. We simply have a very muscular leg up on the rest of the academic world that way. We must seize that advantage. Having focused for several years primarily on structural arrangements, curricular issues, and winning faculty support, we should be free to pursue informed, inspired, liberating education. . . .*

*May I suggest that we also must do a better job of communicating the very practical value of general education—to our students and to the public. I think it is very important for us not to create an unnecessary cleavage between the world of the academy and the world of work, especially not in the minds of tuition-paying parents and higher education’s increasing number of critics. We need to do a better job of showing the crucial link between general education and vocation.<sup>21</sup>*

We look forward to the opportunity to share the progress of our general education redesign effort on campus. Our opportunity is to provide an “informed, inspired, liberating,” and, may I add, unique education for our students.

### **We Are All Children of Heavenly Parents**

As a compelling example of how we might utilize gospel methodologies in an effort to unify our campus community is the BYU Statement on Belonging shared with our campus community this morning by President Worthen. I invite you to find meaningful ways to reinforce the principles found in this statement.

The BYU Statement on Belonging reads:

*We are united by our common primary identity as children of God (Acts 17:29; Psalm 82:6) and our commitment to the truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ (BYU Mission Statement). We strive to create a community of belonging composed of students, faculty, and staff whose hearts are knit together in love (Mosiah 18:21) where:*

- *All relationships reflect devout love of God and a loving, genuine concern for the welfare of our neighbor (BYU Mission Statement);*
- *We value and embrace the variety of individual characteristics, life experiences and circumstances, perspectives, talents, and gifts of each member of the community and the richness and strength they bring to our community (1 Corinthians 12:12–27);*
- *Our interactions create and support an environment of belonging (Ephesians 2:19); and*
- *The full realization of each student's divine potential is our central focus (BYU Mission Statement).<sup>22</sup>*

I invite you to take opportunities in department and college councils to counsel together about ways in which you might help all members of the BYU campus community feel a greater sense of belonging. I invite you to use those opportunities to discuss, in particular, those individuals who feel estranged from the campus community. The BYU Statement on Belonging can become a framework for and a guide to assist in those discussions. As we anchor our counsel in the understanding that we are each children of loving heavenly parents, those discussions will be enlightened by inspiration about how our hearts can be “knit together in unity and in love one towards one another.”<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

Thank you for being here today—and for successfully and gratefully making it to the end of this long discourse. I hope we can understand and embrace our uniqueness as faculty at BYU.

Today I will conclude with the same encouragement that President Kimball urged of the university faculty, staff, and students in his second-century address, which was “to lengthen

your stride, quicken your step, and . . . continue your journey.”<sup>24</sup> I am confident that as we do so, we will be granted heaven’s help. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

## Notes

1. Kevin J Worthen, “Words to Live By,” BYU commencement address, 27 April 2017.

2. Worthen, “Words to Live By.”

3. Russell M. Nelson (@nelsonRussellM), “Wendy and I were vaccinated today against COVID-19. We are thankful for the countless individuals who performed the work required to make this possible. We have prayed for this literal godsend. Receiving the vaccine is part of our personal efforts to be good global citizens,” Twitter, 19 January 2021, 10:01 a.m., [twitter.com/nelsonrussellm/status/1351575425756012546?lang=en](https://twitter.com/nelsonrussellm/status/1351575425756012546?lang=en).

4. Mission of Brigham Young University (4 November 1981).

5. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.

6. “Come, Come, Ye Saints,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 30.

7. Kimball, “Second Century”; see also Spencer W. Kimball, “Installation of and Charge to the President,” *Inaugural Addresses*, 14 November 1980, Brigham Young University, 9.

8. Kimball, “Second Century.”

9. David A. Bednar, “Look unto Me in Every Thought; Doubt Not, Fear Not,” BYU leadership meeting address, 16 April 2021; quoting Alma 49:8.

10. See Kevin J Worthen, “BYU: A Unique Kind of Education,” BYU university conference address, 28 August 2017.

11. See Patricia T. O’Conner and Stewart Kellerman, *Origins of the Specious: Myths and Misconceptions of the English Language* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2010), 200.

12. See Kimball, “Second Century.”

13. Timothy Keller, “The Fading of Forgiveness,” *Comment*, Cardus, 6 May 2021, [cardus.ca/comment/article/the-fading-of-forgiveness](https://cardus.ca/comment/article/the-fading-of-forgiveness); emphasis in original. Timothy Keller is the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan.

14. Kimball, “Second Century.”

15. See *Aims of a BYU Education* (1 March 1995).
16. Kevin J Worthen, "Inspiring Learning," BYU university conference address, 22 August 2016.
17. Jeffrey R. Holland, "A School in Zion," BYU annual university conference address, 22 August 1988; emphasis in original; quoting Joseph Smith, *Teachings*, 354.
18. Mission of BYU.
19. Spencer W. Kimball, "Education for Eternity," pre-school address to BYU faculty and staff, 12 September 1967, 11.
20. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Five Messages That All of God's Children Need to Hear," BYU Education Week address, 17 August 2021.
21. Holland, "A School in Zion."
22. BYU Statement on Belonging (23 August 2021); in "BYU Announces the Formation of a New Office of Belonging," *Announcements*, *BYU News*, 23 August 2021, [news.byu.edu/announcements/byu-forms-new-office-of-belonging](https://news.byu.edu/announcements/byu-forms-new-office-of-belonging).
23. Mosiah 18:21.
24. Kimball, "Second Century."