

Mt. Everest Found: What BYU and Undergraduate Education Can Do for Each Other

REX E. LEE

On two separate occasions . . . President Kimball expressed the hope that BYU would become an “educational Mt. Everest.”¹ It has been a useful metaphor because it has reminded us of the need to strive for excellence, to achieve excellence in fact, and to stand high enough that the world will see us. Not everyone has interpreted that admonition in exactly the same way. . . .

I conclude that, though research and graduate programs are clearly mountains we must climb, our Mt. Everest is to be found in undergraduate teaching. For reasons on which I will elaborate in just a moment, this does not mean any de-emphasis on either the importance of research or our commitment to existing graduate programs or perhaps even others. But these are not our principal ultimate mission. Our comparative advantage, our highest and best use, our greatest potential to make a worthwhile contribution to the people whose contributions support us and to society as a whole is to be found in teaching young men and women during that period of time in their lives between their graduation from high school and graduation from college.

I realize that this is not some great new intellectual breakthrough for a BYU president. Virtually all of my predecessors have reached the same conclusion. But over the last year and a quarter,

I have reached it for myself. I have gained my own testimony, which I bear to you today, and I would like to give you some specific reasons why I think it is correct.

The first is as compelling as it is simple. The teaching that we do here consists of an amalgamation of spiritual and secular truths, offered in an atmosphere that recognizes the reality of the Restoration. Our educational objective is to prepare the whole person for the complete life. That kind of education includes learning that one could obtain at any other good university coupled with a value system anchored to restored truth. It would be quite misleading to try to identify which part of that combination is more important. For us, the two are inseparable. The genius of BYU—and also its heart and soul—is that we are the only four-year university that is attempting to join the two, and we do so because of the effect that the combination has on individual minds, attitudes, and souls.

Note

1. Spencer W. Kimball, “Installation of and Charge to the President,” address at the inauguration of Jeffrey R. Holland as BYU president, 14 November 1980; see Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.

This is an excerpt of a BYU university conference address delivered by Rex E. Lee, president of BYU, on August 27, 1990.