

# Building Positive Momentum

C. SHANE REESE

Thank you for being here today. I pray that our time together is valuable for our collective edification as we seek to “become BYU.”<sup>1</sup> The beginning of a new semester means fresh starts, renewed growth, and discipleship. Fall is such an exciting time.

As we near Brigham Young University’s sesquicentennial—the second half of its second century—our campus is charged with becoming “a Christ-centered, prophetically directed university of prophecy.”<sup>2</sup> You have heard that phrase. But we are not there yet.

Becoming starts with a desire. At a recent devotional, Elder Neil L. Andersen discussed the importance of “educating our desires” to align with the will of the Lord.<sup>3</sup> Elder Andersen pointed to Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane: “O my Father,” the Savior prayed, “if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.”<sup>4</sup> Christ aligned His desire with the Father’s will.

President Dallin H. Oaks taught from this very pulpit that

*God judges us not only for our acts, but also for the desires of our hearts. . . . We exercise our free agency not only by what we **do**, but also by what we **decide**, or **will**, or **desire**.*<sup>5</sup>

Consider these scriptures from the Doctrine and Covenants:

- “If ye have desires to serve God ye are called to the work.”<sup>6</sup>
- “For I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts.”<sup>7</sup>

If our desires are not aligned with God’s will for us, it is time for us to change.

In my discipline of statistics—and I will pause here to say, yes, I am going to talk about statistics.

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*C. Shane Reese, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this BYU university conference address on August 26, 2024.*

And yes, you are more than welcome to roll your eyes—that is, if you haven’t already closed your eyes and dozed off. I have learned from sad experience at too many dinner parties to count that the mere incantation of the word *statistics* has soporific side effects. People who hear the word *statistics* often report immediate drowsiness; some say their eyelids feel as if they are mixing partially cured cement.

Alas! In statistics we talk about a process called change point detection. In essence, these are statistical methods that, in the words of several respected scholars, “aim to detect changes” either “as soon as they occur in a real-time setting” or “retrospectively” in samples of data collected in the past.<sup>8</sup> Imagine tracking water levels of the Provo River before, during, and after the construction of Deer Creek Dam. Undoubtedly the dam would cause change points in water levels.

Our campus quest to become BYU will require change points. We may stumble along the way, but, with the right desire and the Lord’s enabling power, we will succeed.

Last year we all watched in astonishment as Kenneth Rooks fell during the 2023 USA Track and Field 3,000-meter steeplechase championships. Put mildly, Rooks’s chances at that point didn’t look good. But the stumble became a change point in an unexpected direction. In an improbable turn of events, during the last lap Rooks pulled ahead and won the race in arguably one of the most dramatic comebacks in BYU track and field history. Many of us watched Rooks again this summer as he captured a silver medal at the Olympics in yet another thrilling race.

When asked on BYUtv where his drive comes from to surge to the head of the pack, Rooks said: “It’s just deep inside. . . . It’s a decision . . . to finish that race knowing that I had fought and had given it everything.”<sup>9</sup>

“Becoming BYU” is a surge of positive momentum across seven specific areas of importance:

1. Strengthening the Student Experience
2. Retaining a Focus on Undergraduate Teaching

3. Exemplifying BYU’s “Double Heritage”
4. Cultivating the Courage to Be Different
5. Building a Covenant Community of Belonging
6. Investing in Mission-Inspired Scholarship
7. Focusing on Mission-Aligned Hiring<sup>10</sup>

We are framing our 2024 university strategic plan around these seven areas of becoming BYU. Let me walk you through this plan and the ways we will measure some of our progress and our actions.

### **1. Strengthening the Student Experience and 2. Retaining a Focus on Undergraduate Teaching**

Strengthening the student experience is number one in becoming BYU and number one in the strategic plan. This is deliberate. Everything we do at BYU begins and ends with our students in mind. The most important work we do is building our students spiritually and intellectually.

#### *Building Faith and Testimony*

Strengthening each student’s faith and testimony in Jesus Christ and His restored gospel and in living prophets and apostles has always been a part of BYU’s mission and aims. We have now made it explicit in this year’s strategic plan.

Our 2024 data show that 84 percent of graduating seniors say their BYU experience has had a strong or slight positive impact on their faith in Jesus Christ. Some 78 percent say their experience at BYU has had a strong or slight positive impact on their testimony of living prophets and apostles. And now, while this is good, we still have work to do in this area.

I invite all individuals and units on campus to develop a plan to help students build faith in Jesus Christ and His restored gospel and in His living prophets. Let us work together to amplify prophetic teachings and priorities.

We will soon celebrate the one hundredth birthday of President Russell M. Nelson. There is no better example of “dual heritage”<sup>11</sup> than the life and ministry of President Nelson. A world-renowned heart surgeon and pioneering

researcher, President Nelson has seamlessly integrated his testimony of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ and his professional excellence.

Let me remind you of two quotations from President Nelson that every member of the BYU community should know. The first was uttered on this campus:

*There is no conflict between science and religion. Conflict only arises from an incomplete knowledge of either science or religion—or both.*

*Research and education become religious responsibilities for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for we know that “the glory of God is intelligence.”<sup>12</sup>*

The second quotation is on the purpose of learning:

*We educate our minds so that one day we can render service of worth to somebody else.<sup>13</sup>*

### **Faith-Based, High-Quality Teaching and Learning**

Since BYU’s founding, teaching has been our emphasis and our tradition. Teaching excellence is measured and included in faculty advancement and is emphasized in faculty hiring. Our focus on undergraduate teaching will not change, even as we continue with “graduate programs of real consequence,”<sup>14</sup> including a new medical school. (I’ll say more about the medical school a bit later—my colleagues in the humanities might call that a cliff-hanger.)

Let me share a few words on the topic of research: In recent years, university leaders became aware that our research expenditures as reported in the government’s annual Higher Education Research and Development Survey were vastly underreported. Accordingly, a campus-wide effort was made to report expenditures more accurately.

This effort was well underway when BYU learned of impending changes to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. As many of you know, the impending changes to the Carnegie Classifications seek to simplify the Carnegie assessment to focus

on two metrics: (1) research expenditures and (2) doctorate production.

As we understand it, beginning in 2025, institutions of higher education that annually “spend at least \$50 million on research and development and produce at least 70 research doctorates” are expected to receive a designation of Research 1: Very High Spending and Doctorate Production.<sup>15</sup> This is commonly known as an R1 designation.

BYU has traditionally had an R2 designation. But for over a decade, and prior to the university’s efforts to make a more complete accounting of research expenditures, BYU has produced more than seventy PhDs per year and has reported annual research expenditures approaching \$50 million. Without delving into specifics, BYU’s revised research expenditures for 2023 exceed the \$50 million threshold. Again, this increase was driven by an effort to make our reporting more accurate and complete. Our reporting now includes student research wages and the proportion of faculty salaries devoted to time spent on research.

Please note that BYU did not seek this new designation; we sought to provide accurate accounting to the government. And, emphatically, an R1 designation does not signal a change in the university’s mission or focus. BYU is committed to remaining “primarily . . . an undergraduate teaching institution that is unequivocally true to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>16</sup> Research efforts on campus remain secondary, supplemental, and supportive of the university’s primary teaching mission. The recently strengthened rank and status documents reflect this emphasis.

We are heartened that so many appreciate this focus. In recent survey data, 94 percent of BYU faculty report that they are intentional in their efforts to teach their subject “bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel.”<sup>17</sup> We want every class at BYU to be both “intellectually enlarging” and “spiritually strengthening.”<sup>18</sup> Our students’ experiences in feeling both of these aims are measured most accurately by the state of their hearts. And while that cannot be measured directly, students do share their feelings and experiences in student ratings.

On a scatterplot in which the horizontal axis represents students' perceptions of their BYU education as spiritually strengthening and the vertical axis represents students' perceptions of their BYU education as intellectually enlarging, we want courses that receive high marks in both dimensions. That is, we want more dots in the upper-right quadrant.

In winter 2024, the positive trend was good, approaching that upper-right quadrant but with many dots still scattered in the upper-left quadrant and a few in the lower two quadrants. [An image of a scatterplot was shown.] However, we hope to shift the trend even more upward and have the mass even more concentrated in that magical fourth quadrant. We are doing well, but we have work left to do. I invite each of us to respond more fully to President Spencer W. Kimball's charge to bathe our subjects "in the light and color of the restored gospel."

### *Inspiring Learning*

Inspiring learning is also core to strengthening the student experience. Inspiring learning experiences are high-impact learning opportunities that are also spiritually inspiring.

We aim for at least one inspiring, experiential learning opportunity for each student. But our ultimate long-term goal is for every BYU student to have at least *two* such experiences during their time at the university. Our most recent data show that 95 percent of seniors report participating in one or more experiential learning activities, and 80 percent have two or more. External research suggests a strong relationship between two or more experiential learning opportunities and student success beyond their time on campus.

I was recently pleased to see a report from Open Doors ranking BYU the nation's number one university for students studying abroad.<sup>19</sup>

One of my favorite inspiring learning opportunities this past year involved a group of students—most of whom were born outside of the United States—who visited historic sites of the Restoration. While in the Sacred Grove—the hallowed ground where Joseph Smith's First

Vision took place—they video chatted with family members in their home countries, sharing this singular opportunity with loved ones who might not have the chance to visit that sacred space themselves.

Our leadership is determined to offer those kinds of experiences to more students. Inspiring, experiential learning can happen right here on this campus—sometimes in classrooms, sometimes in labs, and yes, in uniquely designed campus work on campus and off campus. Just as Elder Ronald A. Rasband has taught about the kind of mentoring that occurs in these experiences, I invite you to "pause for a minute now" and ask the following questions:

*Who has mentored you? What have you learned from them that is life changing? How have they watched over you? How will you take their example and be a mentor yourself to younger brothers and sisters, friends, and colleagues—those who may need and desire such a relationship?*<sup>20</sup>

Thank you, Elder Rasband, for that prophetic teaching. As you answer those questions, I invite you to consider how that will impact the way you mentor students.

We have launched an experiential learning management system, referred to as ELMS. This system invites students to reflect and report on their inspiring, experiential learning opportunities. Reflection is a key aspect of inspiring learning. We want students to identify what made their experience inspiring and how they felt the Spirit's influence in their efforts. This system is open to all students across campus, regardless of the type of opportunity in which they are participating. I invite all to help students use this system to reflect on their experiences.

### *Increasing Graduation Rates*

In this year's strategic plan, we will also concentrate on eliminating gaps in graduation rates. We believe that every student BYU admits can and ought to be successful and graduate. Currently, 70 percent of students graduate within

the equivalent of twelve semesters. It will take the entire campus community working in a coordinated effort to advance in this area.

### **Limited-Enrollment Programs**

Relatedly, in recent years we have sought to increase student access to limited-enrollment programs by allocating new faculty resources to programs with high student interest. That being said, demand continues to exceed capacity in many of these areas. We currently have fifty-five limited-enrollment programs. The 2024 plan has a new action step to appropriately taper the overall number of limited-enrollment programs.

### **3. Exemplifying BYU's "Double Heritage"**

We are also putting attention on enhancing the University 101 course, officially known as UNIV 101: BYU Foundations for Student Success. For the first time this semester, every first-year student will enroll in one of 280 sections of University 101. It is a major accomplishment to roll out this ambitious undertaking, including capping enrollment of each class at twenty-five students. We are so grateful to all who have helped make this happen.

In this course, our students will get a clear sense of mission, understand the resources available for their success, and have a sense of connectedness. I was heartened by what I witnessed as an instructor in this class, and I am excited to teach it again this semester. I was once a lost freshman, and this class would have been exactly what I needed.

Last week I received a letter from an alumnus whose children have been considering BYU as a possible place to attend college. After reading about the University 101 course in *Y Magazine*,<sup>21</sup> he wrote to us the following:

*BYU was a special place for me. It allowed me to grow spiritually while at the same time [learn] a set of skills that were not only marketable . . . but . . . tended to exceed the marketability of other applicants because of the spiritual foundation that accompanied those skills. . . .*

*. . . But in the decades since graduation, I've heard too many stories of students who didn't have that same kind of experience that I had at BYU. Many of the negative experiences occurred in the [classroom]. . . .*

*[But] enter University 101. . . . By arming incoming students with the prophetic vision of BYU, these students will carry the flag forward throughout their tenure—influencing fellow students and faculty alike.*

He concluded:

*I love that so many experienced faculty and administrators have embraced this course and are being influenced by teaching it.*

Thank you to all who have invested in this course.

### **4. Cultivating the Courage to Be Different**

When we cultivate the courage to be different in good ways, others take note. Under the direction of the University Strategic Communications Committee, we are being deliberate about sharing BYU's unique story, often with the taglines For the Benefit of the World or Enter to Learn; Go Forth to Serve. Let me share with you our latest institutional video that will be broadcast across the country during athletic events this year. [Video clips were shown about students using their BYU education to serve people in Nepal.<sup>22</sup>] I love how Symbria recalled that this experience was made possible because of the gifts that our Heavenly Father had given her.

We have seen some encouraging initial gains in the general public's awareness of BYU from these efforts. We have also implemented coordinated visual branding. I thank all of you for responding to the request to modify your identity marks for your associated communication materials. We recognize this is a heavy lift.

As you know, last year we entered the Big 12 Conference in athletics. We handed out ice cream to visiting opponents at home games. We tailed at away games by performing local service projects for causes chosen by the opposing team's alumni. We did TV spots on our own TV network

highlighting the good other alumni are doing on their university campuses. In West Virginia, where fans sometimes boo the opposing team as they take to the field, we ran out waving West Virginia's own flag as a show of respect. The gesture garnered the attention of university leaders, including the chair of the faculty senate, who sent a generous expression of gratitude.

### **5. Building a Covenant Community of Belonging**

These efforts don't go unnoticed, and they build a community, not only here at BYU but among our friends in higher education. These external efforts to serve and build goodwill are an extension of our covenant community of belonging that we seek to cultivate here on campus. Covenant belonging, as the name suggests, centers on the covenants we make with Jesus Christ, starting at baptism and continuing in the temple.

Elder D. Todd Christofferson pointed out that many tend to fixate on the second great commandment, which is to love others, but sometimes without mentioning the first great commandment, which is to love God "with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength."<sup>23</sup> As Elder Christofferson explained, keeping this first commandment makes us better and strengthens our ability to keep the second commandment.<sup>24</sup>

I invite each of us to treat each other with dignity and Christlike love. It is easy to do in principle and concept. The place where it will make the biggest difference is in our day-to-day interactions. It will happen when a student sits in a classroom next to someone who might be different from them or when there is a need to resolve a workplace disagreement. As we follow prophetic counsel and focus on our "identities as children of God, children of the covenant, and disciples of Jesus Christ,"<sup>25</sup> it will fundamentally change the way we view and treat one another for the better, and that view will change how we serve and sacrifice for one another—two bedrocks of belonging.

Last semester in my University 101 class, on day three or four we had a student who didn't show up for class. I got the attention of our peer mentor and mentioned that we were missing a student.

I learned that six students had already reached out to text this student to simply say, "Hey, we miss you." When we build a community in which we love God and we love all those around us, we are becoming a truly Christ-centered campus where belonging naturally follows.

Our 2024 student data about belonging report that 86 percent of first-year students strongly agree or agree that they feel they are part of the BYU community; 79 percent of seniors feel the same. We still have work to do to ensure that everyone is a part of BYU from when they walk in the door to when they graduate and beyond.

### **6. Investing in Mission-Inspired Scholarship**

Let me say a word more on research. When it comes to university research investment, we are supporting scholarly efforts focused on three core institutions of society:

1. The family, grounded in the doctrinal foundation for the family
2. Religion, including religious freedom and the impact of religion on human flourishing
3. Constitutional government

There will be other areas—particularly as we build a new medical school—that will help serve international humanitarian needs. But we can't be the "Christ-centered, prophetically directed university of prophecy" if BYU lacks the freedoms afforded by the Constitution and the blessings that flow from faith and the strong societal foundations of the family.

Last year, BYU faculty produced 540 publications related to our mission-inspired areas. Thank you for your response.

### **7. Focusing on Mission-Aligned Hiring**

My predecessor, President Kevin J Worthen, would often say, "The most important decisions that will be made . . . are the people we hire."<sup>26</sup> The academic vice president and I interview all faculty candidates. He takes half and I take half. The quality of our applicants is remarkable—so many are faithful disciple-scholars who stand in their classrooms as role models of what a dual

heritage is all about. Thank you for seeking out such candidates in your hiring across campus.

Now a few notes on BYU's medical school. It is important to underscore who made that stunning announcement: it came directly from the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>27</sup> And university leadership is enthusiastically supportive and working with great urgency to carry out the prophetic vision. In coming days, we will have more to say about the medical school and other relevant plans. But in the interim, as you receive questions from students or others, we ask that you simply emphasize the First Presidency's announcement until there is more to share.

Our office has also received a good many names of doctors and prospective medical school hires. We are grateful for these tips, and we are noting all recommendations. We do ask, however, that before forwarding names and CVs, maybe just verify that they at least own a lab coat or a stethoscope. And for our younger faculty and employees, if you get sent a CV from someone named Doogie Howser, MD, don't forward that one on. All that means is that someone raised in the 1980s is trying to pull a prank on you.

All joking aside, we are sincerely thankful for all the names and suggestions that have been sent our way. We have been inundated with names. They are another indication of the excitement across campus and beyond about what we are becoming at BYU.

### The Momentum to Become

I am told by my colleagues in physics that momentum equals mass times velocity. In more rudimentary parlance, I take this to mean that momentum is the product of how much stuff we have and how fast it is going. To become BYU, especially as we approach the halfway point of BYU's second century, we need all the positive momentum we can get to be successful. President Nelson has taught, "We have never needed *positive* spiritual momentum more than we do now."<sup>28</sup> Our students need to witness this positive spiritual momentum from each of us.

Now, my friends, I love you. I express my sincerest gratitude and admiration for your Christlike labors of love. It is you who will help us become the "Christ-centered, prophetically directed university of prophecy."

I testify that this university has a divine destiny. It is guided by prophets, seers, and revelators who work under the direction of the Lord. God lives and Jesus is the Christ; His atoning sacrifice will make all that is unfair in this life right. This is His restored gospel and His restored Church. I share this joyful witness with you in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

### Notes

1. C. Shane Reese, "Becoming BYU: An Inaugural Response," address delivered at his inauguration as BYU president, 19 September 2023.

2. C. Shane Reese, "Developing Eyes to See," BYU devotional address, 9 January 2024; see also Reese, "Perspective: Becoming BYU," Opinion, *Deseret News*, 11 December 2023, [deseret.com/opinion/2023/12/11/23997519/c-shane-reese-what-byu-must-become](https://www.deseret.com/opinion/2023/12/11/23997519/c-shane-reese-what-byu-must-become).

3. Neil L. Andersen, "Educating Our Righteous Desires," BYU Education Week address, 20 August 2024.

4. Matthew 26:39; quoted in Andersen, "Educating Our Righteous Desires."

5. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Desires of Our Hearts," BYU devotional address, 8 October 1985; emphasis in original.

6. Doctrine and Covenants 4:3.

7. Doctrine and Covenants 137:9.

8. Charles Truong, Laurent Oudre, and Nicolas Vayatis, "Selective Review of Offline Change Point Detection Methods," *Signal Processing* 167 (February 2020): 1, article 107299.

9. Kenneth Rooks, in "Kenneth Rooks on His Olympic Steeplechase Tactics," *BYU Sports Nation*, season 12, episode 191, segment 2, BYUtv, 9 August 2024, [byutv.org/6a583f80-5551-4a19-8109-97ef892f3f03/byu-sports-nation-kenneth-rooks-on-his-olympic-steeplechase-tactics](https://byutv.org/6a583f80-5551-4a19-8109-97ef892f3f03/byu-sports-nation-kenneth-rooks-on-his-olympic-steeplechase-tactics); also "Kenneth Rooks Talks Steeplechase Final Strategy on BYUSN," *BYU Sports Nation*,

YouTube, 9 August 2024, 8:28–9:13, [youtube.com/watch?v=\\_MfrhILXaDY](https://youtube.com/watch?v=_MfrhILXaDY).

10. See Reese, “Becoming BYU: An Inaugural Response”; quoting “double heritage” from Spencer W. Kimball, “Education for Eternity,” address to BYU faculty and staff, 12 September 1967; “double heritage” also in Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.

11. Spencer W. Kimball, “Installation of and Charge to the President,” address delivered at the inauguration of Jeffrey R. Holland as BYU president, 14 November 1980. See also “double heritage” in Kimball, “Education for Eternity”; Kimball, “Second Century.”

12. Russell M. Nelson, “The Tie Between Science and Religion,” remarks at the dedication of the BYU Life Sciences Building, 9 April 2015; quoting Doctrine and Covenants 93:36.

13. Russell M. Nelson, “The Message: Focus on Values,” *New Era*, February 2013.

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

15. “2025 Research Designations,” Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, [carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/carnegie-classification/research-designations](https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/carnegie-classification/research-designations).

16. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Second Half of the Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU university conference address, 23 August 2021.

17. Kimball, “Education for Eternity.”

18. The Aims of a BYU Education (1 March 1995).

19. See “Leading Institutions by Institutional Type,” U.S. Study Abroad, 2023 *Open Doors Report*, [opendoorsdata.org/data/us-study-abroad/leading-institutions-by-institutional-type](https://opendoorsdata.org/data/us-study-abroad/leading-institutions-by-institutional-type).

20. Ronald A. Rasband, “Thy Friends Do Stand by Thee,” BYU devotional address, 7 March 2010.

21. See Peter B. Gardner, “Learning the Y,” *Y Magazine*, Summer 2024, 32–36.

22. See “Life and Breath: BYU–Nepali Team Studies Air Pollution’s Human Impact,” video, Brigham Young University, YouTube, 23 February 2024, [youtube.com/watch?v=To8KuYxPdNI](https://youtube.com/watch?v=To8KuYxPdNI).

23. Mark 12:30; see also Matthew 22:37; Luke 10:27. See D. Todd Christofferson, “The First Commandment First,” BYU devotional address, 22 March 2022.

24. See Christofferson, “First Commandment First.”

25. Reese, “Becoming BYU”; see Russell M. Nelson, “Choices for Eternity,” worldwide devotional for young adults, 15 May 2022; Nelson, “Children of the Covenant,” *Ensign*, May 1995; Nelson, “Covenants,” *Ensign*, November 2011.

26. Kevin J. Worthen; quoted in C. Shane Reese, “On the Uniqueness of BYU,” BYU university conference faculty session address, 23 August 2021.

27. See “First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ Announces New Medical School for Brigham Young University,” Newsroom, Church of Jesus Christ, 29 July 2024, [newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/first-presidency-of-the-church-of-jesus-christ-announces-new-medical-school-for-brigham-young-university](https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/first-presidency-of-the-church-of-jesus-christ-announces-new-medical-school-for-brigham-young-university).

28. Russell M. Nelson, “The Power of Spiritual Momentum,” *Liahona*, May 2022; emphasis in original.