

# *Building a Whole University*

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A week ago last Friday I attended the 40th reunion of my graduating class at BY High School. During that evening and the all—BY High reunion the next night, I contracted a case of nostalgia that will infect parts of what I say today. Under our present circumstances I had hoped not to be too drippy about things, but my mind is subject to economic law: the bad thoughts always drive out the good. During our reunion one classmate, in an attempt to be kind, remarked that I hadn't changed a bit. That troubled me a good deal. It was hard to think of myself as a half-gray, half-bald, tri-focaled, pot-bellied, 17-year-old!

Things do change, including our university. But as I contemplate the university today, in all its diversity and strength, I believe that is our capacity to build upon the past and to preserve the ideals, community, and culture of our predecessors that will make us unique and enable us to improve. I feel a daily sense of debt to those unselfish women and men who built BYU.

During this conference you have heard, and will continue to hear, of efforts to make education at BYU even stronger. I, too, will list a number of items, but I intend to focus these items on one large issue. Although I consider the topic to be of central importance to this or any other university, I am not stimulated to

talk about it by any sense of crisis. Indeed, it is precisely because I have seen evidence of our unique capacity in this area that I want to encourage its preservation and strengthening. I have not arrived at any set of solutions to meet what I believe will be ever-increasing challenges. Rather, I would like to help stimulate discussion among all of us. My illustrations will come largely from faculty-related matters, but the issue transcends the classroom or faculty research.

The general question I would ask is “How do we remain focused on the university’s and our students’ interests when so many influences, including some parts of our own reward systems, move us toward departmental, smaller-unit, or personal concerns?” In other words, when centrifugal forces drive us toward specialties and individual pursuits, how can we concentrate on the things that must cohere if we are to continue to achieve what a good university—especially this good university—should do? How do we stay together when so much would pull us apart?

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These questions, of course, are not new. The old description of universities as independent departments linked only by central heating systems is reflected in much of the literature of higher education. However, the durability of such clichés is not a manifestation of their lack of validity but of their fundamental truth. I first thought carefully about this issue while reading *The Academic Life*, Burton R. Clark's 1987 study of American university faculty done for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Clark analyzed survey and interview responses of a large number of college and university faculty members and observed that for the faculty of many universities—especially those with the Carnegie classification of research university—colleagues from the same university no longer are considered the primary peer group. Rather, the peers are professors in the same discipline or subdiscipline found in universities scattered throughout the nation or the world. The primary interest of these professors are focused on those activities that will bring the approval and admiration of that peer group. According to Clark, such activities rarely include teaching, since evaluation of and rewards for teaching rarely transcend the particular institution in which the professor is employed.

I cite this particular tension as an example only. What it seems to illustrate is that the forces that lead professors toward external peer approval may lead them away from activities that are critical for the university. There are equivalent pressures in other parts of the university. For example, it is possible that the need to show a good bottom line in an auxiliary operation could lead to overpricing or to less-than-optimal service.

When I was a student at the University of Hamburg, I found it interesting that, at that time at least, admission to one German university effectively meant admission to them all. The transfer process could be completed in an hour or less. Their system, upon which many

of the American graduate schools were based, was to think of the students as really studying with one professor, and students could shop around various universities until they found that appropriate professor and until the appropriate professor agreed to work with them. Although students were supposed to pay for each lecture they wished to attend, little or no attention was given to who was or wasn't there. (My philosophy teacher, for example, always drew a few hundred more students than were registered for the class.) The real work of the university, it was felt, took place with advanced students in the preparation of papers and dissertations.

In the United States, however, we still place a great deal of emphasis on the reputation for quality of the whole university. Prep schools make their reputations on the basis of their students' admissions to elite colleges and universities, and students are concerned about which institution they can attend. We believe that institutions as a whole—not just departments or individual professors—provide the education we wish our students to receive. This belief is particularly prevalent when we talk of undergraduate education. Thus, when we find rankings of undergraduate colleges and universities, the focus is on whole institutions, whereas most rankings of excellent graduate and professional schools are listed by discipline.

The American emphasis on whole institutions implies that there are many things that we expect from universities in addition to excellent preparation in a specific specialty. Among other matters, these usually include preparation for participation in civic affairs, excellent writing and other communication skills, some kind of general education experience, etc. At BYU we have tried to articulate these kinds of matters in the so-called "Aims of a BYU Education" document. As we attempted to make clear, the responsibility for providing the education described in this document

rarely is limited to one department; often many or all of the units of the university are involved. The ultimate concern is for the education that our students receive. What is a bit uncertain is how we can assure that all departments and individual professors will continue to contribute toward these aims when it is not obvious that such contributions will lead to immediate rewards.

The values survey of faculty and others that was undertaken as part of the self-study provides a good deal of hope on this matter. One of the clusters of values that received the highest scores from the faculty was that group of issues concerning students and their experience here. It is refreshingly clear that we have faculty and staff who are very anxious to provide an excellent education for our students. Many demonstrate on a daily basis that they are willing to put great energy into their teaching and other contacts with students. But as we become ever more well known for other achievements, temptations to sacrifice this focus to matters more noticeable to others will inevitably arise.

Let me now mention a few of the areas where I see some possible concerns in the future.

It has long been recognized that the teaching of articulate writing is time-consuming and difficult, yet one of the most critical things that a university can do. Occasionally, however, some consider leaving the teaching of writing to the English Department and to a few other units that have formal writing courses. Yet studies consistently show that students need to connect writing to a variety of subject matters, and especially to their major, if they are to develop real skill in the area. Writing assignments require a good deal of efforts in development and in correction if they are to be effective.

Data acquired in the UCLA study of faculty indicate that BYU professors assign more writing than their peers at other institutions—a very encouraging finding. There is some evi-

dence, however, that the teaching of writing is somewhat random throughout the university. It seems to me that we need more systematic writing instruction in many of our departments. But there are tensions that could move some of us away from this responsibility—including the need for increased time to concentrate on scholarly work. I would invite you to think how we can become more effective in this aim despite the natural desire to spend our efforts in more exciting activities than questioning transitions, noting comma splices, and so forth. I do not wish to see us having to confront the stacks of themes and essays that decorated the offices, studies, and living rooms of our great colleagues of the past, but I hope we have inherited some of their concern for our students' writing abilities.

General education and service courses compose another major responsibility of the university but are areas that often fail to receive recognition equivalent to that accorded other important activities. We might think of the matter with the following questions: Do we teach general and service courses in large sections to preserve teacher contact hours for classes in the major? Do we reserve essay examinations for our advanced students while using machine-corrected tests in general education classes? Do general education students and nonmajors have the same access to faculty consultation as departmental majors? In which classes do we assign writing? Are our best teachers reserved for courses that enroll specialists? I am aware that a number of circumstances, including resource limitations, make it unlikely that all courses will be treated equally. But we should still question ourselves when we are tempted to give preference to those students who are following our own career directions.

When I think of teachers who took an interest in my own undergraduate education—Orea Tanner, Irene Spears, Stan Welsh, Max Rogers, Lawrence Sardoni, and many others—I am

struck by how many of them came from fields outside my major. In fact, I mentioned none from my major, although several were very influential. This part of my educational heritage is important to me, especially when I reflect on the studies done by Richard J. Light and his colleagues in the Harvard Assessment Seminars. They list personal contact with a full-time professor as the single most important factor contributing to the success of beginning students. Many students at this level will not have chosen a major, of course. Thus, general education and service courses assume an even more critical significance.

Surveys of our alumni and current students show that they chose BYU more for its LDS environment and potential for strengthening their faith than for any other reason. And their response to the spiritual environment here is overwhelmingly affirmative. They feel very good about religion classes and such experiences as devotionals and firesides. If there is an area in which they might wish greater emphasis on the gospel and on spiritual matters, it is in the courses offered as part of their academic major.

A few years ago I was invited to have lunch with a number of Ezra Taft Benson scholars. During our conversation, I asked them if anything had surprised them about BYU. I expected that at least some of them would say that it had been more difficult than they had expected. Instead, they answered, almost to a person, that they had expected more discussion of the gospel in their nonreligion classes. I do not related this story to be critical; indeed, I believe that the integration of all truths achieved by this faculty is remarkable. What I do mean to say is that we need feel no embarrassment about fulfilling our aim to be spiritually strengthening in all of our courses. Our students expect it and desire it.

Many of us who are not full-time members of the Religious Education faculty are asked to contribute to the formal teaching of religion.

I hope that departments select some of their finest teachers for this responsibility and that those faculty selected expend as much effort on this activity as they do on courses intended for their majors. (I also hope that department and college advancement committees will give appropriate credit for excellence in the religion classroom.)

Our students also expect all of us, faculty, administration, and staff, to take seriously our Honor Code and our Dress and Grooming Standards. Again, we are talking of a whole university matter. The principles given in these guides to behavior and appearance belong to all of us. Students expect faculty and others to support and reinforce these matters. There are no awards for supporting honor, but there are lives and souls saved by so doing.

I have already mentioned that students need contact with full-time teachers if they are to adjust well to the university. This need is so widely recognized that Elaine El-Khawass reports in *Campus Trends 1995* that 83 percent of the campuses she surveyed for the American Council on Education have instituted some programs for improving the freshman year. Our Freshman Academy (formerly SHINE) and the faculty mentoring program begun last year are among our own efforts in this direction. I expect that the self-study will result in additional recommendations for helping our beginning (and perhaps reentering) students. Once again, however, we will be faced with the challenge of fitting these critical activities into a national education culture that has traditionally emphasized other contributions.

Related to our concerns about freshmen, but extending to all of our students, is the matter of advisement. I am impressed by the competence of our professional advisement staff. Indeed, I suspect that a very high portion of our students' complaints about advisement would be solved if they would make full use of the services we already provide. But our survey data indicate that students and alumni feel a

need for more careful advisement—particularly advisement about careers. It is apparent to me that we must integrate the faculty with our professional advisors if we are to fill what our students feel is one of the greatest needs. Again, I think that we can expect concrete proposals from the self-study. I extend thanks to those who sacrifice personal concerns to extend themselves to their students in this important way.

On previous occasions I have expressed my view that preparing students for elementary and secondary school teaching is one of our very important tasks. This is a particularly challenging responsibility on the secondary level because it requires good cooperation between the public schools, the College of Education, and the various arts and science departments. Once again, for many professors and departments, teacher education is not one of the areas that will bring increased national stature, but our record in this area is exemplary. We will undoubtedly hear more about this vital challenge in months to come. Let me simply commend those of you who are committed to this effort and encourage even greater coordination and dedication in the future. I especially ask departments to think of ways to evaluate and reward this activity.

I have always felt that students entering BYU should come here with the intention of graduating. There are, of course, good reasons why some will not reach this goal, but the university needs to do everything it can to assure that capable students will not be prevented from attaining this important objective because of our actions or lack thereof. This is one university-centered matter where we are doing better than our predecessors. Graduation rates for all our students, and particularly for women students, are improving each year. In my view this is the most important result of our graduation initiative. We have clarified and unified our general education requirements and made some progress toward getting major hours under control. This is another

area where we must put students first. I know the temptation to feel that students will have a better education if they are required to take just two (or three of four or who knows how many) additional classes in the major. But we are wrong. The universities that are repeatedly cited as the best in the country graduate a much higher proportion of their entering students than we do. They graduate them having required far fewer hours than some of our majors demand, and they do it with no loss in educational quality. As the “Aims” document expresses it, “Undergraduate study should be targeted at entrance-level, not expert-level, abilities. An interest in depth should not lead to bachelor’s degrees that try to teach students everything they will need to know after graduation. Students should be able to complete their degrees within four years.”

My last major point may seem a bit at odds with the others I have mentioned, but I consider it an important university-wide problem. This is the matter of grade inflation. I know the reasons we cite for higher grades: better entering students, achievement-based evaluation, compassion, the need to protect scholarships or to facilitate admission to graduate and professional schools, etc. But the fact is, we have gone too far. Last year, slightly more than one-half of all the grades that we awarded were either A or A-. Our catalog still lists the letter grade A as designating “excellent” performance. As much as I love and admire our students and respect their abilities, I cannot imagine that their average performance is achieving this level. A professor who values students will not deceive them into believing that anything less than their best work deserves our highest grades.

At the beginning I expressed my indebtedness to many who came before us. I would like to extend that expression to those with whom I now work. Because of the likelihood that this will be my last public opportunity, I was tempted to name a large number of associates who make the worst moments bearable and the

best an absolute joy. But the list is too long. I feel a debt to colleagues in the faculty and staff whose vision is more farsighted than mine and who strive, often without thought of immediate reward, to bring BYU to its prophetic destiny.

I have always loved the hymn "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," in part because it contains one of my favorite lines in all writing: "O to grace how great a debtor / Daily I'm constrained to be!" ("Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," *Hymns*, 1948, no. 70). I do feel my greatest sense of indebtedness to our Heavenly Father for his tender mercies.

I was a bit shocked last Tuesday when Elder Spencer J. Condie chose to end his devotional

talk by playing the video of Mack Wilberg and the combined choirs and philharmonic orchestra of BYU performing Professor Wilberg's arrangement of this great hymn. I had planned to conclude my remarks by showing that remarkable piece to you. After reflecting on the number of faculty that stay around during Education Week, however, I decided that I would take the chance and play it anyway. Better than any other way I know, it expresses my sense of debt. It is also the best visual symbol I know to show what BYU is really about.

May we join together in the great work of a unified university, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.