

# “A House of Learning”

CECIL O. SAMUELSON

I consider it a great privilege to welcome you to our Annual University Conference. For those of you who are with us for the first time, we extend a hearty welcome and hope that you will also be with us every late August as we prepare for another exciting academic year. For those who have retired, but still return, a special thanks to you for your loyalty to and continued interest in BYU. For those of you who have been with us for a season and expect to be here for yet another year or several years, let me thank you for all you do. I have been here long enough now to have an appreciation for what a wonderful institution this is and for the many significant and diverse contributions made broadly across campus by so many. This enables BYU, in large part, to be such a remarkable university.

I suspect that many of you have been thinking about some of the same things that I have been considering over the summer and even before. Today I will have the privilege of sharing some of my musings, observations, and suggestions, and I hope that you will also find ways to share your own as we move forward. Although I am still in the relatively early days, I hope, of my presidency, this is my fourth Annual University Conference. My first year here I focused on a number of questions that

had been asked of me or had occurred to me and gave the best answers that I could at the time. Two years ago I focused on the notion that BYU is a changing university in a changing world and suggested some opportunities and realities that we have faced and do face. Last year I entitled my remarks “The BYU Way” and discussed some of the unique dimensions of our quest to become the best that we can be as we have been charged by President Hinckley.

Candidly, I don’t expect that you will be able to remember much of anything I said on those occasions. In fact, I needed to look in my files to refresh my own memory of what I have said when. I mention these previous messages because they have been somewhat of a measuring rod for me personally in trying to determine whether or not we are having any success in terms of both direction and rate in our quest to become what we are expected to be. I do believe we are making progress—some of which is very significant and for which I am

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*Cecil O. Samuelson was president of Brigham Young University when this address was given at the BYU Annual University Conference on 29 August 2006.*

grateful. I also believe that we have much to do and much yet to achieve and become. I voice this sentiment because I feel we are in a somewhat tenuous and yet very important and positive position.

We are receiving the acclaim of the world in a number of areas—for which we are appreciative. At the same time, we cannot afford to become complacent or satisfied because there is so much more that we can do and must do if we are to be fully faithful to the charge and confidence placed in us. In general, people at BYU work very hard. This is true of the students, the faculty, the staff, and even the administration. I believe we do much better in terms of effort than do most other institutions, even some very fine ones.

I think we would not be classified by anyone who knows us in the same way as was the case when a distinguished leader of a large organization was asked a question by a curious foreign guest who was visiting the high-rise headquarters office building of the large and complex organization.

The query was, “How many people work in this building?”

The answer the hosting leader gave—only partly in jest—was, “About half of them.”

Although I suppose that all of us can profit from time to time from analyzing our own situations and determining if in some ways we might work harder, I would suggest that at BYU it would usually be much more productive and much more realistic to ask how we might work smarter or work more effectively or contribute more clearly to our stated mission and responsibilities. The Savior identified this notion when He admonished the scribes and Pharisees to pay more attention to “the weightier matters.” Let me share the verse:

*Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have*

*done, and not to leave the other undone.* [Matthew 23:23]

Now I am not aware that we have either scribes or Pharisees at BYU, and I certainly hope that we have no hypocrites. I do believe, however, that we must be constantly alert to and focus on “the weightier matters” in our important work. Incidentally, on occasion this verse is quoted in part by those who wish to violate the Honor Code or choose not to fulfill some of their seemingly “lighter” obligations. We must remember as Jesus called attention to “the weightier matters,” He also declared that we must not “leave the other undone.”

In the spirit of focusing on the weightier matters, let me share for your consideration my view of BYU as “a house of learning” (D&C 88:119) within the context of our unique environment and special situation.

First, BYU is an extraordinary university in part because of the board of trustees, to whom we look for direction and from whom we receive the core of our very substantial support. Because we understand that the officers of the board are the First Presidency of the Church and the other members of the board are General Authorities and general officers, we sustain them as they support us. Because we are led by prophets and apostles who teach us correct principles, we acknowledge and try to follow the counsel and guidance we receive. We also understand that they teach us correct principles but expect us—each of us—to be wise in governing ourselves and in making correct decisions as we formulate the specific applications in our individual duties as a true reflection of the general principles that govern us. Our board is very clear in general guidelines and direction but delegates to us the specific implementation of policy and procedure in the classroom, laboratory, or office.

As I have mentioned before, one of the truly noteworthy and unique characteristics of almost everyone at BYU is that you not only

sustain the mission of BYU in serving the students with whom we interact but you also place that emphasis at a higher priority than you do advancing your own careers or personal opportunities in your individual disciplines. I believe there is common agreement at BYU that we all desire and aspire to be as good as our increasingly faithful and capable students. Because of our agreement that we are ultimately all about the growth and development of our students, it helps us cooperate in significant ways that are not typical on other campuses.

A clear manifestation of this understanding and cooperation was demonstrated again by the tremendous effort and goodwill of so many across campus during our spring and summer strategic resource planning process. We know the sacred funds that come to BYU are a shared stewardship and responsibility to be used for the best common good. These monies, representing a large portion of the tithing funds contributed by faithful Church members around the world, are generously provided by our leaders with great stability over extended periods of time. Because all funds that come to the university are considered sacred, the same goodwill and care also apply to the allocation of contributed and donated resources.

Second, we as a campus community take seriously the injunction of President Hinckley to make BYU the best it can be. This charge from our prophet and board chairman is understood broadly to mean not only the university as an institution but also for each of us individually, whatever our role or responsibility is at BYU.

As I have said before, I am persuaded that making BYU the best it can be involves continued prioritizing and focusing. I hope and believe that most of you share my view that we must always be looking for better ways to accomplish our work and our responsibilities. To say “we’ve always done it that way” is insufficient reason to do old things in old ways. We won’t be better until we learn to do better.

In this context we are also asked to decide what programs or activities we must stop or discontinue if we are to add new or needed others. Admittedly, it is always easier to add to the load than it is to delete something that might still have some utility or be the favorite “child” of part of our community. I am reminded of the statement of a frustrated fictional student in a British novel of the past century. As this student struggled to cram into his memory all of the facts he thought he would need to pass an important examination along the path to his chosen career, he said: “My mind is just like my grandmother’s attic—filled with things no longer useful but too good to throw away.” I fear that it is not just our individual minds or our grandmothers’ attics that are burdened with things “too good to throw away.” We must not allow such things to prevent the inclusion of new ideas or activities that will be essential if we are to reach the potential expected of us here at BYU.

Because so many are working so hard, it seems to me that we may need to adjust to the idea of learning to do fewer things but doing them better than we ever have before. This is not a new idea at BYU. President Holland spoke of it in the 1980s, and others have as well. While certainly not easy and often very arduous, I believe we can accomplish these things as we hone a greater sense of our responsibilities within BYU and the place BYU has within the kingdom.

This spirit and approach are already evident in the significant internal reallocation of resources accomplished at every level of the university, not only during strategic resource planning but regularly throughout the year. But there is more for us to do—much more—at all levels of BYU. This is particularly true as we seek to accelerate the pace and focus of fulfilling President Hinckley’s injunction and meeting the prophetic predictions made by others since the beginning days of this wonderful institution.

Third, part of making BYU the best it can be is to be true to our mission, aims, and objectives. This means documenting our educational quality and our commitment to effective and continuous improvement in ways and in terms those outside the university can understand and those responsible for accreditation require. We do these things not only because of who we are but also to be sure that we provide our students and our institution the important benefits of being an accredited university.

In this regard I am pleased to announce that as of July 26, 2006, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) officially notified BYU that the “accreditation of Brigham Young University has been reaffirmed on the basis of the spring 2006 comprehensive evaluation visit.”<sup>1</sup> The commission extended “congratulations on receiving this continued recognition.”

At the July 13, 2006, NWCCU meeting at Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, and in its NWCCU full-scale evaluation report, Chancellor Stephen Reno, chair, and the NWCCU evaluation team expressed gratitude for the “kindness, sincerity, and readiness to help” and the “warm and generous hospitality extended to it by all members of the BYU community.” “We acknowledge and express appreciation,” the commission said, “to all who planned and executed the myriad arrangements needed to support our work—from those who directed the study process through those who drove the vans.” Way to go, Ron Clark and our campus hosting colleagues and students! And way to go, Gerrit Gong, who shepherded, guided, and facilitated this entire process.

Please also join in expressing appreciation to our President’s Council and to our Accreditation Executive Committee members—Doug Belliston, Ron Chapman, Doug Christensen, Newell Dayley, Julie Franklin, Steve Hite, Scott Howell, Carri Jenkins, Gary Kramer, Kelly McDonald, Danny Olsen, Randy Olsen, J. B. Ostlund, Ole Smith, Ford Stevenson, Ron Terry,

and Richard Williams—for organizing and representing us all so well.

The NWCCU complimented BYU “on the uncommonly large number of persons who were engaged in the self-study process, a number far larger than most of the committee had known at other institutions.” As listed in our self-study documents, some 275 faculty, staff, students, and administrators participated in one or more capacities in the nine standard working groups and campus focus groups and in many other ways.

The NWCCU praised BYU’s self-study. “Without question,” the commission report states, “great care and effort went into the preparation of the [BYU] self-study report. The product is beautifully presented, formatted . . . , and included at the end of each section a ‘Summary’ that sets out strengths as well as challenges and opportunities.”

Such accomplishments do not just happen. Please thank Scott Howell, chair of the Accreditation Production Committee, and Larry Morris, chair of the Accreditation Editorial Committee, and their dedicated committees and associates for long, late, and creative hours.

As part of the usual reaffirmation of the accreditation process, the university received commendations and recommendations. What was not usual, according to Chairman Reno, was that we received more commendations than are typically given and fewer recommendations. In the aggregate, then, these descriptions of the NWCCU’s view of BYU were very positive and in recognition of good work and progress.

BYU received commendations in six areas: (1) the design and maintenance of its buildings and grounds; (2) the strength of the McKay School of Education’s Educator Preparation Program for future teachers; (3) the institutional support for the Lee and Hunter libraries; (4) the effective use of information technology; (5) the significant mentoring and research

opportunities available for undergraduate students; and (6) BYU's exemplary commitment to foreign language instruction. Congratulations and appreciation to all who contribute so much in each of these areas of commendation.

Within the body of the long and complex final report submitted by the visiting evaluation team and accepted by the NWCCU were found many other compliments and obvious strengths throughout the university. One very senior academic administrator from a large and prominent midwestern state university who was part of the visiting team mused that he wished he could find a way to have his institution leave their state system of higher education and become part of the LDS Church education system!

As would be expected, BYU also received NWCCU recommendations, including one regarding the identification and publication of expected learning outcomes. The NWCCU offered its recommendations in a spirit of constructive collegiality. Wrote the NWCCU evaluation team: "We committee members have also benefitted enormously from the opportunity to 'compare notes' with colleagues [at BYU] regarding both the timely as well as the perennial challenges of higher education." We will discuss specific recommendations at later academic meetings, but here let me put the learning outcome recommendation in the broader context.

You may be aware of ongoing national discussions being conducted under the auspices of the Spellings Commission, named for U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. The Spellings Commission draft report states its interest in "clear, reliable information about the cost and quality of postsecondary institutions" and better "accountability mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students."<sup>2</sup> Several members of Congress, various organizations representing the nation's colleges and universities, and others wishing to represent their views of the broader public interest

have also vigorously entered the dialogue. It is obvious to me that accrediting agencies, including the NWCCU, are paying close attention to these developments with their attendant pressures.

Given the ongoing as well as immediate importance of documenting learning outcomes and other continuing university academic priorities, I have asked John Tanner and Gerrit Gong to cochair a university advisory task committee to (a) identify and publish expected learning outcomes, (b) provide evidence for their accomplishment, and (c) assure documentation that these assessments are improving learning and teaching. Because we are asked to provide the results of these endeavors for each program across the entire university, we are taking this activity very seriously and invite all of the campus community to do so as well.

We want these measurable outcomes to be those our BYU graduates can demonstrate to their greatest benefit. We also want to move both deliberately and quickly according to a timetable that will include focusing our fall college visits on inviting students and faculty to describe how they achieve their stated program outcomes and how that process improves learning and teaching.

In the weeks ahead I plan to say more about two other university advisory task committees I have asked Jim Gordon and Gerrit Gong and Brian Evans and Gerrit Gong to cochair as part of our efforts to make BYU the best we can be. Happily, these efforts—including an ongoing focus on demonstrating achievement of the outcomes we really seek for our students, faculty, and programs—will contribute to BYU becoming even more than it is today the ideal "house of learning" that is our opportunity and responsibility.

Let me conclude this section of my remarks by saying again how pleased we are by the reaffirmation of Brigham Young University's institutional accreditation by our regional accrediting agency, the Northwest Commission

on Colleges and Universities, and by thanking again each of those in our BYU community who contributed to this important outcome. Let me also express appreciation to all who will continue with us in the months and years ahead on this quest, which is not only important for accreditation by our regional agency but also is vital for an even more important and significant accreditation that ultimately comes from the heavens.

During this Annual University Conference we will focus on the phrase and theme “a house of learning” with the hope that we can bring BYU—as solid as it already is and has been over the years—even closer to the Lord’s definition. As I have watched Brigham Young University from a distance for most of my life and on-site for these past few years, it has been apparent that the wonderful 88th section of the Doctrine and Covenants has been one of the most oft-quoted scriptural, constitutional statements used by our leaders to instruct, to inspire, and, on occasion, to correct us in our quest to fulfill our prophetic role and charge. You will have your favorite verses, and there are many. I will share just a few and then conclude with some that may not seem at first glance to be as educationally directed as those that we quote more often.

First, two verses that place our theme in context:

*And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith.*

*Organize yourselves; prepare every needful thing; and establish a house, even a house of prayer, a house of fasting, a house of faith, a house of learning, a house of glory, a house of order, a house of God. [D&C 88:118–19]*

The direction and implications for each of us individually and for BYU institutionally seem

clear and high-reaching. Next, three other very familiar verses:

*And I give unto you a commandment that you shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom.*

*Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand;*

*Of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms. [D&C 88:77–79]*

For those who might think that the NWCCU has high standards and expectations, think of the requirements of the Ultimate Accrediting Agency! Of course there are many other important insights and inspiration to be mined from this section. I’ll leave it to you to find them, to understand them, and to incorporate them into your lives.

Let me share a perspective that probably does not apply universally across the higher education landscape but most certainly should be central to what we do at BYU. Most consider a fundamental role of higher education to be broadening the thinking, knowledge, and understanding of those in the university. With that we wholeheartedly agree.

Some good and honorable people believe that the only way this added enlightenment can happen is through conflict and controversy. While we fully acknowledge the need to challenge ideas, listen to and understand the perspective of others, and be willing to change ourselves and our views when we gain insights not previously achieved, we are also committed to the notion that it is not necessary to have animosity to create change, nor acrimony to accomplish learning. In our quest

to build, strengthen, and be part of “a house of learning” where we accomplish our work “by study and also by faith,” we acknowledge and proclaim that often there is a better way.

In the heading of section 88, this revelation is described as “the Lord’s message of peace to us.” Even in the university, and particularly at BYU, we need to heed the Lord’s message of peace and do what we can to bring it about. By this we mean both collective peace in terms of how we respect and treat each other and also individual peace that comes with the conviction that our lives have congruence with the values we hold dear. Listen to these words of the Lord from this most instructive section:

*Wherefore, I now send upon you another Comforter, even upon you my friends, that it may abide in your hearts, even the Holy Spirit of promise; which other Comforter is the same that I promised unto my disciples, as is recorded in the testimony of John. [D&C 88:3]*

Let me now refer to the Savior’s words in John that speak to this point:

*If ye love me, keep my commandments.  
And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever;  
Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.  
I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. [John 14:15–18]*

What a great and magnificent promise and blessing to have the Holy Ghost or First Comforter to be our companion and guide in our quest for enlightenment and understanding in the “house of learning.” And what a marvelous goal and promise to have the Second Comforter, even the Lord, Jesus Christ Himself, become part of our lives. With these

Comforters, our avenues for learning are expanded greatly and our comfort is increased with the assurance that what we are learning is that which is really most important. What a great privilege to be able to combine the best of the spiritual and the secular in such a special way and in such a special place as is BYU.

As we strive to master the material of our disciplines and assist our tremendous students in meeting their academic goals and objectives, we must never forget that it is at BYU where we are able and expected to meld our developing discipleship with our growing educational competence. It is also at BYU where we are able to achieve the peace the Lord has promised us in the midst of the turmoil and confusion of the world and even the disconcerting challenges of our university demands.

Although we often, like Nephi, must confess, “I do not know the meaning of all things” (1 Nephi 11:17), we can with assurance agree with the words of the hymn by Mary Ann Morton. Let me read a few stanzas and ask that you liken these sentiments unto yourselves and your own situations here at BYU.

*Sweet is the peace the gospel brings  
To seeking minds and true.  
With light refulgent on its wings  
It clears the human view.*

*Its laws and precepts are divine  
And show a Father’s care.  
Transcendent love and mercy shine  
In each injunction there.*

*Faithless tradition flees its pow’r,  
And unbelief gives way.  
The gloomy clouds, which used to low’r,  
Submit to reason’s sway.*

*May we who know the sacred Name  
From every sin depart.  
Then will the Spirit’s constant flame  
Preserve us pure in heart.*

...

*That which we have in part received  
Will be in part no more,  
For he in whom we all believe  
To us will all restore.*<sup>3</sup>

My dear brothers and sisters, colleagues and associates, what a unique and special opportunity we have to live and work in surroundings that allow and even stimulate us to do our very best intellectually and also challenge us to develop our faith and spiritual strength under the sponsorship of heaven. It is this dual quest that ultimately is the same unified goal that should inspire us, enliven us, and encourage us, for “the glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth” (D&C 93:36).

As we deal with challenges and opportunities—both vexing and exciting, both proximate and more distant—let us consider the counsel of the Apostle Paul to his young associate Timothy. Each of us serving as faculty, staff, administrators, Church leaders, or in any capacity with our marvelous students have young people looking to us for counsel and for reliable examples after which to model their own lives. Paul’s words, in my judgment, are cogently current and directly targeted to each of us. Said he:

*Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.* [1 Timothy 4:16]

We are here not only to “save” ourselves—meaning to advance our careers, accomplish

our personal and academic goals, and increase our individual spirituality—but we are also here to do the same for all of our students, however it is and in whatever ways they hear us.

Thank you all for being with us today and every day. Thank you for your devoted and capable service, without which we would all be the poorer. Thank you for being worthy of the great trust placed in your hands to nurture, teach, encourage, bless, and help in every appropriate way our wonderful students. You are making sacrifices to be here, but you are also reaping blessings that could not be obtained anywhere else.

May God bless us all, individually and collectively, to be equal to the daunting challenges before us. May we be worthy of, and achieve, the peace in our lives promised by the Prince of Peace Himself as we do our very best in this next exciting year of progress at Brigham Young University, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. Letter to BYU, 26 July 2006, from Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.
2. Pre-Publication Report—September 2006 from the Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of Higher Education*, 7; available at <http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports.html>.
3. “Sweet Is the Peace the Gospel Brings,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 14.