

Our Quest for Excellence

CECIL O. SAMUELSON

It is wonderful to be together with you this morning. I hope you have had a pleasant and productive summer because the activities of this week send an unmistakable message: Vacation is over! The time has arrived once again to engage in essential and vital tasks related to our stewardships at Brigham Young University. As we begin a new fall semester, there can be no better reminder of the fundamental purpose and mission of Brigham Young University than our theme, “Education for Eternity.”

Since my arrival at BYU, each summer has been occupied in part by my growing anticipation of a new fall semester and the events of the annual university conference. I take this matter very seriously because, at some point in time, all of you made a well-considered decision to cast your lot and future with BYU. For some of you it was as recent as the past academic year, and for others it occurred several years ago.

I think it is clear to most of us that the decision to come here was more than just a good professional choice—although I hope that it was and will be. Many of you were recruited vigorously by colleagues, some were drawn back by pleasant memories of previous experiences at the Y, and others have come because of high expectations of what you anticipate

finding here. I’m confident that virtually all of you studied your alternatives carefully, prayed about them diligently, and have felt “moved upon” to be at BYU. Thus we all have a heavy responsibility to do what we can and must to make sure that your prayerful deliberations are also experientially ratified.

Several weeks ago, while reading some of the early sections of the Doctrine and Covenants, I was struck afresh by the emphasis given in the first year or two of the history of the Church on “gathering.” Throughout recorded history, God’s people have gathered in various ways that have been adjusted or modified to meet particular needs and changing conditions. It occurred to me for the first time that our being together with our students and the entire BYU community is a form of gathering that is approved of and endorsed by heaven. In that regard, let me share some words of the Lord to William W. Phelps that might reflect our current circumstances.

Cecil O. Samuelson was president of Brigham Young University when this address was given at the BYU Annual University Conference on 28 August 2007.

In addition to his specific work of printing—and we have a wonderful print shop here at BYU—Brother Phelps was informed that his work involved “selecting and writing books for schools in this church” (D&C 55:4). Further, he had been instructed to travel so “that you may be planted in the land of your inheritance to do this work” (D&C 55:5).

I would suggest that each of us has been gathered and planted here to do important work of various kinds at this, the flagship university of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Like Brother Phelps, some of you have and will compose hymns, write articles, and publish books while teaching and serving the wonderful and precious students who likewise have been gathered here. It is an exciting but also sobering thought to be so involved as we find ourselves. It is no small thing to have the opportunity and responsibility to help envision and plant “education for eternity” in the hearts and minds of the impressive students and colleagues who are entrusted to BYU.

I hope you have had a good season of refreshment and renewal—albeit one too short and still filled with responsibility and necessary obligations. Life has its ongoing purposes and requirements. A change of pace is always attractive even when there are still lawns to mow, weeds to pull, walls to paint, and trash to be collected. We hope it has been a time to deepen family bonds, to connect a little more with friends and neighbors, and to do the things that charge your figurative batteries for the exciting rigors ahead in the next academic year.

The past year has been remarkable in many respects, and we are grateful for what we have learned and experienced. BYU has never been more highly regarded academically than it is now, and the successes, recognition, and achievements of our faculty and students provide more supporting evidence than ever before that this is so. We have not arrived at

where we need to be, but we have positive confirmation that we are on or near the path.

Among the significant distinctions we have experienced this past year—including in academics, athletics, the arts, and animation—is one that is truly unique: the building and dedication of the new Gordon B. Hinckley Alumni and Visitors Center, which is to be known as the Hinckley Center.

Never before, to my knowledge, has a sitting president of the Church and chairman of our board of trustees spent two consecutive birthdays with us on the BYU campus. On June 23, 2006, we held the groundbreaking ceremony for the Hinckley Center, and on June 23, 2007, the largely completed building was dedicated. To erect and finish this beautiful, spacious, and functional facility in record time is an accomplishment that is nothing short of miraculous, and we owe a tremendous debt to all who sacrificed in any way to make this happen.

Of course in this distinction we include the more than 70,000 who contributed financially not only for the construction of the building but also for a maintenance fund that will ensure in perpetuity that this structure will never need to call upon the tithing funds of the Church for its support. Heaven has blessed this enterprise, and so very many people gave more in effort and treasure than could have been previously imagined.

Last summer and again during my days away from campus this past month, I read a selection of the speeches President Hinckley has given at BYU over the years.

President Hinckley’s messages are always excellent, and for me they seem to be timeless in their relevance for us. Of course there are recurring themes, just as there are in the scriptures, but there is also a freshness or currency that bespeaks of his prophetic insights and his God-directed counsel to us.

At least a few here today have heard President Hinckley on most, if not all, of the occasions when he has spoken at BYU since

his call as a General Authority in 1958. Some of you, like me, are more recent arrivals on this campus but will have access to what he has said in the *BYU Speeches* volume published annually and available in the Bookstore or library or on the Web. I commend all of his addresses and messages, general conference talks, *Ensign* and *Liahona* articles, and the like, but I especially encourage those of the BYU community to study what he has specifically said to and about us. If you do, you will have a much clearer understanding of what it means to be here and why the expectations for each of us are in no way trivial or insignificant.

Today, in keeping with our conference theme, I want to focus on one notion that President Hinckley mentions frequently. You would be correct if you think that there are multiple ideas he emphasizes. His linkage of academic achievement in an environment of spiritually sustaining faith is consistent. He has always been a clear and stalwart defender and teacher of the Honor Code. He often reminds us of the worth of the widow's mite and our obligation to the tithe payers of the Church. You could undoubtedly think of others.

At the time of President Hinckley's charge four years ago when I formally became BYU's 12th president, he gave the counsel to continue to make BYU be the best it can be. We have made a little progress, but I see so much more that needs to be done and can be done if we avoid the curse of complacency that is a great risk when there is already so much here that is "pretty good."

In November 1998 President Hinckley spoke at a devotional in the Marriott Center. His message that day was to our students. Today, not quite nine years later, I occupy the same pulpit and speak primarily to our staff, faculty, and administrators. I believe we should liken these words of the prophet to ourselves—yours truly included—because it seems to me that they are as applicable to us as they are to our students.

Said he:

I speak to you this morning not only about a little more effort, a little more self-discipline, a little more consecrated effort in the direction of excellence in your studies. I speak of it also in terms of your lives.

This is the great day of preparation for each of you. It is the time of beginning for something that will go on for as long as you live. I plead with you: Don't be a scrub! Rise to the high ground of excellence. You can do it. You may not be a genius. You may be lacking in some skills. But you can do better than you are now doing. You are students [and I add, faculty, staff, and administrators] at BYU. Most of you are members of this great Church whose influence is now felt all over the world. You are people with a present and with a future. Don't miff the ball. Be excellent. [Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Quest for Excellence," BYU devotional, 10 November 1998]

President Hinckley's comments that day were entitled "The Quest for Excellence." I hope we can all agree that we share a quest for excellence. I like the phrase used by Moroni as he described how God's gift of His Son provided "a more excellent way" (Ether 12:11) in replacing the law of Moses. It was not that the law of Moses was not good. In fact, the law of Moses was essential for its time and circumstances. Likewise, what has thus far been accomplished at Brigham Young University has been remarkable and wonderful, but there is still room—and the necessity—to accomplish more excellence in the days and years ahead. That is what is expected of us, and that is what we are promised can happen.

As I have mentioned before, I am asked with some frequency about my vision and priorities for BYU. I usually point out that one of the great blessings of this institution is that we are led by a board of trustees whom we sustain in their guiding and prophetic callings. We are grateful for the correct principles they teach us while inviting us to govern our daily programs and activities using our best judgment,

common sense, and the inspiration we might receive directly.

In this context I mention the recent passing of President James E. Faust. He served as vice chairman of the BYU Board of Trustees for more than 12 years and for many additional years as one of our staunchest advocates and advisors in making the BYU Jerusalem Center a reality. He was never failing in his guidance, his kindness, and his faith in the mission of Brigham Young University. He will be missed greatly, and we will forever be in his debt. Our prayers and condolences go to Sister Faust, his family, and the Brethren.

It seems worth mentioning again how regular and systematic our process is of consulting with our board and its representatives. Many of you contribute regularly in department and college councils aimed at optimizing and coordinating our work. You may know that our deans meet about twice a month as a group with the academic vice presidents, usually on Monday afternoons, to consider issues across the university. Likewise, the directors of the university meet frequently with their stewardship lines to carry forward their important activities.

Perhaps you may know our President's Council meets almost every Monday morning. Monthly we meet with the commissioner of Church Education, with the executive committee of the board of trustees, and with the board of trustees, which is chaired by our beloved prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley.

It is remarkable how President's Council, Deans' Council, and the college council members have specific and unique responsibilities and stewardships but work together with an eye to what is best for the institution as a whole. As I watch the coordination and collaboration across this great campus, I frequently think, "Only at BYU would this be possible." I know that people at other places and institutions work cooperatively and collegially, but the clear focus and priority on the institutional mission first is truly "BYU unique."

As we met on this occasion last year, we were taking a figuratively deep breath after what was a rigorous but successful university-wide accreditation site visit and review. Shortly we will have an abbreviated, one-day visit by a representative of the Northwest Commission to document our continued progress. I'm confident that the great work that has been done this past year will be reflected in obvious evidence of tremendous progress. I will have more to say about this in a few moments.

Likewise, we continue to have remarkable and positive support from our board of trustees as well as admiring recognition of BYU's achievements from multiple sources external to the university and the Church. In fact, in my interactions with other university presidents, which my responsibilities require on a regular basis, I'm reminded of a statement made by Senator Lowell Weicker of Connecticut in a meeting I attended many years ago. After a fairly lengthy preamble that described many of the faults and failings of the United States, including the government and its people, Senator Weicker said, "There is only one place in the world worse to live than the USA—that is anyplace else."

That is how I feel about BYU. We have problems, challenges, difficulties, and occasional disappointments. Things are so bad at Brigham Young University that there is only one place where I would rather not be the president than here. That place is any other university in the world. We can't and won't compare ourselves completely to any other institution because there is not another exactly like us. Of course we will measure some specifics against others as we must and should, but we will never try to be completely like another institution, nor should we expect, given our mandates and resources, another to be exactly like us. We will always compare ourselves to what we must become—thus our continuing and relentless quest for excellence.

In that context, and in our remaining time this morning, let me touch briefly on five topics we are addressing and will be emphasizing—particularly in the coming academic year. At all levels each of us obviously works on many and various pressing matters. In noting the quintet that I will mention this morning, I mean in no way to reduce the importance or value of other BYU priorities or imperatives. I do feel all represent areas of significant interest and importance in the coming days. These are the five for today.

1. Becoming the best BYU can be
2. Student learning outcomes
3. New facilities planning and funding
4. Graduate programs
5. Online education

Becoming the Best

I will confess that I have spent many hours—including some late at night and some early in the morning—thinking about President Hinckley’s charge to our campus at the time of my inauguration. While the notion of BYU becoming the best it can be has a number of dimensions, part of “becoming” and “being” the best BYU can be is to live with integrity; that is, to say what we mean and mean what we say. In recent beginning-of-semester devotionals I have spoken—I hope plainly—about such things as dress and grooming, academic honesty, other aspects of integrity in our Honor Code, and loyalty to the doctrines, principles, and people that support and sustain us.

We place great emphasis on academics and will continue to do so without apology, but we also want to be sure that the promises we make about such things as our BYU student housing policy, for example, are aligned with the realities of our circumstances. We support BYU housing standards in a campus and community environment where most students want such and almost all of our students’ families expect them.

Our chartered housing pilots are proceeding, and we are learning as we go. As is the case in other matters as well, specific policies and procedures will modify and change with evolving circumstances when necessary, but our principles will not be compromised. We are sure and clear that those who accept the privilege and responsibility of being students at BYU must have an appropriate learning and living environment on and off campus that accords with our Honor Code and BYU-approved housing standards.

Some have said BYU athletic teams could not maintain both the Honor Code and win consistently. We are grateful to our BYU scholar-athletes and their coaches who demonstrate you can be winners—conference and national champions in many cases—not in spite of but because of keeping Honor Code standards. Where integrity is concerned, the choice is not either/or. It is resoundingly both.

Another part of BYU becoming the best we can be is our ongoing effort to focus and simplify. One way to look at this issue is to do less but do it better. It is almost always temporarily easier to keep adding than to ask critically, “What is really essential?” “What is ultimately most important?” “How can we prevent excellence from being overshadowed by the pedestrian or the merely good?”

Consistent attention to the alignment of our mission and our daily practice is a vital and constant aspect of BYU becoming the best we can be. As a wise commentator once said, somewhat tongue in cheek, “When all is said and done, almost always more is said than done.” It is far easier to identify our challenges than it is to address them, but deal with them we must if we expect BYU to improve and approach the envisioned best it can be.

I have mentioned previously the dramatic changes I have observed in our College of Biology and Agriculture, which is now the College of Life Sciences. We owe a tremendous debt to all of the faculty, staff, and

administration both present and past who have accomplished so much.

Dean Rodney Brown and his colleagues explain it is part of the shift in focus from farming and the Green Revolution of the 19th century to the Gene Revolution of the 21st century. The knowledge explosion in the life sciences is vast, and BYU is committed to making significant contributions to it.

Change, including change at the university, is not easy. It takes shared vision, collegial cooperation, and sometimes difficult decisions.

In restructuring the College of Life Sciences, six departments were discontinued and five new departments reemerged. Low-enrollment and outdated programs were consolidated and eliminated: 40 programs became 21 programs, and a 30-percent reduction in course offerings minimized redundancies.

This was not easy, perfect, or universally popular. But such changes make possible new things. As best as can be determined, no student in this college who wanted a mentored-learning experience with a faculty member last year was denied one. There were 201 undergraduate student names appearing as authors on peer-reviewed journal papers, and 409 undergraduates were authors of abstracts and presentations at meetings.

If we had time this morning, we could talk about plans underway in the Marriott School, the McKay School of Education, and several other colleges as well. In sympathy for you, I'll save these important advances for another occasion.

In a slightly different but related vein, our "BHAG" program exemplifies campus goodwill and cooperation. As you will recall, BHAG stands for Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal.

Vice presidents Brian Evans and Kelly Flanagan have worked with our colleagues in their respective organizations to meet a BHAG goal of identifying and transferring positions and salary to create additional new faculty fellowships.

Let me pause here. How many institutions and units—especially hardworking groups—do you know who voluntarily transfer FTE and salary?

While we do not expect all BHAG positions to be named, the first six have been designated by Financial Services, Human Resources, Dining Services, and OIT to honor six colleagues who have cumulatively served more than 200 years at BYU.

As an undergraduate teaching institution with some limited-in-number but superior-in-quality graduate programs, our mission is to learn and teach with academic excellence in a nurturing environment of sustaining faith. One, academic excellence, can and is being accomplished elsewhere. It is at BYU where both academics and a spiritual environment do and will increasingly bless the lives of those who are here. And those who BYU graduates will in turn bless in their service throughout the world.

An issue of great concern to all of us is the obvious dynamic tension we see and feel between the demands for teaching, scholarship, and citizenship. We experience similar tugs as we attempt to improve how we serve while not expecting or experiencing increased resources to support our vital tasks. These tensions, when properly harnessed, can be helpful to challenge the best from each of us. And yet the temptation is great to respond to the stretching that is taking place by figuratively letting go of one end of the rope rather than enhancing the latent strength within us to rise to the challenges we face. We must all do better in each sphere of our responsibilities.

For example, on rare occasions I hear that a department may feel that it might be necessary to hire new faculty members who are not particularly interested or able in teaching but who seem to have the capacity to do research, creative work, and publishing sufficiently to achieve continuing faculty status. When our behaviors differ from our stated values and

objectives, both we and the institution are diminished and the gulf between what we really are and what we really do as we strive to be the best we can be is widened.

Student Learning Outcomes

Thanks again to each of you who helped BYU prepare for the successful April 2006 site visit by our regional accrediting agency, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. As I reported at our last annual university conference, we were pleased to receive NWCCU reaffirmation of the accreditation of Brigham Young University.

At the end of October this year we will host an NWCCU commission representative for a one-day visit. Our focused interim report is due a month prior to that visit. Our report will indicate that BYU faculty, students, and administrators across campus are directly addressing the three requirements in Recommendation 1 of the comprehensive site visit report.

First, BYU has undertaken a systematic process to identify and publish expected learning outcomes for each of our 415 degree programs. This is a significant achievement. I am told that our learningoutcomes.byu.edu Web site has received some national interest as a readily accessed, open, easily updated list of the expected learning outcomes across campus.

And I am delighted our Student Advisory Council, Deans' Council, University Curriculum Council, University Graduate Council, and many others will be inviting every student on campus this fall to review his or her expected learning outcomes on the learningoutcomes.byu.edu site and in hard copy as will be posted in advisement centers and departments.

Second, BYU seeks to demonstrate that students who complete their programs have achieved the stated outcomes of those programs. Thank you to each and all who are contributing to what is becoming increas-

ingly regular and systematic assessment of our degree programs using the full range of appropriate primary and secondary sources of evidence.

The day has come when BYU—and all higher education institutions across the United States—must be able to state who our students are who graduate from our programs and show what they can do with our degrees.

And, third, BYU is seeking to provide evidence consistently across our programs that the results of its assessment activities lead to the improvement of teaching and learning. In a sense our bottom line is a continual focus on teaching and learning and the improvement of our learning and teaching.

New Facilities

We are all grateful for the generosity, hard work, and vision of so very many who make our superb facilities available to us across campus. I have already commented on what some of us regard as miraculous circumstances that led to the groundbreaking of the Hinckley Center on June 23, 2006, and then, exactly a year later, the dedication of this magnificent structure on June 23, 2007.

As you walk around campus, you see among the many projects underway the major expansion of the Tanner Building for the Marriott School of Management and an addition to the Richards Building to accommodate parts of our dance program and other activities that will be displaced with the razing of the Knight Mangum Building. You will also see the remaining five Deseret Towers buildings come down now that they have reached the limits of their utility in housing our students.

Many may have heard that the board of trustees has given us approval to raise the funds to construct a new BYU Broadcasting facility to meet our unique opportunities and heavy responsibilities in education as well as in sharing our message and that of the Church literally around the world. We are in the

planning phase for a new Office of Information Technology Building. In addition to a rather constant program of campus beautification and infrastructure updating and improvement, we have a task committee carefully examining options for our southeast quadrant of campus as we consider how best to respond to significant facility needs for critical academic programs such as engineering and the life sciences. I have not mentioned all that is on our plate, but you will sense that we are a university that continues to be on the move in many remarkable and important ways.

Graduate Programs

While we continually remind others and ourselves that our primary mission is and will be that of an undergraduate learning and teaching institution, we know that in key, selected areas, our graduate efforts reinforce our undergraduate programs by providing to both faculty and students important academic and professional opportunities they would not otherwise have. We are grateful for our BYU graduate programs; and in the special relationships and roles that occur here, we consider them to be vital to our stated mission.

Having said this, I hope you won't mind me saying again that there is always going to be a very significant and high hurdle for those who might wish to propose new graduate programs. And, no, we are not going to open a dental or medical school!

I hope you will understand when we continue to ask all members of the university community involved with both graduate and undergraduate programs what we might choose to reduce, simplify, or even eliminate as part of our ongoing efforts to do what we do better. Just as we could not tolerate today the academic program of the BYU of 1907, so must we not jeopardize the BYU of the future by inaction or poor choices.

Online Courses

In this digital knowledge age, it is understandable and often productive to see online courses as efficient and enhancing educational tools both on campus and as widely distributed elsewhere. We will continue to think, study, and explore how best to use these tools in ways that enhance and magnify our mission at BYU. These tools are expensive, and, as with all that we do, we must weigh the cost against other good priorities. In this regard we will continue to work with our sister institutions in the Church Educational System, especially BYU-Idaho and BYU-Hawaii, regarding fair, equitable, mutually beneficial, and productive ways to support each other in the online area. It is not only to be expected but also, in my judgment, desirable for each institution to pursue these matters a little differently, and we will assist and cooperate as best we can.

We salute colleagues across this campus for embracing and using appropriate online tools to enhance our educational processes. In particular we recognize our Division of Continuing Education for providing award-winning online courses in many circumstances.

At the same time we will continue to be vigilant in preventing others from abusing our efforts to be helpful to those wishing to access our offerings. Likewise, we will maintain our caution regarding online courses as any kind of substitute for the best parts of what we call "the BYU experience." There is something thrilling and perhaps unique about learners and teachers sharing together in the same place, especially with the enlightening influence of the Holy Spirit.

As we mention the Division of Continuing Education, we anticipate the move of the BYU Salt Lake Center to its downtown Triad Center location this fall. As you may recall, after carefully studying several possible approaches and options, our board of trustees decided to move only the Salt Lake Center and its current program onto the Church Triad Center

campus. We are grateful that the facilities have already been dedicated, but those interested may attend an upcoming open house to visit the new facility. The details of this event will be shared later.

Conclusion

In the interest of time and your patience, I have mentioned only a few topics and issues from a far more extensive menu before us. While we all will be involved in much more than has been addressed today, I hope we can obtain and maintain a clear focus on the things that really matter most in providing the necessary components of an “education for eternity.” For me such focus largely encapsulates my view of our quest for excellence.

As I repeat my strongly held feelings of appreciation and affection for each of you as well as the very many not gathered physically to our campus today but nevertheless clearly gathered with and to the cause of BYU, I also bear my solemn witness that the work of this institution is the work of the Lord. Like William W. Phelps was in 1831, we are and must be God’s agents, planted here to do this work.

To the extent that I possess the authority, I invoke our Heavenly Father’s blessings upon each of us, our students, and our families in this marvelous quest for excellence in achieving and providing an education for eternity. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

