

“A Vibrant and Determined Community of Learners and Lifters”

KEVIN J WORTHEN

It is wonderful to see you all here this morning and to feel the joy, warmth, and enthusiasm you radiate. I count it as one of the great blessings of my life that I have the opportunity to associate daily with such talented, consecrated people whose main focus is to provide our students with the kind of holistic learning experience that President Spencer W. Kimball called “education for eternity.”¹ I am grateful beyond words to each of you for your efforts in that remarkable and remarkably rewarding enterprise.

I don’t think that anyone who has heard me speak this last year will be surprised that this year’s annual university conference theme—“Assist Individuals in Their Quest for Perfection and Eternal Life”—is a line from our mission statement.² That deeply rich foundational document was the central focus of my remarks at this conference last year, and I have tried to mention it (if not make it the main theme) in the many speaking opportunities I have had since then. Given that effort, I couldn’t help but occasionally wonder if my almost obsessive emphasis on the mission statement was having any impact. Was anyone listening? Did anyone care?

Such inquiries usually end up being rhetorical. But on occasion, heaven provides

small but encouraging indications that the message is getting through—though sometimes in the most unexpected ways and in the most unanticipated places. I suppose many of you have already seen this clip from a television show last month, but because it gives me a little boost every time I see it, I hope you don’t mind indulging me in showing one more time the segment of *Jeopardy!* that aired on July 23, 2015.³ [The video clip was shown.]

Who knew that attendance at last year’s annual university conference would be preparation for a final *Jeopardy!* question? Given the answers of the first two contestants, maybe I should have given some emphasis to spelling and considered adding a veterinarian program to the university. In any event, I appreciate the publicity that the show gave to what is our unique mission to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life.

In this last year we have seen some of the fruits of our long-term efforts to achieve that and the other goals set forth in the mission statement. Those who arrived early at this session may have seen several examples in the

Kevin J Worthen was president of Brigham Young University when this address was given at the BYU annual university conference on 24 August 2015.

pre-conference presentation on the beautiful new video display boards overhead. In fact, the video display boards themselves are partial fulfillment of one aspect of our mission. The mission statement challenges us to provide “a stimulating setting” in which our students can pursue “the full realization of human potential.”⁴ The display boards will certainly make it easier for those who attend events here to be more fully immersed in and uplifted by the many different kinds of activities that occur here, from concerts to basketball games to performances and devotionals. All will be more stimulating, thanks to the efforts of those who made the acquisition and installation of the video boards possible.

Let me also note the new seats in which you are seated. There is no explicit reference to comfort in the mission statement, but surely the kind of learning that we hope occurs in this building will be enhanced by the fact that those who attend can focus on the words of the speakers or the skill of the performers and not on avoiding the embarrassment that comes from placing your knees into the back of the person in front of you or worrying about whether you will need to schedule a visit to your chiropractor because of the contortions required to fit into the allotted space. I extend my personal appreciation to Physical Facilities, OIT, Special Events, and all the other organizations that in a very short window between Women’s Conference and August commencement provided an extreme makeover and greatly extended the life of this most important gathering place on our campus. It was truly a heroic effort by so many.

Equally impressive and equally impactful were the efforts of our physical facilities and grounds crew personnel to complete the second phase of our Campus Drive redesign, rendering the campus more beautiful, more pedestrian friendly, and overall more conducive to the kind of life-changing experience we hope our students have here. I also express

appreciation to all of you who soldiered on through the construction delays and detours during the summer. We know it was disruptive, but the end result is an enhancement of the stimulating setting in which our students will carry on this phase of their quest for perfection and eternal life.

Our mission statement also commits us to preparing our students in such a way and to such a degree that they are “capable of competing with the best in their fields.”⁵ There was ample evidence this past year that this is occurring on campus in a wide variety of ways.

For example, performers from BYU’s Theatre and Media Arts Department won more than fifteen awards at the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival—eleven of which recognized students participating in *Our Town*, a reinvention of the American classic by the students who incorporated film into the live play.

A team of BYU accounting students earned first place at the national Deloitte FanTAXtic case study competition, where teams from more than 100 universities were asked to review the situation of a hypothetical company and recommend solutions based on their knowledge of tax law and practices. This is the ninth time in the past fourteen years that BYU has brought home the top prize.

The women’s volleyball team played in the national championship game, upsetting higher-ranked Arizona, Florida State, and Texas along the way and becoming the first unseeded tournament team ever to reach the national championship game.

And four BYU broadcast journalism students won Gracie Awards, national honors given by the Alliance for Women in Media to recognize the accomplishments of women in media and entertainment at the local, public, and student levels.

There are numerous other examples. I don’t have time to mention them all, but I invite

you to take note of and celebrate these kinds of successes in your individual colleges and departments. In our journey up the mountain, we need to pause from time to time to enjoy the view that we have gained as a result of our combined efforts.

In short, we have accomplished a lot this year. And as a result of the hard work and dedication of so many—not just this past year but for many decades—we are part of an extraordinary university with a strong foundation. That fact is recognized by others who come here. You all know that representatives of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, our main accreditation body, visited campus this past April. I am happy to report that the visit went well and that we have recently been informed that our accreditation has been reaffirmed. I express my appreciation to so many—especially Jim Gordon and his team—who worked so hard to achieve this result.

I could go on and on, but let me conclude this brief report on where we are and what we have accomplished by sharing with you the just-completed video produced by Julie Walker and her team in University Communications to introduce BYU to prospective students.⁶ It provides a general overview of what this university has become over the years and demonstrates that, as we look toward the future, we are built upon a very strong foundation. [The video was shown.]

It is clear that we are in a good place. But we cannot stop now. As President Kimball reminded us during his address “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” there are still hills ahead of us and mountains left to climb.⁷ We have a remarkable history, and we are extraordinarily situated at the present. But what about the future? What can we do this year to better assist individuals in their quest for perfection? Where do we go from here? Those who attended my inauguration and have

noted the references to mountains, hills, and climbing in my remarks so far today are probably expecting at this point to hear the refrains from the closing number of *The Sound of Music* and a call for us to “go to the mountains.”

I love that allusion and will return to it throughout my administration, but today I want to focus on particular aspects of that ascent that come from a complementary theme sounded in another address in that inauguration ceremony. While you may—or may not—have listened intently to my remarks last September, I paid most attention to the address given by President Henry B. Eyring. And I had a particular reason for doing so.

When the invitation to accept my current position came to me from the First Presidency early in 2014, I did not receive much by way of instruction—or at least I do not remember receiving much. I must confess that I experienced a bit of shock when the invitation came, so when I left the Church Administration Building that morning, I could not recall any particular charge or instruction about the course of the university or the focus I should have. It was not a particularly comforting feeling. Therefore I paid particular attention to what President Eyring said during the inauguration last September, hoping to find some direction in his remarks. And, as is usually the case when we concentrate on the words of prophets, I was amply rewarded, both in the moment of delivery and during subsequent reviews of his remarks.

What initially stood out to me was President Eyring’s statement that the course of this university had been set by its founder, Brigham Young, in a one-sentence declaration. Brigham Young said:

*Put forth your ability to learn as fast as you can, and gather all the strength of mind and principle of faith you possibly can, and then distribute your knowledge to the people.*⁸

Embedded in that profound sentence are three important insights. First, those of us at this university have an obligation to learn as fast as we can. Second, this kind of learning requires all the strength of both our minds and our faith. And third, our responsibility does not end when we have acquired all the knowledge that results from that kind of effort; we are required to distribute that knowledge to others—or, as President Eyring phrased it later in his remarks:

The vision at the founding was that all here will seek truth not for themselves alone but will also distribute what they have learned to bless others.⁹

Summarizing this view, President Eyring suggested that we have built and should continue to build on what he called this “shared vision of learning, teaching, and serving that has shaped this university.”

Now, some may think that this emphasis on learning, teaching, and serving applies only to the core academic enterprise and that President Eyring’s charge was aimed only at the faculty. It is true that this vision requires faculty who are continually learning, both in their particular substantive areas and in the common enterprise of teaching in which all faculty are involved. It is also true that the insights faculty gain in that endeavor are to be shared both with the students they teach and with others outside the university, including not only their peers in their disciplines but also others in the world at large. However, President Eyring made clear that this one-sentence charge from Brother Brigham was “a message to *all* in this enterprise” (emphasis added). No one is exempt. The charge is intended to have an effect, President Eyring said, on “those who study, teach, and serve here.” That seems to cover everyone: faculty, students, and staff.

It might also seem to describe the role of each of those groups. The students study, the

faculty teaches, and the staff serve. However, I believe that this threefold description of learning, teaching, and serving not only makes clear that every person involved in this enterprise has a role to play but, more important, also describes the threefold responsibility that every person shares no matter what his or her particular role may be. In other words, I believe President Eyring’s charge was for *all* of us to engage in *all* aspects of the direction given by President Young. Let me reiterate Brigham Young’s instruction: Each of us—faculty, staff, and students—are to “put forth [our] ability to learn as fast as [we] can, and gather all the strength of mind and principle of faith [we] possibly can, and then distribute [our] knowledge to the people.”

To quote President Eyring, “Students, faculty, and staff” (note again the universality of the charge) should be “driven by a desire and a strength of mind to learn as fast as they can” and then to share their knowledge in ways that serve the needs of others.

President Eyring then used a distinctive phrase to describe the kind of university this effort would produce: “This is a vibrant and determined community of learners and lifters.” What a wonderful description this is of what we should be: a community of learners and lifters. I believe it is by creating a community of learners and lifters that we will best be able to play our individual roles in assisting individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life.

Creating a community of learners and lifters is an ambitious and, I must admit, somewhat abstract goal. Just what does it mean at an operational level? I will confess that I don’t fully know the answer to that question, and I am inviting you today to begin a larger conversation about what it may mean to you both individually and as members of specific units on campus. However, let me offer a few more concrete thoughts that may help guide that conversation.

First, being part of a vibrant and determined community of learners and lifters means that everyone should be using their strength of mind and faith to learn as much as they can about the field and enterprise in which they are engaged. For the faculty members this means that they need to be current—indeed, cutting edge—in their understanding of the discipline in which they are working. As faculty, we cannot simply dust off the notes of our classes that we have been using for years and teach from them. We must be involved in research, especially research that we can share with our students in some way. The result of this determined effort will be the discovery of new insights about both the specific substantive disciplines of the faculty and the methods of teaching that enhance learning.

But that same charge applies as well to those who work on the grounds crew or in the laundry or at the press or in dining services, technology, office work, or physical maintenance. There is something *each* of us can learn in our areas that will increase our knowledge and also increase our ability to perform our assigned tasks better.

But President Eyring's charge is to go beyond the mere acquisition of abstract knowledge, as essential as that is. It is a charge to consider ways in which that knowledge can have a practical application in helping others. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell said:

*Brigham Young University seeks to improve and "sanctify" itself for the sake of others—not for the praise of the world, but to serve the world better.*¹⁰

The final requirement, then, is to look for opportunities to share that information with others so that their lives can be better. This may be easier for faculty who have a ready-made audience in the form of both students in their classrooms and peers in their discipline. But the charge extends to *all* involved in this enterprise. Each of us should look for ways to

distribute the knowledge we have in such a way that it blesses others. For those in nonacademic units it may mean that you share the insights with coworkers or others engaged in similar activities outside the university or even with family members. For students it likely means sharing newly acquired knowledge with fellow students in class or other venues. And all of this sharing must be with the idea not of impressing others with how smart we are or how much information we know but with the desire to make others' lives better.

Imagine a community in which all members are truly engaged in an individual and collective effort to use all their minds and faith to learn as much as they can and as fast as they can, with the ultimate goal of sharing insights with others to improve their lives. Surely that would be both a vibrant and a determined community, to use President Eyring's phrase. And it would be a community that is alive with ideas and insights gained from a sustained, substantial desire to learn, as well as one with charity generated by that same kind of effort to use that knowledge to improve the lives of others.

We do not begin this effort at ground zero. As President Eyring noted, "Inspired leaders and teachers here have made it possible for students to begin to serve with what they have learned while they are still here" through mentored learning and other opportunities in which faculty invite students "to participate as partners in their own studies"—thereby lifting while they are learning.

Indeed, one of the distinctive traits of this university is the extent to which students have the opportunity to work with faculty members outside of class, including on specific research projects. In the most recent National Survey of Student Engagement survey of senior students, 36 percent of BYU seniors indicated that they had worked with a faculty member on a research project. That is 50 percent higher than the participation rate at other universities

in our same Carnegie classification and even higher than that for other universities of our size.

Using data obtained from our alumni questionnaire and expanding the question to include any regular work with faculty outside the classroom, you can see the growth of faculty-student mentoring over the years, with the latest survey indicating that 49 percent of our students have had such a mentored learning experience before they graduate. Such experiences are invaluable preparation for so many things, including graduate school. Thus it is not surprising that the number of our alumni who three years after graduation have either completed or are in graduate school has also increased over the years—with the most recent data indicating that 40 percent of our alumni are in that category. While I understand the important difference between correlation and causation, I think it not entirely coincidental that those who have worked with a faculty member outside of class are more than twice as likely to attend graduate school as those who do not, as indicated by the data. Such one-on-one interaction is one prime example of the way in which faculty learners become lifters in the very process of learning.

For a number of reasons—including because we are beginning to reach the limits in some departments of the number of individualized experiences students can have on campus—we are increasingly relying on well-structured and well-planned off-campus internships in which we can partner with those outside our campus to provide transforming learning experiences to our students. Such experiences provide our students with both new opportunities to learn and additional venues in which to share what they have learned. We have over the years seen a marked increase in the percentage of our students who are taking advantage of these potentially transforming opportunities, with 56 percent of those in the most recent group for whom we have data having completed

an off-campus internship while at BYU. Like mentored learning opportunities, internships can provide vital preparation for the next step our students will take in their quest for perfection and eternal life. Tellingly, in that regard, 49 percent of those who completed off-campus internships received a job offer in the subject matter of their internships.

Consistent with Brigham Young's vision, the impact of such experiences is not limited to the students themselves. In many instances students are able to share what they have learned in ways that extend the impact of what happens here well beyond the borders of our campus. You may have seen the extensive media coverage generated by a group of BYU mechanical engineering students in Professor Mark Colton's class.¹¹ These students focused their capstone project on helping children in wheelchairs. Motorized pediatric wheelchairs can cost up to \$10,000. They are often so heavy that they are not able to go up steep inclines—thereby limiting the things that their occupants can do. So this class set out to design a lightweight wheelchair that could be constructed for less than \$500. The results are shown in a video. [A video was shown.]

NBC News and other media outlets highlighted the project. That prompted email inquiries to BYU from throughout the world. Let me share just two examples.

From Rohan Mehra, exhibition content developer, Science Museum, London:

I develop . . . exhibits on contemporary science and engineering at the Science Museum in London. We're curious about potentially displaying a version of the wheelchair and interviewing the minds behind it. Do you know if a version could be provided (at our cost) for a period?

Frank Niendorff:

Very impressive project. After reading about the wheelchair, I am interested in finding out [whether]

the plans, specs, and material lists are available. I live in Austin, TX, am retired, have a full workshop, and would very much like to make some of these wheelchairs and give them to the children's hospital or other charitable organizations that support disabled children.

The last line of our mission statement expresses the firm belief that “the earnest pursuit of this institutional mission . . . will greatly enlarge Brigham Young University’s influence in a world we wish to improve.”¹² The wheelchair project is exhibit A, offered as proof that establishing a vibrant and determined community of learners and lifters will better enable us to fulfill that charge.

With such persuasive evidence of the far-reaching and long-lasting positive impact of mentored learning and internships, it should be no surprise that we intend to make mentored learning and internship experiences a priority this year and in the years to come. We are looking for ways to increase both the number and quality of those opportunities for our students. We will use the endpoints of the rather impressive data of student involvement I cited today as the baseline for one measure of how successful we are in fulfilling our charge to become a community of learners and lifters.

As we do that, we anticipate that there will be even more interaction between our faculty and staff on the one hand and our students on the other. As this happens, I implore you not to focus solely on the secular knowledge you will be sharing with our students. For us to fulfill our charge to be learners and lifters in the eternal and most important sense, we must also engage in spiritual mentoring. As you interact with these wonderful young people, keep in mind President Kimball’s observation:

You can . . . be more effective in the service you render students if students see you as individuals who have blended successfully things secular and things

*spiritual in a way that has brought to you earned respect in both realms.*¹³

In that regard, President J. Reuben Clark Jr.’s admonition to never let your faith be difficult to detect is fully applicable to this enterprise.¹⁴ I implore you not to hide what is most important to you and what will be most important to those whom you mentor. You can best help lift them at critical points in their quest for perfection and eternal life only if they clearly understand the true source of all knowledge and wisdom and service and power. We must ever point them to Him.

As we jointly and universally engage in the process of learning and lifting, we will create a community that is not only distinctive but in some ways unique. We have seen examples of that on this campus as well. As those who have been at BYU for some time will have discovered, employment slots, or FTEs, as we call them, are among the most valuable resources on campus. People can be hired to help in any part of campus only if there is an authorized FTE for that position, and those positions are limited. FTEs are sometimes more difficult to find than the funds to pay the salary. In most organizations, such precious resources would be carefully collected and guarded—and probably hoarded—within units. And yet, several years ago, the nonacademic support units on campus concluded that they could best help advance the mission of the university by consolidating their efforts and freeing up FTEs to be transferred to hire more faculty members. The six Teaching and Learning Faculty Fellowships announced this morning represent just a portion of the sacrifice made by the university’s support services to make that happen. This is a remarkable example of consecration that is not likely to be found in many, if any, other places.

A similar example occurred this past year. As many of you know, we have for the past few years been raising funds for a new addition to the engineering building. Despite strenuous

efforts and generous donations by many, the project seemed somewhat stalled last fall. During that fundraising period, Dean Rod Brown of the College of Life Sciences noted that his college's need for a new facility had been generously and fully funded by the Church. Having been blessed in that way, he wondered if there was anything the College of Life Sciences could do to help with the engineering project. After some discussion, the College of Life Sciences agreed to make a significant donation to the engineering project, using funds that could appropriately be repurposed in that way. Shortly thereafter, the Division of Continuing Education made a similar donation, and then Print and Mail Services followed suit. When these remarkable donations were announced at a meeting of our major donors this past spring, one donor—who has been involved with a number of universities—commented, “This kind of thing would not happen at any other university.” I believe he is right. This is a unique academic community in which people by nature lift and help one another in unexpected, and almost miraculous, ways.

Let me give one concluding example—one that is perhaps less dramatic but likely more representative of the often unnoticed ways in which learning and lifting occurs on this campus.

As many of you know, law school can be very competitive. At most law schools, including BYU's, students are literally ranked in order by their grades, and employers often make the initial hiring decisions based primarily on that ranking. It is an environment rife with competition—looking at the other person, trying to better them. To add to the tension, in most law-school classes the seemingly all-important grade is determined solely on the basis of the final examination. As you might imagine, the stress levels at the law school are quite high during finals.

On one occasion I led a student discussion on pride and competition. In that setting,

a first-year student, who had recently been through the soul-trying experience of the first set of law-school finals, related the following experience, which I share with his permission:

When I came to BYU Law School, I immediately developed a big, fat crush on my entire 1L class: they were the nicest, smartest, most interesting people that I had ever been around. . . . [Even though] I realized right away that I was out-gunned, outsmarted, and outpaced in every class . . . , I didn't resent the successes of my peers; they were . . . my friends, and I liked them. . . .

As classes ended, [however,] and our 1L class threw all its weight, collectively and individually . . . , toward finals, I was anxious. The anxiety grew and turned black. I studied hard and long, but I felt more insecure the more I studied.

The student went on to say that he began to stay away from his classmates because each interaction with them increasingly convinced him that they knew more than he did and that he was, therefore, destined to fail.

He then related:

I was praying early one morning about finals, asking for help to do my best [or even to just pass the class], and I began describing the bleak feelings I harbored, and I asked for help. After a few minutes, I [suddenly] found myself [praying] not [just] for myself but for my classmates, and not just for those few that I knew . . . struggled [with the material,] as I did, but for the gifted and the talented as well. I prayed that they would do their best, that they would have peace and clarity. As I prayed for them . . . , I felt a surge of love for the classmates I had admired and had liked so much in the beginning.

He then began to reengage with his fellow students, not just to learn from them but with the thought that he might actually have something he could offer to them. At that point his stress level dropped dramatically, his learning increased considerably, and his view

of law school and life was transformed. He was a learner and a lifter whose lifting amplified his learning. Who knew that finals, especially law-school finals, could be a spiritual experience? They can—and should be—at BYU.

And so we look forward to the coming year with optimism, knowing that as we become a vibrant and dedicated community of learners and lifters, we will truly assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life.

There will be challenges. Some of what we do will not win the praise of the world; indeed, some of the things we do may be ridiculed. Events around us will cause some to question our values and our course of action. We are ready to address such challenges in ways that I may explain more fully at a future time. In the meantime, we can all take comfort, as did I, in the words of President Eyring at last September's inauguration:

In the midst of what may at times seem a tumult, [President Worthen] will be carried back to the view that is the heart of this university by the joy he has always found in being a determined learner and a mentor of other children of God. . . .

. . . He will then find himself saying quietly in the face of what appear to be crises, "Things will work out."

I bear my witness that, as President Eyring testified, God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ live and that "They have been and always will be attentive to the needs of all who study and serve others here and who go on learning and serving others over their lifetimes and beyond." As we follow that clearly marked path, we will be blessed and prospered. I so testify in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Spencer W. Kimball, "Education for Eternity," pre-school address to BYU faculty and staff, 12 September 1967; see also excerpted text in "Climbing the Hills Just Ahead: Three Addresses," in John W. Welch and Don E.

Norton, eds., *Educating Zion* (Provo: BYU Studies, 1996), 43.

2. *The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education* (Provo: BYU, 2014), 1.

3. Episode 31.224, 23 July 2015, *Jeopardy!*; see Barbara Christiansen, "BYU Featured in *Jeopardy!* Question; Neon Trees Wear BYU Shirts," *Provo Herald*, 31 July 2015, heraldextra.com/news/local/education/college/byu-featured-in-jeopardy-question-neon-trees-wear-byu-shirts/article_39cbc0d9-4005-5cad-b263-e12eeda2cb3e.html.

4. *Mission and Aims*, 1.

5. *Mission and Aims*, 2.

6. BYU University Communications, *The BYU Student Experience with Stacey Harkey*, youtube.com/watch?v=tpDqfj3v30c&feature=youtu.be.

7. See Spencer W. Kimball, "The Second Century of Brigham Young University," BYU devotional, 10 October 1975; excerpted in "Climbing the Hills Just Ahead: Three Addresses," in Welch and Norton, *Educating Zion*, 73.

8. Brigham Young (19 August 1860), *JD* 8:146; quoted in Henry B. Eyring, "A Leader of Learners," BYU inauguration devotional address, 9 September 2014.

9. Eyring, "Leader of Learners" (all further Henry B. Eyring quotations are taken from this 2014 talk).

10. Neal A. Maxwell, "Greetings to the President," *Addresses Delivered at the Inauguration of Dallin Harris Oaks*, 12 November 1971 (Provo: BYU Press, 1971), 1; quoted in Kimball, "Second Century."

11. See Allison Oligschlaeger, "BYU Engineers Create Inexpensive 'Do-It-Yourself Wheelchair,'" *KSL*, 3 April 2015, ksl.com/?sid=34085087&nid=148.

12. *Mission and Aims*, 2.

13. Kimball, "Education for Eternity"; see Welch and Norton, *Educating Zion*, 44–45.

14. See J. Reuben Clark Jr., *The Charted Course of the Church in Education*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1994), 7.