

Extending our Influence for Good

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I appreciate the opportunity to share some thoughts with you for a few minutes today. I have enjoyed getting to know so many of you over this past year and seeing your competence, faith and dedication in action. What a remarkable group of faithful teacher scholars we are blessed with at BYU! While our faith and dedication to Restored Gospel principles and Christian values unites us in ways not seen at other institutions of higher learning, I am grateful for the unique gifts that faculty members have and the different disciplinary perspectives that provide for the edification of all.

When I think of unique gifts, it reminds me of the time I tried to replace the soffits on our roof when we lived in hot, muggy Louisiana. The undersurface of the exterior overhanging section of our roof eaves was rotting away. I tackled the soffit replacement project with vigor, only to discover that it was much more complicated than I ever could have imagined. Several hours into it, a ward member who was a carpenter drove by, screeched to a stop, got out of his truck, and tried to stifle his amusement as he observed the mess that I was making. Cocking his head skyward towards the roof, he simply said, “Brother Hart, would you be ok if I took over? Why don’t you go into the university and do what you do best and leave it up to me to do what I do best.” He finished my project, but let me help some so I could learn how to do it myself next time. Thankfully, next time has not yet come. Later, I was able to help him and his family with some skills I had that focused on a different kind of home repair. Both of our homes were blessed and edified by the service that we rendered to each other.

The word “edify” refers to “instruction and improvement in moral, spiritual and religious knowledge.” Spiritual knowledge cannot always be disassociated from temporal knowledge. There are places in the scriptures where this is alluded to. For example, in D&C 77:2 we are reminded

“... that which is spiritual being in the likeness of that which is temporal; and that which is temporal in the likeness of that which is spiritual.” (D&C 77:2).

This concept is reiterated in D & C 88:77–79 where the Lord enjoins the saints to

“... teach one another ... in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God; ... 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 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)

Most of us can find our disciplines in this and other passages of scripture. We often think of our skill sets and disciplines that relate to scriptural references in temporal terms. At Brigham Young University we have the freedom and opportunity to openly explore and teach the spiritual dimensions of our disciplines, as we “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C

109:14). My associations with the broader campus community has made me more mindful of how individualized interests, talents, and skill sets come together to make BYU the unique and wonderful university that it is today: A place where students and faculty can *edify* one another. A magnificent “*edifice*” pointing to the ideal that Brigham Young University is “a house of faith, a house of learning” (D&C 88:119; Dallin H. Oaks, “House of Faith,” July 5, 1977).

I have been impressed by how well most of our faculty integrate the secular and the divine in this edification process that is reflected in their teaching and scholarship, and as they strive to instill faith in our students by precept and by example. It was inspiring this past year to see how well the vast majority of our faculty candidates for rank and status are doing and the wonderful contributions that they are making. And I am continually heartened by major scholarly, technical, and artistic accomplishments of faculty and students that we see so often recounted in the national media and by national professional organizations. When interviewing faculty candidates, I am often touched as I see how the hand of the Lord has contributed to their preparation to be a good fit for BYU.

By all measureable standards that President Samuelson and John Tanner have noted in recent university conference addresses, we are making good progress. Yet it appears that this institution has far to go in fulfilling its prophetic destiny. We have all heard many times in this university conference setting the following prophecy of President John Taylor:

“You mark my words, and write them down and see if they do not come to pass. You will see the day that Zion will be far ahead of the outside world in everything pertaining to learning of every kind God expects Zion to become the praise and glory of the whole earth, so that kings hearing of her fame will come and gaze upon her glory.”(Sermon in Ephraim, Utah; 1879)

This prophecy has been weighing on my mind for some time. Although not specific to BYU, President Kimball emphasized its importance to faculty here in an address he gave over a century after it was delivered. He envisioned members of the Church greatly increasing their positions of excellence in “drama, music, literature, sculpture, painting, science, and all the graces.” He discussed the greats—Shakespeare, Handel, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and many, many more. And asked if we could not find equal talent among members of the Church in these fields and many others. He also made the following observation:

“It has been said that many of the great artists were perverts or moral degenerates. In spite of their immorality they became great and celebrated artists. What could be the result if discovery were made of equal talent in [those] who were clean and free from the vices, and thus entitled to revelation?”(“The Gospel Vision of the Arts” *Ensign*, July 1977)

I think many of our students have caught this vision and will help fulfill this prophecy, whether in or out of academia. One of them, Billy Wilson, reminded us in the recent College of Humanities convocation how we are all entitled to revelation. He recounted George Frideric Handel's revelatory experience as he composed the Messiah: “On several occasions Handel's servant found [him] sitting over the piece sobbing at the beauty of the music he was composing. Upon its completion, Handel stated that while completing the oratorio he beheld the angels standing around the throne of God, ‘And whether I was in my body or out of my body I knew

not' ” (*The History of Creativity: In the Arts, Science and Technology : 1500 - Present*. Kendall/Hunt, 2006)

Brother Wilson then went on to note, “Despite the praise he received for his work, Handel took little credit for the Messiah, always claiming it was given him from God. This same type of revelation is our privilege and opportunity as Latter-day Saints who have the gift of the Holy Ghost ... there are many greats sitting among us. God expects Zion to become the praise and glory of the whole earth. It is our responsibility to pursue the creative dreams in our hearts and build up Zion in the process. I invite you to consider how your degree will help you build up Zion, and then to act on the thoughts and impressions that come to you.”

As I have re-read talks by J. Reuben Clark, President Kimball, Elder Oaks, and President Hinckley, along with many others who have helped chart the course of this great institution and describe its role in the Kingdom, I am both overwhelmed and energized by the magnitude of the task that lies before us. I believe that with our diversity of talents and gifts and reliance upon the Lord, we have the potential to bring greater things to pass.

I believe much of this will be accomplished by our students as we continue to lay a foundation to help them do so. Prophetic guidance has helped our BYU faculty keep their primary focus on student learning and not on building research empires that require large-scale soft infrastructure support and take faculty out of the classrooms. We have seen the wisdom of this not only for students as more of our faculty interact directly with them, but for the good of the entire university during the recent economic downturn as we have not had to let people go.

I would like to reiterate something that President Samuelson said in his 2008 University conference address.

“Research of superb quality is an important part of our mission with the intent that it supports and enhances our primary responsibilities in teaching and learning. ... We do research, serious inquiry, or creative work because it enhances the learning and teaching environments for our students. ... We cannot, and must not, compromise on the qualitative aspects of the creative work that we do here.”

He then goes on to point out that because of our teaching and mentoring emphasis, the quantity of output may not be commensurate with that of other excellent universities, and then says:

“... but the significance of the contributions must always be first rank. In almost all of our disciplines it is generally possible, with considerable agreement, to reach some consensus on what constitutes real quality and what observations really contribute.”
 (“Citizenship, Research, Teaching: The BYU Way,” August 26, 2008)

I know that many disciplinary units across campus have reached some consensus. Still other units are struggling to define defensible quality standards and deriving ways to meet them with creative utilization of resources. This is a difficult task. I applaud your efforts and encourage you to continue charting this path as you council together in your units.

Over the past decade we have seen good quantitative growth in scholarship with some fields arriving at sustainable plateaus that are within acceptable normative ranges for their disciplines.

Many areas are now focusing more on enhancing the quality of their work. Some have already arrived in regularly meeting disciplinary verifiable quantity and quality standards. In many disciplines, including my own, scholarship that is read, critiqued, cited, and influences the work of academic peers is important for meaningful discovery and consequential impact. Most of us have seen instances where scholarly credibility has helped open doors for the Church. And in some instances has influenced important public policy, legal decisions, and the like. Some of this work has also provided the basis for practical outreach that has blessed the lives of many.

Critically peer reviewed work of high quality appearing in excellent venues is the currency of our professions, whether it be in publications, creative works, or performances. Beyond providing student mentoring opportunities, engaging in high quality scholarship and creative works help assure that we are sharing the cutting edges of our disciplines in classroom instruction, and that we are moving arts and scientific discovery forward in meaningful ways. Moreover, credible scholarship at BYU fosters connections with national and international disciplinary peers. This often opens doors for students applying to advanced degree programs, professional schools, and helps them gain access to other types of professional development opportunities.

Recently at an international conference I heard a leading scholar refer to his research lab as “BYU-East.” I was surprised and asked what he meant by that. He replied that his best doctoral and post-doctoral students have all been well prepared by reputable scholars at BYU “who do high quality work.” He wants us to send more. Interestingly, I learned that he has never been to BYU, but we have made arrangements for him to visit this fall. At a separate professional conference last month, another well respected scholar sought me and another BYU colleague out to tell us that students from BYU who enter his institution’s graduate program are the most exceptional that they have ever had, and attributed it to the mentoring they received from productive faculty he personally knows at BYU. He also asked for more students. It is not surprising that BYU is highly ranked in the incubator factor for many of our disciplines that successfully place students in top doctoral training programs.

I realize that there are many other types of doors that our scholarly credibility can help open for students in practitioner oriented fields, performing arts, and so forth. The point is that the more credible we are beyond the boundaries of the mountains that surround us, the more likely our students will find themselves in situations where they are better prepared to help fulfill prophecy and be an edifying influence for good in their homes, stakes, and communities. In so doing, we must be careful to not fall into the trap of self aggrandizement that is so much a part of higher education. We should strive to be disciple scholars, prayerfully seeking for help and inspiration from our Heavenly Father to take us beyond what we can do on our own, and as with Handel, humbly acknowledge the source of our accomplishments.

In conclusion, I know that Brigham Young University is playing an important role in furthering the Lord’s latter day work. I am grateful for prophetic guidance that has brought us to the point we are at today and has provided us with vision for the future. We have a university president who is very attentive to the counsel of living prophets and follows their direction. I have also seen the inspiration of the Lord rest upon him on several occasions over this past year as he has guided this institution with a steady hand, assuring that we stay on course and incrementally improve. There is a sense of mission here that transcends all that we do. We are blessed to be a

part of it, combining our various gifts for the edifying of all. I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.