

A LEARNING COMMUNITY

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Editor's note: Fenton spoke with Scott Samuelson on 11 February 2009.

Scott: What is your vision for academics at BYU–Idaho?

Fenton: An academic learning community that uses our resources to prepare and build students. The focus for students in this learning community should include:

- Knowledge
 - Recall, Understand, Apply, Expand
- Skills
 - Leadership, Analytical, Problem Solving, Decision Making, Communication (written & verbal), Teamwork/Group, Quantitative, Computer
- Values
 - Integrity/Honesty, Strong Work Ethic, Positive Attitude, Service, Health & Fitness, Cultural Awareness
- Experience
 - Internship, Capstone, Cultural Events, Societies
- Learn how to Learn
 - Learning Model and Learning Process

All of this would be tied together in the development of a disciple leader.

The other part of the learning community is the faculty, staff, and administration. They are instruments and facilitators for student development. The following areas are key components of faculty development:

- Academic Depth / Content Knowledge
- Scholarship of Learning & Teaching
 - Learning Model & Learning Process
 - Teaching & Learning Skills
- Mentoring Skills
 - Careers
 - Honor Code
 - Student Improvement
- Spiritual Preparation

The learning community should provide an academic atmosphere that is continually improving. What we have is

good, but by focusing and simplifying, we can continue to develop and mature.

Scott: Can you give an example?

Fenton: Some of the constant challenges faced by faculty are sufficient time, resources, priorities, and time management. A major part of meeting these challenges is the alignment of resources. We have been blessed with resources at BYU–Idaho. Our responsibility is to improve our organization and delivery of the resources. Let me give you a few examples:

- Curriculum / Course Development
 - Provide easy access to help
 - Peer Collaboration
 - Outsource or acquire from those who have developed quality material
- I-Learn
 - Continual Training
 - Assistance
 - Quality Control
- A.V. Services
 - Discussion on what is Important / Priorities
- Library
 - Packaging of helps for faculty
 - Increase student and faculty awareness
- Bookstore & Press
 - Work to develop and provide lower cost, better quality, and alternatives
- Other Universities
 - Options for other programs
- Combining of resources to provide interdisciplinary, associate, and other degrees

These are a few examples of resource use. If we use the Learning Model and process in a focused approach with the help of these resources, we will continue to improve.

Scott: What are some unique and innovative ways this process is working here?

Fenton: Many universities say, “In order to teach better, we must have more courses.” At this university we don’t believe we always need more courses, more programs, or more centers. We need quality. For example, we’ve chosen not to develop an entrepreneurial center here on campus. Elder Bednar and

President Clark have both said that we don't want to have such centers. Rather, we have encouraged the local community and the INL in economic development. We supply students as a resource to work, and they in turn receive valuable experience. Such an arrangement doesn't distract us from our vision by getting us focused on centers; instead we continue to emphasize the experience of students in the classroom as well as outside the classroom, through practical application. This has been accomplished without requiring additional resources.

Scott: We've been taught that Brigham Young University–Idaho has a prophetic destiny that goes along with the development of the Church and kingdom. How do you see the academic branch of the University in relationship to the unfolding of this prophetic destiny?

Fenton: I would like to emphasize three ideas. First, the better students prepare themselves, and the better the faculty help prepare students academically, spiritually, and in leadership, the easier it is for the Lord to use them in the future. When students graduate as very qualified citizens and workers who can contribute in the marketplace, then it isn't hard for the Lord to use them to build his kingdom. Part of the destiny of the kingdom and particularly this institution lies in our doing our best to help young people enter the world fully prepared.

Our goal is to do the best we can with our current resources. We have solid young men and women who will be a credit to this institution and a credit to the Church. We will continue to help them rise to new levels. And though we want our graduates to compete in the world of work, our methods and goals differ in important ways from those of the world. We work here; we help the children of our Father in heaven rise to new levels, to be better than they were.

Students need to have competency in their academic field. They need to be able to write well, they need to be able to speak effectively, and they need quantitative and problem solving skills. It is important to be well prepared.

Second, our progress with the Learning Model is very much in line with the Church's emphasis on improving learning and teaching. Does BYU–Idaho have all of the answers, or is it unique to this time and place? No, many use similar

principles. Watch the emphasis of the brethren over the last few years to help us improve teaching. Look at the World Wide Leadership Training, at *Teaching, No Greater Call*, and *Preach My Gospel*. The Church desires to help all its members improve teaching. Here we strive to adopt that orientation, look at it, and continue to evolve and develop the Learning Model and learning process.

My final point in answer to your question about the University's role in the unfolding kingdom is to say that we have a responsibility to bless the world. Students will continue to come to BYU-Idaho, and we will continue to serve more students. We'll develop better online courses; we'll develop better ways of teaching people. I can see what we learn here about online teaching blessing members of the Church throughout the world. For instance, could you ever see the day when somebody in South America could take a cluster in accounting online, not even in pursuit of a full degree? How that could bless them in their workplace! Or perhaps the day will come when a mother in Japan could take three or four courses on family and child development. How that could bless her, her family, and community! And all of this without ever setting foot on this campus. I think BYU-Idaho ought to be able to put our resources together with BYU-Hawaii and Provo and say, "Let's not increase costs; let's make this better; let's simplify it and make sure we are fulfilling the needs of the people in the world."

Scott: I have often felt that the quality of a student's experience in a class is directly proportional to a teacher's increasing mental, teaching, and spiritual capacities. What do you see as being some of the factors that would help faculty continue to learn and grow and feel the excitement that comes from staying current and sharp?

Fenton: I think that understanding and sharing vision will increase our excitement about our opportunities. One of the challenges in having a university the size we have is the ability to communicate and work jointly in developing this vision. I know that the Lord gives individual confirmation to us concerning the direction that we are going. It is always amazing and strengthening to see how often different faculty or administration have come forward with the same idea or direction. It is important for us to understand that this work and the University will go forward. I have come to

understand that it doesn't matter who receives credit; what matters is that it is right and sound in our role of meeting the mission and imperatives of the University.

A few recommendations to help you develop and progress in your teaching and mentoring:

- Develop your own professional development plan
- Peer observation / collaboration
- Conferences, workshops, etc.
- Develop your computer skills
- Work on developing a particular teaching skill
- Master's feel to a bachelor's program
 - Student research
 - Group work
- Focus on building individuals
- Establish outcomes and assessment for classes
- Learning opportunities through travel
- Creating a course in alignment with the learning process
- Team meeting with faculty teaching the same class or area
- Time each week to study and observe learning and teaching
- Ponder on your development and direction in order to open the spiritual eyes
- Try something new—learn to teach in new ways
- Time to read in the content area each week
- Read publications and journals
- Teach in Foundations
- Gospel study
- Develop an online course
- Keeping yourself in good physical condition
- Nature-type experience

These are a few suggestions. Faculty members need to examine and ponder over what works best for them in keeping current and sharp. I see people who have been teaching for years who are excited about blessing the lives of students.

Scott: How do you think Foundations and the Learning Model have helped faculty develop their academic and teaching skills?

Fenton: Foundations has brought about a number of important components:

- a) Increased use of the Learning Model and process
- b) Shared experiences from teaching
- c) Helped us improve our ability to work in groups and interdisciplinary
- d) Sharing of knowledge
- e) Brought different areas together—increased our association as faculty
- f) Provided a base for moving into online course development
- g) Provided an opportunity to attract students to different areas and interests

The Learning Model has helped us in the following ways:

- a) Benchmark for training and evaluating faculty
- b) Identified common threads of principles and process for teaching and learning
- c) Given us a model for design and delivery
- d) Provided an approach for students to learn how to learn
- e) Developed a format to use in consistent online course development

Scott: If it were possible for you to have the faculty in an informal setting without the stiffness of a huge meeting, what would you say? What appeal might you make to the faculty of Brigham Young University–Idaho.

Fenton: I would ask the faculty to focus on the Learning Model as our foundation for learning, teaching, leadership, and as a guide for our work. I would emphasize all the principles:

- Exercise faith
- Teach with the Holy Ghost
- Lay hold upon the word of God
- Act for themselves
- Love, serve, and teach one another

Let's focus our thoughts on two principles: to love, serve, and teach one another; to act for oneself and accept responsibility for learning and teaching.

Love, serve, and teach one another: We have a unique opportunity to come together to develop a university that develops the type of individuals that are a blessing to their families, the Church, and to the world. This development is based on love and service. We teach each other, we build each other, we

care about each other. Faculty build students and students build each other.

In order for the full effects of this principle to be accomplished, we need to be reminded of the importance of unity. There is a power in unity that allows us to accomplish something at a level that exceeds individual efforts. There is a synergy. In the October General Conference, President Eyring referred to “Our hearts knit as one.... The Saints can accomplish any purpose of the Lord when fully united in righteousness.” President Eyring commented that he heard the message of unity from every prophet of God in his lifetime. He explained the importance of unity and how it was achieved. He laid out three principles that guide our process.

1. *Revelation.* The Holy Ghost will testify to our hearts, and the hearts of those gathered around with us, what he would have us do.
2. *Be Humble.* Happily, I am seeing more and more skillful peacemakers who calm troubled waters before harm is done. You could be one of those peacemakers, whether you are in the conflict or an observer. One way I have seen it done is to search for anything on which we agree. The great peacemaker, the restorer of unity, is the one who finds a way to help people see the truth they share. That truth they share is always greater and more important to them than their differences. You can help yourself and others to see that common ground if you ask for help from God and then act. He will answer your prayer to help restore peace, as he has mine.
3. *Speak Well of Others.* I can promise you a feeling of peace and joy when you speak generously of others in the light of Christ. It will be because the Lord will let you feel his appreciation for choosing to step away from the possibility of sowing seeds of disunity. What will become more obvious to us is that the atonement brings the same changes in all of us.¹

As we work, counsel, and care about each other, we will be blessed to accomplish that which we need to. We will find a miraculous outpouring of knowledge and spirit to assist us.

Act for oneself and accept responsibility for learning and teaching: One of the continual questions is the question of professional

development. Always with that question, comes thoughts on how and where do we go? I would like you to think deeply about the idea of educational and spiritual empowerment in your profession. We will strive to provide resources and options and encourage your follow up.

I want to share three thoughts from *Preach My Gospel* that emphasize the importance of acting and the use of agency:

1. Study is an act of faith requiring the use of personal agency. (*Preach My Gospel*, (PMG), 2004, 17)
2. While learning from a good teacher is very important, it is more important for you to have meaningful experiences on your own. (PMG, 2004, 17)
3. Acting on what you learned will bring added and enduring understanding. (PMG, 2004, 19)

I hope that we can relate to the idea of professional development in ways that we take responsibility. Professional development is an opportunity through multiple avenues. The development can include content, cross discipline, teaching techniques, computer skills, and we could include many more. There are ways that we can continue to develop. From time to time, we need to ponder on our direction and our effort. Elder Wirthlin shared this thought with us:

Pondering, which means to weigh mentally, to deliberate, to meditate, can achieve the opening of the spiritual eyes of one's understanding. Also, the Spirit of the Lord may rest upon the ponderer.²

You will figure out how the Learning Model and process can work for you. You will find ways to continue to develop. The University will provide a framework, tools, practices, and programs to help. But ultimately, it is the individual teacher who will make the difference in the lives of these students. The Lord has a lot of confidence in you. He cares about our faculty. He cares about our students. He would expect us to be agents and to act. Consider your opportunity to act in continuously developing as a teacher, facilitator, and mentor.

Notes

1 Henry B. Eyring, "Our Hearts Knit as One," *Ensign* November 2008, 68-71.

2 Joseph B. Wirthlin, "Pondering Strengthens the Spiritual Life," *Ensign* May 1982, 23-24.