

## A VIEW FROM “DOWN SOUTH”

*Douglas D. Alder—Former President, Dixie State College*

The people in Utah’s Dixie received the news about the creation of BYU-Idaho with amazement. After nearly four years of negotiation and sometimes acrimonious agitation in the state’s political process, Dixie College had just been authorized to take two small steps toward becoming a two-year/four-year community college. Then a few months later, in one swift announcement, Ricks College was appointed to become a four-year institution—all in one step. What a dramatic demonstration of the difference between church decision-making and public process.

We at Dixie State College will miss Ricks College, our esteemed athletic rival, but we will also watch with keen interest as you create a new institution at the same time we are doing something similar but much more modest. Our two institutions began in the LDS Church Academy system of the nineteenth century. We both experienced the extensive questioning about whether the church should maintain a parochial higher education system. Around 1926, church leaders, under the influence of John A. Widtsoe and James E. Talmage, decided that state-owned higher education was not a danger to the faith of members. If supplemented with religious education in an LDS Institute, they felt that state education would be a fine influence in members’ lives. So the church leaders decided to scale down its parochial system. Gradually all of the academies except Ricks and BYU were closed. The result is that the Church does not intend to provide higher education for its members, deferring instead to state systems. In 1933 the Church withdrew its sponsorship of Dixie College. It was a major challenge to the community, but ways were found to keep the college alive until the state agreed to take on its sponsorship in 1935.

We have enjoyed being associated with Ricks because we have had much in common, especially as we have both focused on the two-year curriculum. Now Ricks will change its role dramatically and Dixie very gradually. Some major issues will have to be decided quickly at Ricks on matters of deep significance. We will be watching with keen interest.

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### ADMISSION STANDARDS

The first matter deals with admission standards. Is BYU-Idaho going to become more and more selective? That is the easy way to solve decisions about who is to be admitted and who is not. Past pressures on the admis-

sion limit may pale compared with what will soon happen. One reason for making the change is that there are so many young people throughout the nation and beyond who want to attend an LDS four-year college, many more than can be accommodated.

Over the last three decades BYU-Provo has chosen the selectivity route. The result is that the BYU student body is of very high quality, sort of a meritocracy. There is an ethical issue with this policy: Is a high ACT/SAT score a requirement for church membership or a prerequisite to salvation? Obviously not, but such a score is required for admission to BYU-Provo. De-facto, BYU-Provo has become one of the nation's elite universities. A justification can be made for that evolution. The question is whether BYU-Idaho will follow suit.

My personal experience teaching at a research university (Utah State) and directing its Honors Program immersed me in the heady atmosphere of bright, motivated and prepared students. Every day was exhilarating.

Then I suddenly found myself the leader and spokesman of a community college. There the open admissions policy created a somewhat different atmosphere. I was surprised, however, to find the students better prepared than I expected. I had been overly impressed with selectivity. Gradually I become converted to the idea of democracy in education, to open admissions, to second chances.

One reason I came to feel that way was because I lived and studied in Europe. There I came to know a society that is tightly stratified based on education. Decisions are taken there when children reach age ten. Some are destined to attend the university; the majority are diverted to other directions. There are some very good things about such systems, but our American society values equality and freedom much more than Europeans do. I saw the negative impact on many Church members there because their children were not allowed to even attempt higher education. That did not seem ethical to me. And we face a similar issue in the Church. Is it ethical to reject members of the Church based on their test scores when other factors such as worthiness are positive? It is a real conundrum. Is it fine to call a young person to serve a full-time mission but not consider him or her acceptable to attend BYU-Idaho? This has been considered in depth at Provo. Now the issue moves on to Idaho.

Higher education is increasingly the gatekeeper of our society. A century ago land ownership was king; then money took over as the determiner of social mobility. In today's information society, access to higher education is often the distinguishing factor in human success. There are obviously other elements such as family and character, but

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success in higher education is crucial. The United States is one of the few societies that makes access to higher education reasonably available. The community college is the last vestige of educational democracy.

BYU-Idaho will become even less a community college. So what is it going to be? Will it gradually become a selective Liberal Arts college? In my estimation that would not be defensible. They are essentially elite institutions. We already have a fine university based on that principle. There is no need to replicate it.

One specific decision will be whether to continue offering, or even to require, remedial skills courses to students who are admitted conditionally without sufficient mathematics, reading, writing, and study skills to succeed in the regular curriculum. BYU-Idaho can easily decide that such training belongs in community colleges, not at BYU. Such a decision can be justified financially, but can it be spiritually? Should repentance be allowed in LDS academia, even if the predicted success is doubtful?

Having spent a lifetime teaching LDS students, one thing is very clear to me. The impact of missionary service often changes the motivation level of young people. How can that be factored in at BYU-Idaho? The scores and/or grades of these young people may not qualify them, yet their potential may be newly in gear. There are other elements that sometimes awaken talent in young people. Marriage and work experience can bring about maturity and effectiveness. Can BYU-Idaho build in such factors?

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#### OTHER ISSUES

Curriculum questions are obviously attracting major attention in Rexburg and will define the nature of the new institution. Hopefully, vocational issues will receive significant attention. There are things BYU-Idaho can do that BYU-Provo will not do, but they are worth doing. Very serious attention should be given to vocational issues. Computer technology and systems should be a vital element of the curriculum. Teacher Education could well be a central theme. A quality Business School could be important, but so could highly trained mechanical skills—and what else? Weber State University might be a good sample to examine.

Some key decisions were made at the outset when President Hinckley made it clear that BYU-Idaho is not to become a research university. Instead it will be a teaching institution. Faculty will be recruited as teacher/scholars, not as research/scholars. That is a defensible decision, but it is crucial that the faculty continue to be scholars and not just teachers. There must be a clear distinction between a high school ethic and a college atmosphere.

A central issue must be the role of religion at the institution. Without that at the core there is little reason to have BYU-Idaho. I think your leaders have clear insights on this matter, but the faculty must be a part of the design.

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A final issue: Is the institution to serve a region or the worldwide church? We at Dixie feel very comfortable serving our dynamic southern Utah. We enjoy students from many other places but we mesh most closely with our region. BYU-Idaho could also fill that role nicely, but the reality is that the recent change is partly a response to pressure from members widely spread who want the BYU experience. So there will need to be a delicate mix of the two roles. BYU-Provo no longer focuses on serving central Utah. It is clearly a church-wide institution. BYU-Idaho will need to consider how to serve two constituencies.

#### WISHING YOU WELL

These are simply thoughts from an old well-wisher, clearly from a distance, but from one who feels the sacredness of the educational process. I have watched students place their trust in us as college teachers and administrators, almost unquestioningly. They assume we know what we are doing and they work diligently at the tasks we set for them. That is a huge trust.

We, as faculty and leaders, know there are some big questions in the whole process. I wish you well in facing them squarely at this rare juncture in Rexburg. ∞