

DIALOGUE

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*No matter how many talents or gifts we now have,
God will seek to remodel us, if we will let him*
—Neal A. Maxwell ¹

It's been twenty-two months since the announcement. We were collectively inspired by the charge to create a new university. We were told to build a new ship of curious workmanship. We were stirred by instructions that, as a part of the whole, each faculty and staff member, each department and college, is not only entitled to but also responsible to act as an integral force behind our transformation.

We've worked very hard and accomplished much. To a casual outsider we may appear to be sailing happily along, our task complete. But we know that while we've embarked, our ship has a long journey ahead. President Hinckley, President Bednar, and others have laid astonishingly insightful ground-work for our debut as a full-fledged university. They cannot, however, designate every facet of what we become; nor can they experience the individual and collective transformations that will shape our finished institution.

As we strain towards accomplishing our mandate, we as faculty and administration need to closely examine our methods of communication. As faculty, we are accustomed to reaching out to our students in attempts to help them think and act independently and collaboratively. We are less accustomed, however, to reaching toward our colleagues and leaders in attempts to think and act collaboratively. Many of us would like to do so, but the classroom is more immediate. We see our students' faces daily and are dedicated to filling their needs. While we may feel ourselves at least fairly successful at reaching our students now, we must realize that the theoretical and practical decisions being made right now will deeply impact our future success with our students. Ricks College has been endowed with a wonderful vision; however, there are a variety of perceptions of exactly what that vision (BYU-Idaho) looks like when all the pieces are joined. For this reason I want to focus on the idea that we may better communicate our views, our doubts, and our strengths with each other so that those with the power to make decisions and connect parts may benefit from the expertise of those who develop the courses and teach the students.

The last issue of *Perspective* included a polished presentation about promoting BYU-Idaho. Currently, our campus is adorned with posters and flags asserting qualities that in some cases are hardly removed from the

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drawing board. While I found the article useful because it suggests that we look hard at what we are and what we wish to become, and while I view the propaganda with interest, I worry about our underlying assumption: that the way we present ourselves now will evolve naturally into what we become through skillfully molding our customers' perceptions. I believe the opposite to be true: if we hope to serve our customers with integrity, we must first be certain we have achieved the merits we advertise. While it may be useful to promote our current strengths in order to outshine our competitors, we must be worthy before we earn the right to laudatory evaluations. After we labor to achieve our goals, our customers will, of course, ultimately determine our success; however, we must insist that their judgment be clear-eyed.

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A case in point is the oft-used phrase, the "scholarship of learning." While catchy and quotable, there is some ambiguity about what the term really means. If it means that as faculty we passionately watch and interpret the way our students learn and then adjust our teaching to accommodate their needs, we are really not much different from passionate teachers anywhere. If, on the other hand, the scholarship of learning means actively researching our own and others' qualified studies of the learning process and then designing programs that facilitate the best these findings offer, time is an issue: there are not enough hours in the day. For some of us the scholarship of learning simply implies openness to revelation. While revelation is an elemental goal each of us should seek, we must take care not to abuse our right to it, for we know that understanding rarely comes without a great deal of hard work. To paraphrase *Doctrine & Covenants* 9:8: we must study our ideas out in our minds, and only then are we entitled to ask if our answers are right. After that we need to formulate means for implementing the answers. If we neglect to decipher the meaning and impact of "the scholarship of learning" and merely adopt it as a motto, few will be able to make it a priority. In other words, we need to talk.

Honest and energetic dialogue is a rare skill. It is not only rare but also a rather risky skill to develop in some circles. Fearing reprimand, unintentional offense, and misunderstanding, we hesitate to express opinions that might be innovative or controversial. I have witnessed many debates which, just as they were becoming interesting and potentially useful, were laid to rest with comments such as, "Let's not talk about this issue, we'll just end up disagreeing." I have a difficult challenge during the first weeks of every semester in weaning my literature students away from their theory that it is impossible to fairly judge art. It is much safer, they believe, to say, "Well, I don't like this story; but if you do, that's okay. It's all opinion anyway." Similarly, in some of my committee work, pedagogical issues worthy of serious research have arisen, only to be dismissed with statements such as, "Well, let's not debate too much,

we'll just go with whatever feels right and let our leaders struggle with the final decision.”

Innovation is the product of spirited dialogue. Thoughtful people who respect themselves and others must talk and disagree and then talk some more until a thoughtful consensus can be reached. Of course, open dialogue can be mishandled; but if we accept one another as equal participants in this monumental task of creating a fine university and if we lay and follow sensible ground rules for discussion, we will also learn what it means to collectively seek and receive revelation.

I

What things should we think about then, and how?

—Hugh Nibley ²

A good discussion often begins with questions. A useful transition query for us, since we have successfully constructed a framework but have yet to fully determine what we become, is—what do we intend to do with the Spirit of Ricks? We have been assured that no matter what, the Spirit of Ricks will endure. If that’s so, we must remember that much of Ricks College’s success was attributable to our individual attention to students.

But we are growing. Most of the faculty are currently designing new courses, serving on committees, counseling advisees about material new to all of us, and teaching eight weeks beyond our traditional 30-credit-hour academic year. All this takes energy. Part of the energy that has brought us this far stems from excitement, a willingness to contribute, a desire to be our best. Long-term energy is not derived from short-lived excitement, however: it requires time. Is it probable that we can continue to serve our students in the Spirit of Ricks without neglecting other important facets of our lives? Is it possible to maintain the Spirit without cutting some corners in preparing for classes, in seeking out and implementing superior pedagogy, and in evaluating students in ways that help them learn? With our burgeoning student-body, how might we maintain our ability to view our students as much more than faces crammed into warehouse lecture halls? What steps can we take to ensure that we treat our jobs as much more than numbered hours within exhausting weeks that roll through ten months of the year?

While more money is a pleasant answer, I compare it to adrenaline: powerful energy, though short-lived. This does not mean that a lowered FTE is the only answer to our concerns, but it is one realistic option. If we were provided with more time to serve in the old Spirit-of-Ricks manner, however, would we choose to accept it and use it wisely? Should we and

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could we be held accountable for it? More time ultimately means more employees; is that a reasonable request?

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A significant part of the Spirit of Ricks involves the spirit of sacrifice. Older professors and alumni relate tales of the not-so-long-ago when offices were housed in “lambing sheds,” departments functioned on shoe-string budgets, money for professional development wasn’t even an option. While such sacrifice should be rightly honored, we know that sacrifice simply for the sake of martyrdom is not wisdom. When embraced, sacrifice must be geared toward a greater goal, certainly the betterment of our students and colleagues. How do we maintain our willingness to sacrifice without losing our effectiveness as teachers and scholars? Again, we must look to obtaining reasonable time and consequent energy as a significant clue to the answer.

The most important aspect of the Spirit of Ricks is its unique spirituality. Much of that is, again, attributable to profound interaction with students. Real spirituality can rarely be preplanned, formulated, or enforced. As our professional demands begin to overwhelm us, will some of us be tempted to adopt manipulative practices to provide the illusion of spirituality in our classrooms? With increased demands on our time, we will need to creatively seek opportunities for constructive leisure: time to reflect, ponder, and seek real spirituality that can be shared with our students rather than merely addressed as one in a litany of outcome-based objectives.

The Spirit of Ricks should continue to be the foundation upon which this university is built. If we can collectively determine just what this Spirit consists of, agree on which aspects are most valuable, and then nurture them from every angle, including willingness to sacrifice more in some areas than we have in the past—then we will have successfully involved ourselves in a vital dialogue.

II

*We must cultivate a spirit of affirmative gratitude
for those who do not see things quite as we see them.*

—Gordon B. Hinckley³

In our passion to get up and running in merely months, miraculous decisions have been made. Many hours and determined teamwork have led to skeleton four-year programs whose implementation is remarkable. However, we have yet to develop the courage and ambition to re-evaluate our various agendas. It will be difficult for some of us to give up cherished hopes for a particular plan; perhaps more difficult still for others to acknowledge the superiority of a new perspective if it alters an already established program. And here is the test for our ability to successfully embrace dialogue: the discussion is bound to become heated.

As representative of a world-wide church, BYU-Idaho has a unique mission to understand and celebrate the differences among us while embracing our unity of faith. Currently, my students have some trouble in relating to one another because of a tendency to stereotype in matters as insignificant as what differentiates a “Utah Mormon” from a “California Mormon.” We sometimes bemoan the differences in experience between students raised in traditionally rural backgrounds as opposed to those from urban settings. How much more worthy our discussions about diversity could be if we were to explore instead the comparative qualities of our students from vastly different ethnicities. If the Spirit of Ricks is maintained and because of the spirit of the gospel that will bless our efforts, BYU-Idaho may well hope to be a flagship in attracting lively and thoughtful dialogue between students and faculty of profoundly varied background. What socio-political and socio-environmental issues will we not be able to address if we have the guidance of the Spirit and the insight of gospel principles to guide us? These conversations can become an integral part of our course work—particularly in literature, music, education, and history—that recognizes and values the strengths of diversity and tolerance within the unifying principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our students cannot be considered properly educated if they are unaware of the finest works in the artistic and intellectual world. We must help them develop the maturity to determine what areas of interest or study might be deemed worthy of their attention after leaving our campus. For example, there is much contemporary literature, theater, dance, music, and visual art that motivates and inspires. But often young students are shocked when their course material presents views from traditionally non-LDS sources. We’ve managed to steer clear of much controversy by simply avoiding some of the material with which we anticipated our 18-year-olds would struggle. But now that we offer the only collegiate work to which many of them are exposed, we must determine what is appropriate. Often the least educated in a community seek to control exposure to the arts the most stringently. We cannot permit that to happen here. Censorship has been an issue at Ricks College in the past, but has, overall, been handled diplomatically. Undoubtedly, BYU-Idaho will deal with censorship issues. We must speak insightfully with each other and with our students about what determines “good” art. We should discuss the qualifications of judges who choose the Nobel literary works and other major artistic awards. We need to explore the various methods by which the canon is constructed. How well we offer the best of the arts to our students in order to challenge them, without exposing them to experiences none of us needs, will play a great part in achieving

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our goal of producing graduates capable of blessing—and willing to bless—the world.

Too frequently we find ourselves choking on gnats when we should be exploring the creativity possible through applying the peaceable truths of our principles. Too many discussions involve superficial judgment and unsupported belief. As a writing teacher, I frequently overhear heated debates about relatively minor issues such as whether a returned missionary who color-tips his hair is denying his testimony of a living prophet or whether a student who prioritizes a night of serious study over attending a Family Home Evening activity is sinning. These purposeless tendencies to judge and police one another occupy too much of our students' time and intellect. They might rather exercise their spiritual brains over meaningful gospel issues such as how the principle of charity might be applied in difficult classroom confrontations or how they might actively seek, receive, and apply understanding of the atonement as it blesses their lives on a daily basis, even in their “mundane” course work.

As departments, we need to nurture our abilities at collegiality between fields of study, and within each field, care needs to be taken to avoid splintering into intellectual factions. We must first acknowledge that we have hierarchical tendencies and biases. Only then can we develop a forum in which we spiritedly discuss truths between and beyond our individual preferences.

III

...the commonest enemies of mankind are the unconscious frauds.

—Alan Simpson ⁴

Our student profile is changing. When they leave our university, we will have done them a disservice if their world-view has not matured.

While we discuss matters of innovation, we must continue to talk about a very old issue: how to help our students individuate. President Bednar's advice to privilege principle over routine practice is applicable in academics as well as the gospel. We must nurture teaching methods that encourage students to do more than memory work; we must show them—in our professional interactions—that we share and apply the concepts we value as scholars and demand that they do so as well.

Our student profile is changing. When they leave our university, we will have done them a disservice if their world-view has not matured. And their view will not have matured if it has not been challenged, if they have not been shown how to explore ideas and issues outside their comfort zones. Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg defines morality “as the ability to see an issue from points of view other than just your own.”⁵ It is when we are able to calmly entertain ideas new to us that we validate our right to engage in the conversations that really matter.

When they leave us, our students must exhibit the fine ability to explore, question, and discern. We must help them be unafraid of the world they live in, yet committed and courageous in their ability to refrain from participating in many of its failings. Anthropologist Mary Midgley reminds us of a truth we would do well to frequently remember: “Nobody can respect what is entirely unintelligible to them.”⁶ Our challenge as a faculty and administration, therefore, is to develop a wise tolerance that respects inquiry, acknowledges the primacy of application over mere knowledge, and embraces dialogic scholarship. “We charge our teachers to give constant stimulation to budding young scientists and scholars in all fields,” said Harold B Lee, and “urge them to push further and further into the realms of the unknown.”⁷

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Much hope has been expressed that BYU-Idaho will develop as a school of unparalleled merit, a university where students and faculty, blessed by the spirit of the gospel and filled with zeal for academic understanding, will exhibit qualities uncommon and even unavailable elsewhere. Our goal is not to produce students able to compete well with graduates from other universities, although that will certainly be a byproduct of what we hope to achieve. Our ultimate goal may well be to graduate students whom we respect as academic and spiritual equals—graduates with whom we are delighted to converse, and most importantly, graduates who are capable of conversing proactively, intelligibly, and with thoughtful restraint within their communities.

IV

Restoration theology is expansive, not constraining.

—Neal A Maxwell ⁸

There are many discussions to be had. If it is safe to assume that 22 months ago President Bednar meant what he said when he told us we were all entitled to revelation within our areas of influence, we must remember the charge: we are to work, discuss, research, draft, and revise. We are to seek understanding so that we as a collective may help the Lord establish an exceptionally fine institution of higher education. If some of us have become discouraged or feel that the power to change is out of our hands, we need to go back, look again, seek understanding again, confer with our leaders, negotiate, even argue, and then compromise, until—whether our individual biases are adopted or not—we feel that decisions have received our full-fledged input and that as a group we have created the best solutions and programs possible.

Much has been achieved. However, the questions we ask, the discipline we model, and the openness with which we are willing to discuss in the next several months will have at least as profound an effect on our

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final development as the decisions that have already been made. There are few clear-cut solutions to the dilemmas still facing us. We need to entertain many possible answers, and we need to model for our students the finest academia possible: faculty and administrators who cheerfully and thoughtfully and doggedly participate in the building of a university founded upon revelation. ∞

NOTES:

1. Neal A. Maxwell, "The Disciple Scholar," in *Learning in the Light of Faith*, ed. Henry B. Eyring (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999), 1-18.
2. Hugh Nibley, "Zeal without Knowledge," in *Thinking About Thinking*, ed. Kip Hartvigsen, (Ft. Worth: Harcourt, 2000), 111-121.
3. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Out of Your Experience Here," *BYU Today*, March 1991, 18-21.
4. Alan Simpson, quoted in "The Marks of an Educated Man," in Hartvigsen, 207-211.
5. Lawrence Kohlberg, quoted in Thomas G. Plummer, "Diagnosing and Treating the Ophelia Syndrome," in Hartvigsen, 171-178.
6. Mary Midgely, "Trying Out One's New Sword," *Heart and Mind* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1981).
7. Harold B. Lee, quoted in Dallin H. Oaks "Reason and Revelation" in Hartvigsen, 123-138.
8. Maxwell.