

## RETHINKING EDUCATION AT A CHURCH SCHOOL

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Life is full of change. We all know this, and for the most part accept it. Reactions to change, however, differ from person to person. I, for one, have never been a big fan of change. Stability has always been my watchword. Prior to coming here, I had no real desire to make a major change in my life, no need to move from the known, with which I was generally satisfied, to the unknown. But something led me to this university during this time of transition. And this move has caused me to question some long-held concepts that have formed the framework for my life.

In an intensely dynamic world, persisting in static ways of thinking may not only be detrimental but also counterproductive; therefore “rethinking” is necessary for both institutional and personal growth and progression. I look at this fortuitous convergence of changing personal and institutional identities as more than just coincidence. I see it as a wonderful opportunity to effect change in my own life and to contribute in some small way to the change taking place here at BYU-Idaho.

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Rethinking does not necessarily mean a wholesale discarding of past philosophies in favor of completely new ones. The University’s mission statement has not changed. President Hinckley eloquently reaffirmed the University’s first two principles when he said that the mission of this school is to provide students with a first-class education while building testimonies of the Savior. The principles of building testimonies and providing quality education, even in the context of “rethinking education,” do not change, just as the principles of the gospel don’t change though some of the programs and processes do.

This institution must remain a teaching institution, an institution whose every effort, every decision, and every focus must be placed on educating students academically and spiritually. This is not the way things are done in the world. Academic institutions are traditionally defined by the research of its faculty, their prominence and prestige based on the number of articles published, discoveries made, or Nobel laureates on its faculty. This is not how our institution will achieve its greatness. Its greatness will be measured by those quality graduates who will go out into the world and influence it for good. What will make this institution great in the eyes of God and the world will be the sacrifice of those men and women who choose to forego the prestige of faculty rank and the accolades of the world, and instead, as Elder Henry B. Eyring states, “put the Savior first and take His life as their model.” Such a faculty emulates the Savior by putting others—in this case, students—first. This focus on the student, not on professional research and scholarship, is what brought

me here, and is what impressed me so much that I was able to rethink my attitudes toward change.

Where this selfless focus on individual students might have seemed easier with fewer students and in the context of a two-year college, the challenge to “rethink education” as we make the transition to a four-year university is a major one. How do we keep this focus on the students when so many more of them are here, when academic programs are expanding, and when faculty and staff are justifiably questioning how these changes will affect individual programs and departments? President Bednar tells us how this focus will come: “We have access to the gifts of the Spirit, which cannot be quantified nor counted. There are simply things we cannot adequately define and describe about the process of teaching with the Spirit.” As we focus on the Spirit, we will receive the blessings of a Heavenly Father who will and does make more of us than we are alone. By working through “inspired inquiry and innovation,” we will be able to teach our students “one-by-one” (President Bednar).

Finding my opportunities to teach one-by-one as well as make a contribution during the University’s transition has been a great challenge for me. Even among a faculty unique in all the world, I occupy a singular place as a nonteaching faculty member. My assignment does not place me in the traditional university classroom; instead, I find myself in a niche within my profession where my contact with students and others is limited. Since coming to campus, I have struggled with how I can accomplish the charge President Bednar has given us: “Everyone on this campus is a teacher.” How is this possible in my day-to-day activities as a cataloger, behind closed doors in the McKay Library? At the Jacob Spori Teaching Summit, which I attended just last month, I felt like a fish out of water among the twenty other faculty members who were discussing how to incorporate innovative, gospel-centered ideas into their classrooms. During their discussions I wondered, “How can I be a part of this ‘rethinking education’? How am I supposed to emulate the Savior and participate in one-by-one teaching, when I spend most of my day behind a set of double doors, organizing information for students I don’t regularly see?”

An answer came to me yesterday in the form of a student on crutches who came through those double doors and asked for me. She wanted to see me in my capacity as her academic advisor. In the few minutes we spent together in my office, we explored different options for her academic career over the long term and her class schedule for next semester. During our conversation, nothing spectacular happened; no epiphany took place. It was only after she left, as I reflected on this unexpected visit and made notes on what we had talked about, that I felt the workings of the Spirit upon me. As I wrote about what we had

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just discussed, my mind was flooded with things I would like to tell her the next time we meet. I realized that this young woman, unfocused and searching for her own place in life, needed the experiences and guidance of someone who had been there before, someone like me. I realized that the contribution I could make to the university's mission and its focus on "rethinking education" could happen in little ways, one person at a time. I could help this person and others like her rethink her own education and development, both academically and spiritually. My experiences, my testimony, could help her build her own. At that moment I realized the responsibility and obligation I have to change my focus, to facilitate the growth and development of students "one-by-one," to do what I can to lift them. My thinking then broadened even further as I realized that in accomplishing God's work I can uplift and serve my colleagues, bringing them closer to Christ as they, in turn, embrace this same philosophy and uplift and strengthen me. As President Hinckley said, it doesn't take geniuses or even great people to do that.

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The rethinking I did personally has applicability not only in the context of this university, but also in my own personal life and in my family life. Rethinking or refocusing my efforts to extend beyond myself, to put others first, to serve others, to esteem not myself and my needs above others, these are what this university is all about and what will make it great. Rethinking education here is nothing more than doing what we all must do in our individual lives as we progress eternally: it is putting others first. This philosophy faithfully applied and carried out in companionship with the Lord will allow BYU-Idaho to become more than a sum of its parts. The miracle of this university, prophesied and foreseen by prophets of God, will result in the miracles that take place in our individual lives. This is what will make Brigham Young University-Idaho unique among all the institutions of higher education on the planet and will produce graduates who, like ourselves, will be rethinking and refocusing throughout their lives as we all proceed on our journey to eternal refinement and perfection.