

Inaugural Response

President Henry J. Eyring
President of Brigham Young University-Idaho
Brigham Young University-Idaho
September 19, 2017



All meetings at BYU-Idaho are a celebration of the goodness and power of our Savior Jesus Christ. That is especially so as we formally reflect upon the mission of this university, which is His.

Today we are blessed to have that mission embodied in eight former Ricks College and BYU-Idaho presidents. They

have led the transformation of an inspired but obscure junior college which is now a world-renowned university. All brought unique capabilities but looked to the Savior for guidance.

I have been blessed to know and be guided by each of these presidents, beginning with my father. He and my mother, Kathleen, accepted the assignment to preside over Ricks College sight unseen.

They traded tenure at Stanford and the guest house on my grandparents' California hilltop estate for a single-wide student trailer in Rexburg, during one of its fiercest winters.

I felt a sense of pride in the move, announcing in second grade show-and-tell, "I'm moving to Rexburg, Iowa."

President Eyring came to Ricks College during a challenging season of political tensions, cultural revolution, economic malaise, and a demographic downturn among college-aged Church members. He found inspiration for the future partly by looking to the college's past. In his inaugural address, he referenced "a long tradition of open admissions," including "providing education for those past the normal years of college."¹

President Eyring further noted that, "The school has a long tradition...in attempting to bridge the campus and life away from the campus." He cited "a supervised home-study program in agriculture and home economics," which "included guidance in social and religious activities."²

President Eyring also declared,

I believe that the community which education should serve is the whole world...Just as our obligation is to our local students, to prepare them to serve the world, we must also find ways for this college to serve young people whose needs are shaped by a great variety of cultures and situations, and who may not be able to come to this campus.³

President Eyring was blessed by an unusual assignment from the Brethren to forecast the college education of the future.

That assignment would prepare him for a lifetime of service to the Church Educational System. But as Ricks College's president, he spent more time in practical tasks: raising money to fill budget gaps, consolidating academic units, and encouraging haircuts for men and modest attire for women.

In 1977, Bruce and Marie Hafen brought to Ricks the intellectual capability and modesty of accomplished scholars. They reinforced a tradition of intellectual rigor at Ricks. Later, as my law school dean, President Hafen taught members of the law review to advance the frontier of knowledge, not via attempted revolution, but respected addition.

In 1985, Joe and Barbara Christensen came to Ricks. They had presided over the Missionary Training Center in Provo, where they taught me and my fellow missionaries both doctrine and discipline. Under their leadership, Ricks College continued to acquire the qualities of what Elder David A. Bednar would later call a "disciple preparation center," or DPC.

In 1989, Steve Bennion arrived in Rexburg with his uncanny memory for names and his hundred-decibel "Hello!" both of which I admired while serving as one of his trustees at Southern Utah University. Steve and Marjorie powerfully display the Spirit of Ricks, a treasured hallmark of BYU-Idaho.

Elder David A. and Sister Susan Bednar came to Ricks in 1997. By recognizing Ricks College as a ship of curious workmanship, they prepared the institution for President Gordon B. Hinckley's unexpected announcement that it would become a four-year university. The Bednars, kind mentors to Sister Eyring and me, guided the new BYU-Idaho as it assumed a unique, expanded mission.

With Elder Bednar's 2004 call as an Apostle, President Hinckley asked Robert M. Wilkes to temporarily take BYU-Idaho's helm. President Wilkes kept this curious ship on its charted course, drawing upon more than three decades of service at Ricks College.

Along with Harry J. Maxwell, who played a similar role between Presidents Eyring and Hafen, Brother Wilkes knew me as a pre-teen likely to be found doing homework in my father's office after school. Both men generously treated me as though I were a peer.

By the time Kim and Sue Clark arrived from the Harvard Business School, in 2005, BYU-Idaho was under full sail. Only a captain as bold as HBS Dean Kim Clark would have immediately called for three new "imperatives"—serving more students, at an affordable cost, while raising quality.⁴ Under President Clark the reach of the university expanded

dramatically, with its online and Pathway programs beginning to fulfill President Eyring's call to serve the whole world. By then I had returned to Rexburg and was blessed to have President Clark as both an inspirational employer and a devoted home teacher.

When President Clark G. Gilbert and his wife, Christine, succeeded the Clarks, it was a homecoming. A decade earlier, President Gilbert launched the Pathway program, with modest help from me and much more from the founding members of what is now BYU-Pathway Worldwide. President Gilbert brought renewed focus on the Three Imperatives of keeping costs low and quality high, while serving students of varying levels of academic performance. He also reminded us of the "birthright" conditions attached to President Hinckley's creation of BYU-Idaho. President Gilbert emphasized our responsibility to serve "everyday students" and to eschew academic traditions that would distract us from them.

President Gilbert has left us well-prepared to welcome a wave of new students, both in Rexburg and online. But we also face the challenge of retaining currently enrolled students, particularly our freshmen. As at most universities, a heartrending number leave prematurely, suspending at least temporarily their progress toward a college credential. Some take with them the burden of financial debts. Many bear the added burden of lost confidence and faith.

Ricks College and BYU-Idaho have a long tradition of meeting the needs of these students, largely through individual employees who seek the Holy Ghost's guidance in their ministrations. A particular hallmark of this institution has been an anxious concern for students who doubt their place here. But now our student body growth, along with the more complex and rigorous curricular offerings of a four-year institution, compounds the challenge of ministering one-by-one.

Providentially, we have been blessed with innovative approaches to helping all students, especially newcomers. Under former Academic Vice President Fenton Broadhead, we launched a unique online tool called I-Plan, which helps students as they explore and pursue their plan of college study.

In addition, a team led by Professor Mark Orchard has piloted a College Success Course designed to build awareness and confidence among freshmen. And, under the optimistic leadership of Greg Hazard, the employees and student volunteers in our Academic Support Centers are innovatively tutoring more than 12,000 students annually. Importantly, we continue to seek the Spirit's guidance in shepherding and safeguarding each student.

Nonetheless, it is challenging to provide Ricks College-quality ministrations in an increasingly large and sophisticated university. In tackling this challenge, we are grateful for our partnership with BYU-Pathway Worldwide. As we create practical online courses and degrees for Pathway students, we are reminded of the unique learning needs of college students who may be at risk.

Pathway has helped us see more clearly the gap between the needs of many BYU-Idaho students and the sophisticated nature of our bachelor's degree programs. When Ricks College became BYU-Idaho, it was important to accreditation experts, such as Rhonda Seamons, to thoughtfully consider academic best-practice. Of particular concern in the early years was the transferability of credits to other institutions. Even today, with our university's innovative reputation well established, we must thoughtfully prepare bachelor's degree graduates for potential application to master's and doctoral programs. We must also meet the expectations of employers and professional licensure boards. In designing bachelor's degrees, we have begun with those ends in mind.

That curriculum strategy has succeeded admirably. BYU-Idaho has placed graduates with the most discerning employers, graduate programs, and university faculties. They have fulfilled President Henry B. Eyring's prophecy of our students' becoming "natural leaders," even in the most elite organizations.

Yet our graduation statistics tell us quantitatively what we know intuitively: that curriculum designed to meet the needs of the most capable and ambitious students can present problems for some. For example, a degree program designed to prepare our students for admission to graduate school or for professional licensure is likely to presume a high level of preparedness and subject-matter affinity. It is also likely to have many required courses, necessitating an early declaration of a major for students to have a good chance at four-year graduation.

The design of most general education programs likewise presumes higher education preparedness and certainty. Lawrence Lowell, a Harvard president who wielded lasting influence on American higher education, declared,

The best type of liberal education in our complex modern world aims at producing men who know a little of everything and something well.⁵

During Lowell's twenty years at Harvard's helm, he institutionalized the now-standard bachelor's degree design, with a rigorous, far-reaching general education program for lower-classmen, followed by deep specialization.

This model worked well for the male scions of Boston's privileged Brahmin class, who were well-prepared for college and likely to be considering graduate school. But this is not the situation of many BYU-Idaho students. Our mission is different, and our curriculum design must be as well.

As at other universities, our students are blessed with the choice of numerous degrees designed to ready them for graduate school and professional licensure. For well-prepared and forward-looking students, degrees created with these ends in mind can be a boon.

But for many others, particularly those not fully prepared for college, we must begin with both the end and the beginning

in mind. For these students, the beginning of college is fraught with difficulty and risk. The beginning is when they are living away from home for the first time, with life's distractions and complications at their highest. The beginning is when many may lack academic competence and doubt that they are "college material." It is also when they are prone to enroll in large general education classes taught by professors with whom they are relatively unlikely to forge a long-term relationship. In sum, the beginning is when danger is greatest and thus our curriculum decisions and support activities are most vital.

New learning tools and services such as I-Plan, the College Success course, and expanded tutoring are already lessening the academic risks of the early semesters at BYU-Idaho. And our faculty members, always focused on "the one" and sensitive to the Spirit's promptings, are giving more attention than ever to potential "lost sheep." Importantly, our students themselves are fulfilling President Eyring's prophecy that they will "see the greatest work of their lives as nurturing [one another] as the Savior did."⁶

Yet, a greater margin of safety can be built into the curriculum itself. In recent years, we have been developing bachelor's degree programs that hark back to the parsimonious design envisioned at the university's creation, when our slogan was "Rethinking Education."⁷ These broad-ranging degrees, including interdisciplinary degrees being created under the direction of Dean Danae Romrell, include a major that constitutes only a modest minority of the credits needed to earn a bachelor's credential. A wonderful example is a new bachelor's degree in Data Science, designed by faculty members from three departments with help from colleagues across the university as well as outside advisors. This degree includes courses in statistics, computer science and information technology, design, communication, and business.

It also leaves room for credit-bearing internships and complementary collections of courses from other fields. Importantly, the frugal design of this major allow freshman students to sample curiosity-stimulating introductory courses from multiple majors before making a long-term commitment. Similarly valuable is the flexibility to change majors without incurring a graduation delay.

This Data Science degree includes another vital feature, the nesting of a certificate and an associate degree within the bachelor's program. This design, spearheaded by President Gilbert, provides a valuable credential in the event of a student's leaving in less than four years. It also engages students early in the practical elements of a discipline, with the goal of stimulating curiosity and boosting confidence.

These Pathway-inspired innovations can benefit all students, not just those who feel uncertain and underprepared for college. I sense that from personal experience. I was providentially introduced to my college major, geology, when I was just eight years old. Ricks College professors Ed Williams, Glen Embree, and Roger Hoggan took me into the field.

These mentors gave me a hammer and rocks to split. They helped me imagine the formation of shallow seas that became towering mountains such as the Tetons. They entertained my speculations about geologic puzzles they were trying to solve. They taught me as the Savior did and as BYU-Idaho teachers do: with scenes by the wayside, and an emphasis on Heavenly Father's power and love.

These professors said little of geological time periods or the chemical compositions of minerals. Of course, they didn't give me math problems or research papers to write. Yet by making me feel smart, they made me want to learn more, even at the cost of memorizing eras and formulas.

Despite this unusual advantage, as a college freshman I struggled through two semester-long courses in each of three foundational disciplines—calculus, physics, and chemistry—as well as a semester of biology. Even with the benefit of youthful zeal and mentor-inspired confidence, I nearly foundered. Had I not first fallen in love with geology, I'd likely have given up on my academic relationship with it in college.

Fortunately, all disciplines have the innate capacity to engage students. We're seeing that in the form of exciting introductory courses for many majors. Arron Schellenberg, creator of the popular Mechanical Engineering 101, has helped us build one of the largest and fastest-growing college engineering programs. Another example is "Exploring Geology," a new course created by department chair Julie Willis and her colleagues. These courses, which require no previous exposure to the field and can be taken concurrently with remedial work in college English and math, have the potential to engage freshman who would otherwise be at risk.

It is not only the at-risk student who benefits from an engaging start to a college major which is modular and practical. Commissioner Clark has noted that even the most capable would-be graduate students do well to prepare as though they planned to seek employment with a bachelor's degree, viewing graduate education as only one alternative path. He has often declared that, when we prepare students for the world of work, they are also prepared for graduate education. However, the converse does not necessarily hold.

The path to earning and beneficially applying a graduate degree has always been fraught with risk. But that is true now more so than ever. At a minimum, our students need help in answering graduate program-specific questions about graduation rates and timetables, debt loads, career placement, and earning prospects.

Better than the most thorough risk analysis, though, is a bachelor's degree that prepares graduates to be "natural leaders who know how to teach and how to learn," and who, in the words of President Eyring, "will become legendary for their capacity to build the people around them and to add value wherever they serve."⁸ Such BYU-Idaho graduates naturally succeed in their homes and workplaces, receiving important assignments and promotions with or without a graduate degree.

Moreover, students who choose to pursue graduate education with this kind of college degree are also well-prepared. Thanks to their natural leadership abilities, which are enhanced by well-designed group work and other pedagogies collectively referred to as the BYU-Idaho Learning Model, these students pass what Commissioner Clark calls “The Doorway Test,” which is this: If you are a professor, and a graduate student appears in your office doorway, are you glad? In other words, do you anticipate that the time you invest in that student will be worth your investment?

BYU-Idaho graduates have decided advantages in passing The Doorway Test. They are valued because their practical training and leadership abilities set them apart from colleagues who are merely technically competent. Even more so, they are valued for a quality that their colleagues sense but cannot identify: it is the image of Heavenly Father and the Savior in their countenances. These BYU-Idaho graduates, like their Ricks College forebears, are also recognized and valued for their humility and eagerness to serve others, especially the downtrodden.

I saw those qualities manifested at a wrenching time. On an early summer Saturday in 1976, the just-completed Teton Dam burst with little warning. My brother Stuart and I watched the ensuing flood from the dry farm of our home teacher, Craig Moore, high up in the hills east of Rexburg. We could only imagine the damage being done by what appeared to be a silent, slowly expanding brown lake.

The bursting of the dam drove thousands from their homes. With nowhere else to go, the evacuees came to the higher ground of the college, which opened its dormitories to all. Throughout that summer, the college was a temporal and spiritual sanctuary. The experience was life-changing for both flood victims and those who helped them muck out their homes.

Significantly, no one was required to leave the campus unprepared for the challenges of recovery and rebuilding that awaited them. There were no “dropouts” among those sheltered in the college dorms, only successful “graduates.” They were aided by thousands of volunteers who boarded buses in surrounding communities and states, riding through the night to spend a day cleaning out the homes of strangers. Many of the volunteers were Ricks College students, who returned to campus three months later having gained vital qualities of natural leadership and increased sensitivity to the Spirit’s guidance.

Such is our challenge and opportunity today. Thanks to prophetic direction and the financial support of the Church, we stand on higher ground. Through our integral association with BYU-Pathway Worldwide, we are blessed to be both a haven and a light to the world. We are similarly blessed as we minister to one another on this campus. May we honor our institutional birthright by building upon the providential preparations of the past and qualifying for heaven’s continuing direction.

In closing, I bear testimony that this university is the Lord’s. I am grateful for my testimony of Him, which is a gift initially

bestowed upon me by my mother, who cannot be with us today. Mother loved Rexburg and this campus, cherishing it as a spiritual sanctuary, a haven for her family. She now sits where the veil is thinner still. May we continue to qualify for such thinning. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. 🙏

1. Henry B. Eyring, “Inaugural Response,” Ricks College, December 1971.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Kim B. Clark, “Inaugural Response,” BYU-Idaho, October 11, 2005.
5. A. Lawrence Lowell, “Inaugural Address,” October 6, 1909, in A. Lawrence Lowell, *At War with Academic Traditions in America* (New York: Greenwood, 1970). <http://hul.harvard.edu>.
6. Henry B. Eyring, “A Steady, Upward Course,” BYU-Idaho Devotional, September 2001.
7. Ibid. See also discussion of rethinking education. Note: under the BYU-Idaho presidency of David A. Bednar the theme “rethinking education” was adopted.
8. Henry B. Eyring, “A Steady, Upward Course,” BYU-Idaho Devotional, September 2001.