

The State of the University: Sound Spiritually, Academically, and Financially

REX E. LEE

I have now served as your president for two years and two months, and this is my third university conference. I have enjoyed the experience immensely, more than I thought I would. Part of the reason is that for me this is more than another employment. It is an affiliation with an institution for which I deeply care and whose mission I am convinced is a very important one. Another reason the experience has been such a good one is the supportiveness that I have felt from all of you. On a daily basis, I can observe and see the benefits of the outstanding efforts and dedication of the members of our President's Council. Each is just right for the position, and each discharges it magnificently. And my gratitude for similar dedicated efforts runs through the entire university community, administration, faculty, and staff. We are a team, and we are a good one. I thank you, and I look forward to our further united efforts.

For several reasons, this seems like an appropriate time to review generally the state of our university, including where we are and where we ought to be going.

Let me begin with the big picture. In my opinion, Brigham Young University is as sound spiritually, academically, and financially as at any time in our history. The two most important components for an institution with a teach-

ing mission are its faculty and its students, because good teaching occurs when you put good teachers in a classroom with good students. We have had an excellent faculty recruiting year, which will materially strengthen our quality as a university, and every objective criterion available to us indicates that this year's incoming student class may be the strongest ever.

The central mission of this university—indeed our sole reason for being—is now quite clear to me. Brigham Young University is an integral part of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It exists because it can contribute to kingdom building in ways that can be done by no other organization or entity within the Church. The most obvious and most important of these is the university's ongoing contribution to creating and maintaining a core of well-trained young professionals and others with great faith who will provide tomorrow's leadership and role models. Other distinctive contributions relate principally to the general enhancement of the Church's reputation, and therefore to its long-range ability to spread

Rex E. Lee was president of BYU when this address was given during the Annual University Conference on 26 August 1991.

the message of the Restoration and perfect the Saints.

Everything that we do should be measured by our place within the larger kingdom. In order to fulfill our role, we must first be a very good university, measured by the standards applicable to universities generally. Neither our students nor our academic contemporaries will take seriously our efforts to combine technical learning with higher values—to blend learning by study and also by faith—unless we have first satisfied both those we teach and our peers at other universities of our technical competence and accomplishments within our own fields.

Against that background, then, let me turn to a brief review of some of the things that have happened over the past year, and some of the directions in which I see us going.

The most significant BYU event that has occurred over this past year was a special four-hour meeting with the board of trustees held just a little over two months ago, on June 5. As you know, our board is composed of the First Presidency, seven members of the Quorum of the Twelve, a member of the Presiding Bishopric, and the presidents of the Relief Society and Young Women organizations. The June 5 meeting was unusual in that all of the members of the Quorum of the Twelve (not just our board members) were invited. The results were, in my opinion, correspondingly significant for the future of BYU.

The central focus of that June 5 meeting was, what kind of university BYU should be, not just right now, but over the balance of this decade, and even beyond. We also touched at several points on what would be required to reach where we want to be, though most of those issues remain to be developed.

Neither time nor propriety permit me to review in detail everything that happened at that meeting, but I will discuss what I believe were its three most significant conclusions. Each of the three is important not only in its own right, but also as an applied subset of

our existence as an integral part of the larger Church.

The first concerned the matter of our long-range governance and the preservation of our uniqueness within the larger community of American institutions of higher education. The premise from which we began that discussion two and a half months ago, and from which I begin this one with you this morning, concerns the importance of maintaining our traditional governance structure and the relationship that that structure bears to preserving our religious anchorage. Historically central to our governance has been the personal involvement and attention of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve. To me the advantages to that kind of representation on our board of trustees are obvious. Let me explain why.

We are distinctive among American universities, because we are not only a good university, but also because we can combine our academic mission with a set of values that are unique to us. Literally unique. Our goal is to blend technical traditional academic training with restored truth into a single whole that develops not just the mind, but the entire eternal soul. Obviously, our effectiveness in carrying out that central objective, and making our distinctive contribution to the total process of kingdom building, is not only well served by a board of trustees that includes people whom we recognize and sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators; I doubt that over the long run we could sustain our mission in any other way. In short, the responsibility for the university must remain with the same people who are entitled to divine inspiration for the entire Church of which we are an inseparable part.

The other, and to me equally obvious, side of that same coin is that with a Church whose active membership is growing at an astounding rate, and a First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve whose memberships are set by scripture at three and twelve, the ability of the members of those quorums to continue to give

our large policy concerns the attention that they need in order to preserve our uniqueness and our strength could be at stake over the long run. What the board agreed to in our meeting of June 5 was a set of procedures that I am confident will give us the kind of continuing input that will not only assist us in preserving our identity, but will also give us more focused policy guidance where we need it. The past 26 months have led me to the view that policy guidance by the Brethren on some of our larger issues will do more for the health and welfare of this university and its people than any other single development that could occur. I do not make that assertion loosely, and while I cannot give you all the details as to why, I am convinced that it is true. Continuing involvement of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve is absolutely essential to the preservation of our uniqueness and our quality, and I believe that the procedures to which the board agreed on June 5 will give us that continued attention, even in the face of other and ever-increasing demands.

Let me respond just briefly to the opposing point of view, expressed from time to time by thoughtful people, that the governing boards of universities such as ours should be educational experts and not ecclesiastical leaders. I mention in passing that, as Elder Packer noted in an address he gave here last February, we do in fact have among our present board members a rather impressive number who are highly experienced in college and university matters. But beyond that, our entire American experience teaches that the strongest institutions, and those that have withstood the test of time, are those in which the ultimate decision makers on large policy matters are generalists rather than specialists. This is true of all three branches of our constitutionally ordained republic. In the executive branch, we have legions of experts on almost all conceivable issues, from taxes to transportation, from international trade to international health. But the final reviewing

authority over all of those experts is vested in generalists, and ultimately in one generalist, the president of the United States. The same is true of Congress, whose members are the final authority over their more expert staffers. The most prominent example in the judicial branch is taxation, which is highly technical and specialized. Many proposals have been made that the decisions of the tax court, which deals only with tax matters, should be reviewed by an equally specialized court of tax appeals, instead of the existing appellate courts, whose jurisdiction sweeps across the spectrum of federal law from bankruptcy to bank robbery, from discrimination to defense. None of those proposals has ever succeeded. In my opinion, they never will, though they will continue to be made from time to time. And why will they not succeed? Because of the soundness of this general principle that the work of specialists should be ultimately reviewed by generalists and not by other specialists.

The second significant development coming from our June 5 meeting was the board's general approval of the standards and criteria by which we are currently administering the admission of new and transfer students. This approval followed a rather careful and detailed explanation of those standards and criteria, because our board understands, as we do, that few if any subjects are more sensitive to our total constituency and to us than how we allocate the scarce admission slots available to us each year.

In brief, what we seek to do through our admissions system is to admit those persons who will gain the most from a BYU educational experience and will contribute the most in the ways that we want our graduates to contribute. It is not an easy task, and no set of admissions criteria can perfectly draw the kinds of distinctions that ultimately need to be drawn. But we have given a lot of attention to this matter, and the criteria we now use reflect our consciousness of the importance of the underlying issue.

Our current criteria focus on three things: (1) the applicant's worthiness and willingness to abide by our standards of personal conduct; (2) preparation to do academic work of the quality we offer, ultimately leading to graduation; and (3) personal characteristics suggesting that the applicant and BYU have something to offer each other in terms of our broader mission. The first and third of these general inquiries are quite subjective, and therefore partake of both the strengths and the weaknesses of subjective criteria generally. They are more difficult to apply, more difficult to understand, and therefore subject to greater criticism, particularly by those who are not admitted. They are also much more consumptive of time and resources. But they reflect our present conclusion that we can reach beyond strictly numerical criteria in making our admissions decisions, and that those decisions affect so many people in so many important ways that the risks of departure from strict objectivity may be warranted. At least we are willing to give it a try, and our experience this year was encouraging.

On June 5, the board reviewed these and other admission challenges that we face, and approved our present approach.

The third major issue with which the June 5 board meeting dealt concerned the relationships between our teaching and the research, scholarship, and other activities that support our teaching and also have value in their own right. First, the board reaffirmed that our dominant emphasis is to be undergraduate teaching. This was nothing new, in light of our history and the board's previous determination of about a year earlier. My own reasons for believing it is exactly the right general approach are set forth in the remarks that I gave to this body at our last annual conference. It is at the undergraduate level that we have the greatest impact on values that are important to us.

This year the board went a significant step further and determined not only that our major focus is to be undergraduate teaching, but also

that the quality of that teaching effort should be commensurate with the quality of our student body and with the broader objectives that we have set for the university as apart of the total kingdom-building effort. We discussed, and all present understood, that that kind of teaching involves more than disseminating information to students by teachers who have little time for anything else. More specifically, we reviewed again the Carnegie Foundation's categories of American higher education institutions and gave a few well-known examples that fit in the categories on each side of us. Specifically, we made some comparisons between what BYU has done in recent years and what is done by schools that Carnegie classifies as "comprehensive." The Carnegie folks will never classify us as a research university, because research for us is a means to an end, and because the measuring rod for that classification is the amount of annual federal grants. But neither will they classify us as comprehensive, because we do more than just teach classes.

The board specifically determined and approved our continuing to function at a level beyond the comprehensive category. They understand, as we do, that this means a continuing commitment to the importance of high-quality research and creativity, as well as participation in activities beyond the campus, including seminars, conferences, another activities generally that will keep our faculty intellectually alive and at the forefront of what is happening in their fields. The end objective of these involvements is not only to enhance our ability to provide a high-quality undergraduate education, but also to solidify further BYU's emergence as a respected, first-rate university.

I hasten to add that in my view we are not yet there. We have made remarkable progress in that direction in recent years and we must continue that progress. In some respects, it will require additional resources, and we continue to consider ways that those can be obtained.

But both over the long run in which we continue to work on obtaining them, and over the shorter run, this board decision means that we will continue to place our faculty recruiting emphasis on people who understand what it takes to give our students the very best possible education; people who are committed to keeping themselves at the forefront of their fields; people who regard research, scholarship, and creative work as an essential part of their professional lives; and people who not only have intellectual capacity and curiosity, but are also willing to work hard and use that capacity to its maximum potential. In short, the board understands the direction in which we have been going for the past couple of decades and has approved both the direction and the momentum.

We intend to take full advantage of that momentum as we replace the unusually large number of retiring faculty members over the remainder of this decade. As I indicated at the outset, I have been very impressed with most of the results that we have had in this respect during the past year, and I look forward to working with you in the future.

Finally, the board also understands that being a major undergraduate teaching university does not mean that we have no graduate programs. Indeed, the quality of undergraduate education that is our major objective could not be achieved without some graduate programs, and as you know, these presently account for about 10 percent of our student body. From time to time, we may and probably will add some programs and discontinue others, as in fact we already have. But these decisions will not be driven principally by whether they are located at the undergraduate or graduate levels, but by their total effect on, and contribution toward or university and its mission. These decisions, particularly decisions to discontinue, are very painful, and for that and other reasons are not lightly undertaken. But however painful, if we as an administration

are to carry out our stewardship in a responsible way, those are the kinds of decisions that we will have to make. There are two crucial components to President Holland's statement that we cannot do everything, but what we choose to do, we will do very well. Both parts are equally important. The first requires a continuing analysis into whether things that are not essential to the university's mission are standing in the way of things that are. And the second requires that our programs be of very high quality. To that end we must have available both the resources and the people that will move us steadily ahead in our effort to become the very best Church university that we can. On June 5 of this year, our board of trustees reaffirmed that they understand these objectives and principles and will work with us toward their achievement.

The next subject I would like to discuss with you concerns our campus buildings, including those that presently exist, those that are under construction, and those that have been either formally or effectively authorized.

Over the past two years or so I have reflected with interest on the relationship, both historically and also at the present time, that our university buildings have borne on the achievement of our larger mission. I have concluded, incidentally, that probably the only time in our history when building needs did not occupy a substantial portion of the administration's attention and efforts was in 1875, when we first opened our doors to 29 students in the Lewis Building on Center Street and Third West. I believe it is literally true that over the entire period since then, my predecessors and I have always had to be concerned with space and building needs.

I am also sure that building concerns were a principal motivation behind our enrollment ceiling, and certainly our enrollment ceiling has had and will have a limiting effect on new building needs. Part of the folklore of our university is that President Wilkinson once

assured the board that with the enrollment ceiling, and some then-recently completed structures, the “campus was complete” and that we would never again have to be worried about new bricks and mortar. Whether that story is true or apocryphal, the fact is that in just the two decades since the end of the Wilkinson administration, we have added nine new buildings, including four major academic buildings, for a total of 1,400,000 net additional square feet. How can that possibly be, given the fact of our enrollment ceiling? Is it just a wasteful quirk of universities generally, in which we also participate? Or is it an academic extension of a principle that Parkinson never precisely articulated, but maybe should have? For starters, there are three categories of reasons why, even with a stable enrollment, we will always have a need periodically for new buildings on this campus. There are familiar examples for each of the categories. The first is represented by our beloved old Joseph Smith Building, soon to be replaced by another one that is located nearby and looks very much like its predecessor. As central to our hearts and our university history as the Joseph Smith Building has been, it has now reached the point that it is structurally, mechanically, and in other ways worn out, and as a practical matter cannot be fixed. From time to time, that May happen to other structures as well.

The second category is represented by another building that played a very prominent role in my own days here as a student, the Eyring Science Center. Unlike the JSB, it need not be torn down, and as a building will still be useful for decades. But not for many of the science functions that it was originally intended to serve. Its category is that of buildings whose academic disciplines—the sciences are probably the classic examples—have changed so significantly that the building can no longer serve its intended purpose. The simple truth of the matter is that if we are going to continue to function as a university, we must continue to

teach science, including chemistry and molecular biology, and these can no longer adequately be taught in the Eyring Science Center, which was designed and constructed for a quite different kind of teaching and learning.

Accordingly, one of the more significant events that has occurred in the past two years was the board’s approval of a new science building, whose architectural and other planning is now well under way, and which will be located on the edge of campus, on the hill just south of our Nicholes Building.

The third category of university realities that periodically require new buildings, even with an enrollment ceiling, is library expansion. We have not totally solved the dilemma of the university library. The heart of any great university such as we are determined to be is its library. Given our commitment to the kind of school we must be, it is unthinkable that our library should lag behind other aspects of our development. Within the limits of existing understanding and technology, this means that about every 15 to 20 years a university of our quality will be compelled to undertake a major expansion of its library buildings. We have two major libraries on this campus, one of them considerably larger than the other, and both are coming up on the twentieth anniversaries of their most recent building construction. The available other steps that can be taken to relieve the space needs—including satellite storage, microfilm, collapsible shelving, and interlibrary loans—have been exhausted. The options before us now are either to add significantly to existing library space, or start burning books. The board’s approval of these library projects is at a stage preliminary to the authorization for the science building, but planning money has been authorized, and we are moving ahead with consultant reports, analysis of long-range needs, and other aspects of the planning that the board has approved. I am grateful, as we all must be, that our board of trustees understands that if we are to continue

in the university business, we must not only teach the sciences according to today's standards, but we must also maintain adequate libraries. With them, I can only hope that by the time the next 20-year cycle rolls around, we will have found some better answer to the problem of continually escalating library costs.

Aside from these categories, we will periodically have other building projects of lesser and different magnitudes. You are all aware of the construction now under way on our foreign-language-house complex and the additions to our married-student housing. The Wilkinson Center needs some major renovations, but the Wilkinson Center also produces a reserve from its operations that should suffice for the purpose.

Clearly the most ambitious building project presently under construction is our new museum of fine arts, scheduled for completion by about the end of next year. While that one will have definite academic benefits, it is not a classic academic building such as the new JSB or the science building or the library additions. Neither will it produce self-sustaining revenues, as will the foreign-language-house complex and married-student housing facilities. It is an enrichment building. Because it is an enrichment building, it has been financed entirely by donated funds, and the donations have had to include enough to provide an endowment for its continuing maintenance and operation. I am delighted at the prospect of bringing this welcome addition to our campus. And I stand in admiration of the work that has been done by our development people, by Dean Mason, and by others in raising the money to build and operate it. But I have had sufficient involvement in that particular effort to realize just how difficult it is to finance a building in that way. It has left me with skepticism about undertaking such an effort unless there is solid indication of strong financial interest and an equally compelling need.

Before I leave the subject of buildings, I want to make one more observation about what I consider to be one of the strengths of our traditions, as reflected in our physical plant. Over the decades, our board has followed a policy for financing academic buildings that for the most part has permitted us to incorporate those buildings themselves as part of the teaching process. Let me explain. Our objective is to train people not just to be technically competent, but also to incorporate into their professions and other work the larger values that are the bedrock principles of the gospel. Precisely because of the names that almost all of our academic buildings bear, the buildings themselves, I believe, can and in some instances do play a not inconsequential role in that teaching process. We teach our business and finance classes in a building named for N. Eldon Tanner. No one in our history has better combined Christian values and sound business principles. The same can be said for so many buildings on this campus. We teach science in buildings named for people like Eyring, Martin, and Nicholes, math in a building that bears the name of James E. Talmage, and law in the J. Reuben Clark Building. We teach educators in the David O. McKay Building, humanities in the Jesse Knight Building, religion in the Joseph Smith Building, and military science and physical education in buildings named after Daniel H. Wells and Stephen L Richards. And there are other examples.

I want to discuss next the role of athletics at BYU. Unlike today's other subjects, this one is not central to the performance of our larger mission. But while not essential, it is important, and I believe makes our university a more interesting and attractive place in which to work and live. I also believe, frankly—though I cannot empirically support it—that the winning traditions of our teams, especially in recent years, have contributed to upgrading the quality of both our faculty and our students. I have little doubt that they have contributed

toward the general sense of pride and community spirit that are important to us. Again, to quote President Holland, "It's a little hard to rally round the math building."

The United States is apparently the only nation in the world that incorporates competitive athletics as an integral part of its college and university programs. Competitive sports certainly exist in other countries, but the major programs are sponsored through clubs, whereas college and university involvement in sports is more on the order of what we would regard as intramural. And even within this country, there are prominent examples of very successful institutions of higher learning whose academic achievements appear not to have been affected adversely by the absence of participation in intercollegiate athletic competition. Over the past 26 months, I have talked to several people who are convinced that in this respect, other countries got it right and the United States got it wrong. Several thoughtful university presidents have expressed to me in private that they would get out of the intercollegiate athletic competition business altogether if there were any way they could. Though they have not put it in these terms, I get the impression that they would compare it to drug addiction: Don't ever get started, because once you do, it's almost impossible to stop it.

I want you to know that I do not feel at all that way about our program at BYU. On balance, I believe that the effect of athletics on this campus is very positive, for reasons that I mentioned earlier. It is also a source of some pride, not only because of our accomplishments on the field, the court, and the track, but also related to higher objectives for which we stand. Just this last summer, I was pleased to learn that this university is one of only six Division I schools (out of 296) that has never been assessed with a major penalty by the NCAA. The number of university administrators who are aware of this fact is not inconsequential, and this contributes to our university character

image in just exactly the right way. It is a tribute to our school and particularly our athletic administration and coaches that we have been able to sustain a program that is highly successful (consistently ranking in the top twenty in total team sports) while still being financially self-sustaining and free of major NCAA violations.

The final entry in this necessarily limited review of important events that have happened over the past year is the valuable work that has been done by our Honor Code and Dress and Grooming Standards Review Committee, under the able chairmanship of R. J. Snow. Some have asked whether our standards have been relaxed. They have not. The work of that committee has been to reaffirm and to strengthen. Most of the strengthening will come through implementation procedures, involving principally student honor councils, whose effort will be to help all of us understand that the ownership of these standards is university-wide and that all have a stake in them. I assume that the questions about possible relaxation relate to the fact that we now permit knee-length shorts. What we should all remember is that knee-length shorts are, if anything, more modest than knee-length skirts, which have long been permitted. I think that our basic challenge is to educate some of our students as to exactly where the knee is, and for this purpose I have prepared a visual aid. [Slide 1: President Lee in casual wear, including knee-length shorts.] Note the happy, satisfied look on this particular person's face because he knows he is in conformity with BYU's dress and grooming standards. Note also the versatility with which these knee-length shorts can be used as part of a carefully chosen wardrobe. [Slide 2: President Lee in formal wear, except for the same knee-length shorts.] My personal views about the importance of both an honor code and dress and grooming standard such as the ones we have and are trying to build are strongly held and rooted in years of experience at BYU. Some

of the requirements are to trivialize, and even demean, as inconsistent with a serious academic undertaking such as the one in which we are engaged. I see the total package, both honor code and dress and grooming standards, as lying at the core of what we are trying to do, because both relate to our spiritual and intellectual tone and to the environment in which we teach and learn and live. Some of the provisions are solidly based on scripture. Others are rooted in considerations of basic honesty, including academic honesty. All of those, I assume, are beyond any question.

There are other provisions that vary significantly in the degree of enthusiasm they attract. But one of the hallmarks of any civilized society is that lines must be drawn, decisions must be made, and one they are, reaction to them will range from enthusiasm on one end to antagonism on the other, with indifference in the middle. But it is also one of the marks of a civilized society—indeed one of its absolute prerequisites—that once environmental or any other kind of rules are adopted they should be followed, especially when those rules have been adopted by a reasonable process with opportunity for input by representatives of those interested. There are in our society many who disagree with many of our rules, ranging all the way from taxes to safety to defense. But we obey them, including the ones with which we disagree. The alternative, ultimately, is anarchy.

One of the most important lessons that I hope we are trying to teach here is what it takes to be a good citizen and a to function as a contributing member of society. The importance of rules of conduct is central to that effort, and we promote it by helping not only our students but all members of the BYU community to respect our honor code and dress and grooming standards. It follows that the implementation of these standards is the business of everyone at BYU: the faculty in the classrooms; our auxiliary services people in

the dorms, cafeterias, and the bookstore; our librarians; student leaders; everyone. For reasons that I have just stated, I take these issues very seriously, and I hope that each of you will also. I hope that all of us can come to regard these honor code and dress and grooming standards as involving no lesser values than environmental issues of the most elementary quality, as issues of right and wrong that go beyond environmental preservation. The code and standards belong to all of us, and I hope we will take our ownership seriously. Toward that end, permit me to point out two things.

First, this campus is the place where we live and work and study and learn. There is no other place like it in the world, and that is by design rather than by accident. Our ability to do what we want to do here depends in no small part on the environment in which we operate, and the honor code and dress and grooming standards play a significant role in maintaining that environment, including not only its physical aspects, but also its intellectual and moral. Second, ours is a teaching mission. Among the things that we teach is the responsibility of each citizen within a society or community to live by the rules that hold the society together. In any society of any complexity and any sophistication, many of its members will disagree with some of those rules. And one of the lessons of life and citizenship that we absolutely must teach at this university is that responsible citizenship does not permit individuals to pick and choose among those rules that he or she elects to follow. We can try to get them changed, through the regularly designated processes. But failing that, we obey the rules, including the ones we think are silly. If you like, I can give you a long list of rules that I follow every day just because they are rules, notwithstanding my conclusion that they are silly.

We are dealing here with principles that are far more important than hair lengths, earrings in male ears, beards, and knee-length shorts.

At stake are issues of morality and good citizenship. Some are issues that lie at the core of restored truth, and all lie at the core of the ability of any society, including the family, the university, and the nation, to sustain itself as an institution, rather than degenerating into a collection of free-wheeling self-expressionists.

Every member of the groups has an interest in the continuing health and vitality of that principle. If we see someone polluting our environment, or killing our neighbor, or defacing public buildings, we are just kidding ourselves if we think that the highest principles of morality require us to say or do nothing. And so I invite every member of our university community to join with us in a special effort

throughout this coming year to help educate our students not only where on the human body the knee is really located, but also about honesty and morality and that fundamental principles of good citizenship require obedience to the rules by which society exists, including those rules with which we agree and those with which we do not.

I will also at this time express my conviction that we are engaged here at BYU in something very worthwhile, something that has both intellectual and also spiritual dimensions of great significance for us and our students. That each of us will lend an effort commensurate with the importance of what we are about is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.