Dean's Remarks
University Conference, College of Humanities session
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I. The BYU advantage

Conference is a time of reflection and planning, and something I sorely missed before coming to BYU. I started out my teaching career at Colgate University, in the middle of rural upstate New York. [slide] We didn’t have anything like University Conference; in fact, I arrived with a new president, and left six years later, during which time we had been promised a ‘mission statement’ any day now. I really felt that lack, since most of the faculty, for whom I looked to guidance as I began my teaching and scholarly career, seemed headed off into a dizzying array of directions. Or, if they were not inclined to padding their CV, they exuded a kind of collective cynicism with which my ideological new professor self had nothing in common.

So arriving here and attending my first University Conference, with prayers, hymns, inspiring addresses, and alcohol-free receptions, seemed as though I had come to academic paradise. Although now, as an administrator, I find the meetings pile up, I am still grateful to have a chance to reflect and recharge each year right before the students arrive.

When I was at Colgate, and attended conferences to read papers, I would wear a name badge, such as this one, [slide] used at an Association for Asian Studies regional conference in New Paltz, NY in 1993. After graduate school it was very exciting to go to conferences and have a name badge; it was part of the validating process that made me feel like I had arrived, and was actually doing what I had been dreaming about for years. I noticed people reading my name, noticing my school, and developed a kind of pride in being “at Colgate.”

The year after using this particular name badge I moved to BYU, and I remember my first conference after arriving, a similar Association for Asian Studies regional conference held in Pomona, California [slide]. I was the same guy, of course, but wearing BYU after my name made me feel very different in significant ways. I was still a scholar of Japanese and Comparative Literature with a PhD from Princeton, but none of that was on the badge: only my current school, “BYU.” I was not sure, exactly, how that would play out in the mind of the person looking at my badge. I wondered how much my new badge would change the way people perceived me. I wasn’t sure whether to put on my “persecution” or my “missionary” game face as I went forth into the world as a BYU professor.

As it turns out, I should not have worried as much as I did. I have faced little, if any artwork in-progress “Don’t Need These Stinkin’ Badges: No More!” The title is, of course, homage to a great film line. But it is also a reminder that each one of these badges represents a few days where I pressed the flesh, walked and talked with others outside of BYU as a living, breathing example of an LDS scholar. In the process, on every occasion, I made at least one new friend or acquaintance for whom the badge is no longer necessary. We know each other now, and are much more than just the school we’re “at.”

I confess that wearing the BYU badge has changed me, I believe for the better; not by causing me to retreat inward in fear, but rather it has given me boldness I did not have before coming to BYU. I believe that boldness comes from the knowledge that, unlike the feelings of insecurity I had at Colgate when my scholarly pursuits seemed purely self-serving, I am now using my talents for a greater cause, the building up of the kingdom of God. When we wear the BYU badge, we come to see ourselves as consecrated scholars, giving of our time, talents, and God-given gifts to research, teaching, and serving others. That, I believe, is the greatest blessing of having BYU on our name badge. I am personally aware that at times God chooses the weak things of the world to show forth his strength. We can be magnified, both in our scholarship and our teaching, as we humble ourselves and invite God to strengthen our weakness.

I hope that wearing the BYU badge proves to you, as it has for me, full of pleasant surprises and new friends. When any of us travel for BYU, we are performing a remarkable act that brings credit to the College and BYU, as much as, perhaps even more than, a printed publication.

II. A vision of and for our students

Back in January we met as department chairs in an annual retreat, part of which was a discussion of a book Dean Rosenberg assigned us to read entitled How College Works [slide]. The authors were from Hamilton College, a small liberal arts school in upstate New York, a place I know well both from having administered Japanese exams there and because Colgate was a mere 20 minutes up the road. [slide]

I was struck by the book, not so much for what the authors said—in a nutshell, college works best when people have meaningful contact—but rather the nostalgia the book caused me, and the concomitant memories and impressions it produced. I remembered the students I came to know, and love, at Colgate: the education-hungry innocents who were the first generation to speak English and go to college; the ‘legacy’ students whose affluent, old-money parents had gone there as well; the ‘operators,’ who were often from nouveau-riche families and had their futures waiting for them when they graduated from this prestigious place; the ‘hockey jocks,’ many displaced from their native Canada, who skated along the margins of working-class values and liberal arts sentiments; and the language nerds who, attracted to rather than repelled by the difficulty of Japanese, burned with an intense desire to learn.

I have kept in touch with some of my students from Colgate, and now that I have been teaching nearly three decades, have seen some grow wildly successful in the world’s terms, others struggle along, and all grow into early middle age (gasp). [slide] My first BYU students have likewise moved on, some to unimaginable success, others through a series of dramatic shifts and changes in careers and lifestyles. And,
reflecting on both, I have come to a conclusion about their differences and similarities, sparked by the discourse offered in How College Works.

There is a reason for the overwhelming success of Ivy League and other elite colleges, and it is largely due to the heritage of its students. They come from privilege, largely, and a sense of confidence and entitlement such privilege produces in youth. While this is less and less the case, in terms of family background, it is still the case in terms of preparation prior to their arrival on campus. The students show up one of two ways. Some have spent the formative years of their youth in academic finishing schools. They have been thrown together with others of privilege in a hothouse environment of college prep that has done its best to get them ready to succeed. Others, with less access to resources, have experienced the best imitation of that hothouse process their public schools, parental or government intervention, or sheer resourcefulness, could muster, and are admitted in the face of incredible odds.

In either case, as much as the faculty of elite colleges would like take credit for the brilliance of their students, in actuality they would have to try very hard indeed in order not to succeed as teachers, given the preparation and profile of the students they, sometimes begrudgingly, teach.

Now that I’ve been at BYU for over two decades, I am realizing that BYU has a similarly rich heritage, but of a different profile, one that does not quite fall into stereotypes as easily, but is equally complex and nuanced. Scott Sprenger alluded to this in an article in the college magazine last fall. [slide]

*I understood the minute I stepped foot on campus that BYU is the most unique academic community the United States, if not the entire world, because of its students...I will never forget the 20th-century French lit class that I guest-taught during the interview process. The class was bursting at the seams with smart, energetic, and curious students, and the foreign language ability was simply off the charts. It was clear to me immediately that BYU students were positioned for success in the international arena in ways that no other university, not even the Ivies, could ever match.*

Our students have a combination of background and ambitions that have been uniquely shaped by their Church and missionary experiences, and this profile sets them apart from their non-BYU, state-school peers just as clearly as do the privileges of college prep for their Ivy League cousins. Just as being raised in wealth and prep schools shapes a particular kind of student, so being raised in the Church—giving talks in Primary, learning leadership and social skills in youth programs, and, with or without that, serving a mission at home or abroad—shapes a particular kind of BYU student, who are the overwhelming majority of those we teach. We have largely taken this profile for granted. Perhaps, with our myopic bias towards the elite often bred into us in graduate school, we have even downplayed our students’ difference, to their and our detriment. (I know I have been guilty of underappreciating the miracle of my student’s language proficiency at times, bemoaning instead their lack of native-like fluency.) But I agree with Scott Sprenger: our students’ unique background in service, leadership, and language is perhaps our greatest asset, and one we should not hesitate to leverage, especially in our curricula.

Increasingly, there is also an overlap between the kinds of students who show up in the fall at Ivy League schools and those who arrive in Provo. In terms of socioeconomic privilege we have a few proto-Mitt Romneys in our midst, of course, but the student profile we most share in common comes from the public school-prepared and self-taught types. Thousands of potential students who see ad admittance into BYU as a shrinking window, with increasingly higher standards, are rising to the challenge. Some of these have also applied to the Ivies, but, unless their prospective scholarships are particularly lavish, BYU makes better economic, and certainly spiritual, sense. And they show up much better prepared than those before them, and with higher expectations for what we, their teachers, will deliver.

So, we stand on the dry shores having seen the tide of students go out as many left on missions, and have noticed its profound shrinking effect on the small number of graduates we celebrated during August convocation. Are we prepared for the returning tsunami such a phenomenon precedes? [slide] In the College, it will make its first appearance in our language classes this fall, and its effects will be felt throughout all of our programs. Now, more than ever before in its history, except perhaps at the end of WWII with the GI Bill and in the early 1970s with its huge leap in enrolled students, BYU is going to see a fundamental change in its student body.

The returned missionary profile that makes our students unique, and contributes in large part to the subsequent success that we have all seen and will doubtless continue to see, will become an even more universal component of the students we teach. We are already beginning to see this among our returning missionary women students, who show greater confidence, poise, and alertness in the classroom. We will shortly see it as well in a growing freshman male population whose profile suggests its own new acronym: RM-NBC [slide] (Returned Missionary, Never Been to College!)

What this means for us, as teachers and stewards of this precious human resource, I will leave to your imagination and your individual inspiration. [slide] There will doubtless be shifts in enrollments and teaching assignments, as well as important reconsiderations of how we now use our resources. It will certainly call for new pedagogies, and re-evaluation of who our target students are, and what they need to learn. I can only suggest that we should play to our strengths, and that the privilege we may now claim, to teach and interact with some of the finest souls on the face of the earth, is a blessing that will take all of our inspiration, creativity, and resourcefulness to realize. (This will not, I should note, involve using our students as talk therapists or protégés in our campaign to reform local culture or politics.) Our task, our challenge, our calling, if I may be so bold, is to give them the legacy of an education that truly liberates them from the narrow, confining bonds of their own media caricatures of what college-educated people are like, the current version being a warped mixture of smugness, pedantry, and dis-hed. We can show them a more liberating vision and example in the way we share our faith, write our publications, live our lives, and teach in our classrooms. We can also help them, through self-discovery and faith, arrive at a more enlightened sense of who they are and what calling, and perhaps even vocation, God has in store for them.
III. On coinage

In Matthew 17 (24-27) we read the story of the coin from a fish. As you recall, Christ and his disciples were lodging in Capernaum when a man asked if they paid tribute tax. Christ used this as a way to teach Peter about negotiating his way through the world as a saint. After stating that the children of rulers are never taxed, Christ said that, to avoid offense, Peter should go to the Sea of Galilee and throw in his line. The fish he caught would carry in its mouth a coin that would exactly cover the tax. (The Gospel of Matthew, by the way, never says whether this actually happened, but we can presume it did.) [slide]

Our first impression of the story, when Christ instructs Peter, may have been that He was going to say, “You, Peter, go catch some fish to sell so we can pay the tribute.” And, if that were the case, the fundamental message would have been the same: God provides. But there was something much more powerful in the way Christ instructed Peter, something He needed Peter to experience, and indeed come to anticipate for the remainder of his life. Of all the possible ways, miraculous or otherwise, Christ could have procured a coin to pay the tribute, the method He invokes seems like one of the most circuitous: the chances of casting a line into the Sea of Galilee only once and catching a fish that happened to have swallowed a coin, and that of sufficient value to pay the tax, are mind boggling.

But I do not think Christ was using this method as an act of showmanship to astound and convert. After all, his audience—the disciples—had already witnessed many miracles. I think He was targeting a specific disciple and wanted to make a specific point in Peter’s own occupational ‘language.’ Christ did not ask Judas, the bursar, to go sell something to obtain the money for the tax. He asked Peter, the fisherman and future leader of the Church, to go catch a fish, and I think Peter, who knew even better the odds, had a great personal lesson to learn from this about how God will provide for our needs if we combine faith with works; in this case, our work or occupation. For a fisherman like Peter, the divine signature of the event would have been unmistakable: familiar as he was with water, weather, the migrating habits of schools of fish, and having cleaned thousands of coinless fish in his lifetime, Peter could not help but understand Christ’s message. What was to Peter a mundane place and quotidian task—the Sea of Galilee, fishing—became a sacred space and an ordinance of redemption from the claims of the world.

We are blessed to have the same opportunity as Peter: the Lord is giving us a chance to see the hand of God in miraculous ways in our daily occupation and labors. And we, too, are being invited to cast our lines in faith and see daily miracles in our lives as we consider what to study, where to look for answers to our research questions, how to construct our teaching approaches and learning outcomes, and how to serve and interact with others here at BYU.

The odds may seem astounding, but if we research in faith, if we serve with faith, if we serve our students and colleagues in faith, the Lord can provide us with the various coins of the realms, as we need them, to advance along the winding road of our careers and our lives.

Conclusion: Labors of love

In the three months I have been serving as dean I have made it a point to visit people in the college in their offices. It has given me a chance to get to know them better, and to get a feel for the way they decorate their offices, the books and art, the objects and people they love. And I have been overwhelmed by the generosity of spirit and degree of love each person radiates in their own unique way, in particular as they talk about students. To me, that is a key element that helps make this college the warm and friendly place it is.

Last year Doug Prawitt, a professor in the Accountancy program, offered his comments to the faculty center regarding the role love plays in the classroom. I’d like to share them with you. [slide]

“We have to be striving to be the people that we need to be, and then we just need to love our students, and you can’t fake that. Either you do or you don’t. And if you do, you walk into the classroom, and the sharing—of who you are, and the effort that goes with it, and the openness, and everything that has to be there—will be there. And the students will trust you. They’ll open up their hearts and minds to be taught both the information and the more spiritual aspects of it. You know, you can put together a long list of things we should be doing, but unless (1) we’re striving to be what we need to be, and (2) we truly do love our students, I don’t know how much good the rest of the list does you.” -- Doug Prawitt (BYU, Accountancy)

I know that you are striving to be who you need to be, as teachers, as scholars, and as servants of God. And I know that you love your students. I believe that the institution of the classroom works best when a teacher’s love for students motivates both faculty and students to learn. A college works best when colleagues respect and love one another for the diverse work that each performs as part of the broader whole. I have felt a measure of love for the college in an amazing way over the past few months, and look forward to serving you and learning to love you all much better. Likewise, I encourage you to continue to see everything you do in terms of love. To borrow from the inspired words of President Eyring that President Worthen invoked in his address on Monday, let us all magnify our love of learning and our love of lifting so that we can continue to research and teach, learn and lift, not for the praise of men but to serve the world, and especially our students, better.