

*Brigham Young University*

# Speeches

*A Charted Course*

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## *A Charted Course*

HENRY B. EYRING

Yesterday I sat in a living room with a family whose son was to drive to Provo today to begin his freshman year. He will likely park in a lot near Deseret Towers, take his bags through the door of his new dorm, and wear the smile of happy anticipation I saw as he sat near his parents in that living room. I could see his eyes shining with the thought of an exciting beginning. And I thought I saw the eyes of his mom and dad shining, too, but with the moisture that sometimes comes when something precious is about to end. That handsome young man and his parents extend to us remarkable trust. That act will be repeated hundreds and perhaps thousands of times in the next few days.

You deserve thanks for the preparations you have made for that young man and his colleagues which merit that extension of confidence to us. From the parking lot to the dorm to the financial offices to the library to the classroom, he will pass by with only faint recognition of the care and labor that made his opportunities possible, the blacktop repaired, the how-to-use-the-Internet course prepared, and the syllabus redesigned yet again. I thank you for that—at least as well as I understand it—for him, for his parents, and for the thousands of students and their families that your work blesses.

There is another preparation, one that will be even harder for him to detect, for which I thank you. And so would he and his parents, from the bottom of their hearts, if they sensed both the magnitude of your effort and the good it will do for years to come, not only for this group of arriving students. Thank you for the labor and the time and the talent so many of you expended in turning what might have been a standard accreditation self-study into a process of making plans to move us toward our destiny as a university.

Much of the high quality of that effort—from the willingness to gather evidence about the results in the lives of students to openness about possible real changes—seems to me to stem from something we did near the start of the process. We selected some talks and writings from members of the board of trustees—present and past, some still living and some dead—that described visions of the nature of this university and our potential for good. Many of you read those foundation documents

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*Henry B. Eyring was commissioner of education for the Church Educational System and a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this BYU Annual University Conference address was given on 27 August 1996.*

carefully. And many who read them have analyzed and made plans using the ideas in them as a guide to a vision of our future.

I reread those foundation documents again as part of my preparation for the new academic year. What struck me was their consistency across long periods of time and with each other. I was struck with the recurrence of the idea that putting religious faith first will enhance our achievements as a university. What was not said in those documents, perhaps because it was understood by the audiences, was that the religious faith of which they spoke was faith in a revealed religion, one with living prophets and with faith that God reveals his will to his servants. That makes the idea a bold proposition, given the histories of other universities and the prevailing views in much of the academic world. From all that I have seen, I believe that proposition will prove to be true: Putting religious faith first will enhance our development as a great university. Let me tell you why. And from that let me suggest how each of us can help.

It seems to me that a direct test of the proposition is the effect on the university of the influence of prophets on the university. And one of their principle contacts with it has been through their generous service on its board of trustees. I have now for many years been able to observe the service from close range. The documents themselves mirror what I have seen. First, the consistency of the messages—over the years and from so many personalities with such different experiences in life—is both evidence of the source of the vision they share and an assurance that we are on a charted, steady course.

I have personal evidence of that and of its value. Many years ago, when I served as the president of Ricks College, then Commissioner Neal A. Maxwell asked me to chair a committee charged with considering the future of higher education in the Church. Some of the faculty of this university made valuable con-

tributions to that committee's work. Between our meetings and on a visit to Salt Lake City, I was allowed a few minutes to seek help from President Spencer W. Kimball, one of the authors in our series of foundation documents and then a member of the board of trustees.

As we talked about the plans we should make for the future, I made what I thought was the logical suggestion that conditions during the Millennium would surely allow such educational innovation that we should assume our universities should be planned with the expectation that they would be replaced with some more effective institutions in that time when the Savior would be among us.

There was what seemed to me a lengthy silence, and then he made the quiet statement that over the centuries universities had proved to be the most effective institutions we had developed to find, conserve, and transmit knowledge across numerous fields of inquiry, so why not expect that they would serve as well in the Millennium. That immediately seemed sensible to me.

That little incident is representative of all I have seen: Even in times of turbulence there is a steady, shared confidence in the value of this university. That confidence is rooted in a sense of the history of universities and of education—and the facts of their present condition—and in a shared reliance on common sense.

I emphasize the word *shared*. My introduction to the board of trustees came as I left the faculty at Stanford to be the president of Ricks College. I attended my first board meeting soon thereafter. My work at Stanford and elsewhere had exposed me to the ways boards of directors and groups of people in business made decisions. But nothing I had seen prepared me for what I saw in that meeting.

President Harold B. Lee, also one of the authors of our foundation documents, was serving as chair. I have now forgotten the issue, but the discussion was lively. I had never seen such frankness without rancor before,

but neither had I seen people listen to each other as carefully. In a few minutes, what had seemed to me widely divergent views began to move—I thought so rapidly as to be miraculous—toward a consensus. Just as I began to think I had seen an example of joint revelation beyond what I thought possible among strong leaders, I was surprised by a statement from the chair, President Lee. He said something like this: “I sense that there is someone here still not settled on this matter. I suggest that we hold it for further thought. We can discuss it again in a later meeting.” President Lee had seen or felt, I don’t know which, that there was not yet complete unity. And so an important matter was held off.

That story is not about one day but represents a pattern. Not only does the board of trustees give consistent direction, based on a deep understanding of universities as they have been and of this one as it is, but it gives direction out of unity far beyond a product of counting votes and far above a process of coalition bargaining.

Those patterns of leadership from the board, so valuable to this university, will never be lost because of their source. The consistency of view, the grasp of things as they really are, and the unity are not dependent on any individual or even on a cluster of individuals. The view stays consistent and facts are made clear and the unity comes because the inspiration of God is the source. He really calls his servants. He knows the past, the present, and the future. He knows what is best for his children. And he inspires his servants. Members of the board of trustees will leave and others will come. But there will be consistency and steady purpose. The patterns of such value to the university will continue because they are independent of the people involved. Religious faith, faith in a revealed religion, does not require some sacrifice in the effectiveness of a university; it allows enhancement. Only for someone who believed that the mark of a great university

is the lack of wise and consistent leadership would such a board be anything but a treasure.

There are some practical things we could do to help. One is to invest some of our scarce time in reading those foundation documents again. From them we will sense where the university is headed and in what specific ways we could help now. We will feel impressions about innovations to suggest that will move the university more rapidly along, and we will find that those ideas are shared by others. We already have evidence of that, it seems to me, in the surprising degree of agreement that has been reached about some major changes suggested in our recent planning.

Another way to help us along the way is to show confidence in the capacity of our students. When we declare to them faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, we express confidence in their divine potential. And then when we treat them as if that potential for learning and creating is real, we express our faith again in tangible form. To act as if every soul is capable of improvement, with the upper limit beyond our human measure, is to mix revealed religion with education. And since that possibility is true, our acting as if we believed it will be part of what allowed President Kimball in one of his talks to say: “In all the world, the Brigham Young University is the greatest institution of learning” (Spencer W. Kimball, “Education for Eternity,” *Preschool Address to Faculty and Staff*, 12 September 1967, p. 1).

Finally, you could simply share the confidence of the board in this university and with it its optimism about the future. You can share the board’s confidence in President Bateman, in his capacity to lead you in achieving the vision of the university that they have articulated so clearly. And you can share the board’s confidence in your capacity to teach and to learn and to serve. You deserve the trust of the students and their parents. And you will be blessed with powers to lift them beyond even what they and their parents dare

hope. I know you have been given that blessing, because students and their parents have told me about what you have done and what it meant to them. And because God loves both you and them, I know you will be blessed to do that again and again.

May our Heavenly Father continue to watch over you, your families, and the students you serve. And may the Lord continue to prosper this university. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.