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Aerial view of BYU-Hawaii's campus in Laie, Hawaii.

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## BYU-Hawaii: A Conversation with Steven C. Wheelwright

INTERVIEW BY FRED E. WOODS

Steven C. Wheelwright (swheelwright@hbs.edu) was president of BYU-Hawaii from 2007 to July 2015.

Fred E. Woods (fred\_woods@byu.edu) is a professor of Church history and doctrine at BYU.

*This interview was held to celebrate the 60th anniversary of BYU-Hawaii and the 150th anniversary of Laie's designation as a gathering place for Latter-day Saints.*

*Steven Charles Wheelwright was born in Salt Lake City in September 1943. Raised also in this locale, he grew up loving Scouting and the outdoors. Further, Steve enjoyed swimming on both the East High School and the University of Utah swim teams. Following missionary service in the North Scottish Mission (1963-65), Steve returned to the University of Utah, where he met and later married Margaret Steele. They are now the parents of five children and have twenty grandchildren.*

*After completing an MBA and PhD degrees at Stanford, Steven spent one year in France at INSEAD and then joined the Harvard Business School faculty in 1971. Eight years later the Wheelwrights received a tenured offer to return to the Stanford Business School. In 1988 they moved back to Boston because of an offer extended by Harvard University and because they felt inspired that this was the best place for their family.*

*The Wheelwrights presided over the England London Mission from 2000 to 2003. When Steve and Margaret again retired from Harvard in August 2006, almost immediately President Monson called and asked if they would serve as a senior missionary couple at BYU–Idaho under the direction of President Kim B. Clark. Little did the Wheelwrights imagine that less than a year later (June 2007), Steve would become the ninth president of BYU–Hawaii.*

**Woods:** *What do you notice about the caliber of the students coming to and graduating from BYU–Hawaii during the past eight years since your arrival here?*

**Wheelwright:** It's interesting how we view our students as they come from these many different countries; they're obviously coming much better prepared in two very important respects. Increasingly, we find that they're spiritually better prepared. We're getting a larger and larger percentage of returned missionaries. In fact, this semester we have received the first batch returning since they lowered the age limit [October 2012]. We think that our percentage of returned missionaries will go up dramatically and this will be thought of as a returned-missionary school. The second thing is that we find that as we better understand the school districts and the different countries our students are coming from, we get a clearer sense of their academic preparation, and we can use our online program to help prepare them much better, both in English as well as in academic subjects. We find that this improves their success rate and better prepares them to be successful in jobs in their home country, which of course is very important.

**Woods:** *How does such a small place as Laie play such a significant role in the Church and in the world?*

**Wheelwright:** One of the great things about Laie is that it's always been a gathering place. Initially it was a gathering place for the Saints in the greater Pacific, but when the university was built it became a gathering place for higher education. Then the Polynesian Cultural Center (PCC) followed, and it became a gathering place for tourists that might otherwise never have stopped in this place. So I think the combination of these Church activities—temple, BYU–Hawaii, and PCC—make it unique and special within the Church system.

**Woods:** *What do you notice about there being [in the words of President Hinckley] “something special, something spiritual, something wonderful, that’s associated in the kinship with the Almighty”<sup>1</sup> in this area?*

**Wheelwright:** One of the things that really makes Laie unique is to have the temple here, and then to have everything really focused around the temple. I think local residents, particularly members of the Church (and that's most of what we have in this part of the island), came here mostly because of the temple. The university and the PCC have simply strengthened and enhanced that attractiveness of the temple. But it means that the activity level of the people here in this area, particularly among members of the Church, is unique and special. We think of the temple as the center of all that we do. We think then of the other institutions as a complement to the spiritual learning that goes on in the temple. So I think part of it is the fact that the temple is here; that makes us unique and special.

**Woods:** *Being a former professor and senior associate dean at the Harvard Business School, what have you learned that has made you realize that BYU–Hawaii, though small and sheltered, has such a great mission and destiny as one of the best schools of learning?*

**Wheelwright:** Having been associated with leading secular institutions all my life, it's been very interesting coming to a small, religious-based institution like BYU–Hawaii. Here you really see the impact of a complete education. You see what a difference it makes to educate the spiritual, as well as the social and emotional and other aspects of the individual, in addition to the academic or professional preparation. One of the things that is sorely missing on secular campuses is the opportunity to teach the full person gospel truths and all of the things that they will need in their life. I think that makes us unique and special, and it certainly comes through in how our students feel about the institution.

**Woods:** *I find this interesting just because Harvard was the first university in America—1636, as I recall—and their original mission statement was “This is life eternal, that they may know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3).*

**Wheelwright:** In fact, all of those initial Ivy League schools were focused on a Christian-based education. In those days they educated only young men, which is unfortunate, but they were founded to educate young men on the principles of truth found in the Bible so that they could be what we would call a Renaissance person—that is, somebody who in all aspects of his or her life is educated. And then over time they started cutting things out and got to where they are now.

**Woods:** *So what do you think are the strengths of BYU–Hawaii that are unequaled in other parts of the world? What really makes it distinctive?*

**Wheelwright:** One of the things that I think is really unique about BYU–Hawaii is the multicultural environment. We have students from more countries, and we have a larger proportion of our student body from outside the U.S., than any other undergraduate institution. This is true even of institutions that have forty or fifty thousand students. Nowadays, many others are trying to duplicate that diversity and variety, if you will, but we have this wonderful laboratory where we get to see it in action all the time. Another thing that is unique is the fact that with those students from those different cultures, you see the gospel and how it interacts with different cultures, which again is very different than if you were just in a single culture and watching the interaction between the gospel and that culture. Here you get to see what really is common, what might be at odds or could be refined in order to better be a part of the gospel culture, and that's very important to our students.

**Woods:** *In 1973, President Marion G. Romney made the comment that this school “is a living laboratory. . . . For what could be done here interculturally in a small way is what mankind must do on a large scale if we are ever to have real brotherhood on this earth.”<sup>2</sup> So I wanted to ask you how you view BYU–Hawaii as this living laboratory that President Romney spoke of more than forty years ago.*

**Wheelwright:** I loved President Romney—he was wonderful—and I love the reference that he made to a living laboratory, because that is what we are. Our students come here not knowing in many cases what to expect, so we help them set expectations, whether it's about work, education, social life, service in the community, or serving in the Church. Those are all things that are part of the educational laboratory here on this campus. And I think our students do a wonderful job, as do our faculty and staff, at discovering new and better ways to accomplish those things. And I think that's one of the senses that President Romney had in mind when he called it a living laboratory.

**Woods:** *So I often tell my students [citing BYU professor Terry D. Olson], “I want you to always remember to sift your discipline through the gospel, not the gospel through your discipline.” I wanted to just get your feedback on this statement. Would you comment about that?*

**Wheelwright:** Sometimes people would call it a clash of cultures, where either their discipline culture or their ethnic culture may conflict with the gospel culture. One of the things that we've worked very hard on—and my predecessors have done a great job of this—is how do you take the best of

those cultures and put that into a context that is consistent with the gospel culture? That's something that I think is distinctive about BYU–Hawaii. We have students from enough cultures that we should be able to make real progress on that front. One of the things that leads to most of the violent clashes in the world is the clash of cultures. Sometimes it gets couched in beliefs and practices. But I really think that if we would focus on what it is that is valuable about an ethnic culture, and give somebody identity, purpose, and so forth, and then use the mirror of the gospel culture and its truths, then I think we can get the gospel culture embedded into even ethnic culture. And that's what I think the Lord has in mind. I don't think the Lord intends for us to all be the same and have the same ethnic culture. We are the way we are because that's how he created us. And it's a matter of making the gospel the dominant culture but not having it erase the rest of the influences of our ethnic culture.

Similarly, one of the wonderful things regarding the many academic disciplines here at BYU–Hawaii is that our faculty see the melding of ethnic cultures to make them complementary to gospel culture, and they naturally do the same thing with their academic discipline culture.

**Woods:** *What were some of the ways in which you feel the Lord prepared you for your appointment as the ninth president of BYU–Hawaii?*

**Wheelwright:** I had no idea what to expect when I came to BYU–Hawaii, and yet as it has unfolded I've discovered more and more aspects of his preparation. Let me just highlight a couple of these that I think make the point of how intimately involved the Lord is in the detail of our lives because he knows what's coming later.

One of them is connected to the year we spent in France (1970). At the time, I thought we were going to France right out of my PhD program so that I could get my feet on the ground and establish my own style of teaching and research and really get started without having to be in the intense environment I knew I was going to be in when I got to Boston. Well, it turns out that did work and that was great, but I probably learned even more about how it feels to be a non-native speaker in a foreign culture. That has had a great influence on how I think of our international students and their struggles with English and what we can do to assist them.

A second is connected to our involvement with the building of the Boston Temple. Right from the beginning the Boston Temple had more than its share of opposition during its planning and construction. My wife was in charge of responding to people who called the hotline about issues

during construction and other complaints. We went to every hearing over a one-year period. In Hawaii we have been in hearings with the city council on our region's Sustainable Communities Plan for Laie, working with the community and the other Church entities. It's much of the same kind of thing. Now, I don't have the same responsibility for this current process that I had in Boston, but the Boston experience was very relevant for what's going on here in Laie with some of our opponents and how we might respond. I find myself in conversations thinking about some of those things that we learned during the Boston Temple planning, construction, and open house.

Further was the experience of being a mission president. We had young men and young women from forty different countries at any one time. While I had international students in my MBA classes, it's different when you're a mission president because you really get to know how they are thinking and how they are reacting to circumstances around them in a more personal way.

**Woods:** *How does BYU–Hawaii deal with the challenge of preparing international students to be exceptional employees in such a wide range of countries that you're currently serving?*

**Wheelwright:** It's clear that President McKay was prophetic, not just about the institution but about the individual students and what they would need to be successful in accomplishing all the Lord intended for them to do. We use a little triplet to summarize President McKay's mission statement—we see our students becoming learners, leaders, and builders. That's our code for the mission of BYU–Hawaii. It's focused on our students becoming lifetime learners who are broad in their approach to learning so that it covers all aspects of what they're doing, not just one certain aspect. Furthermore, if their leadership is based on character and integrity and if they want to build something that's going to last, those are the things that employers want all over the world. We've also added certificates and additional educational elements that are just what companies are looking for, whether it's familiarity with a certain IT package or whether it's the ability to use graphic arts in web design.

**Woods:** *Please share some of the challenges in the pursuit of English acquisition that you've found for missionaries as well as returned missionaries.*

**Wheelwright:** There are two things that I think most people would agree are needed to become an accomplished English speaker and to acquire the English that you can use either in employment or in pursuing higher education. One is that you need a diagnostic test that can be administered regularly so students know how they are doing and also where they need to focus more

attention, whether it's reading, writing, listening, or speaking. It's not just a matter of vocabulary. It's a matter of all of those dimensions and moving them forward so that they become more accomplished in each of those rather than only being accomplished in say, conversational English without being able to read or write English. The diagnostic testing needs to be effective and inexpensive if it is going to be used periodically with large numbers of missionaries and returned missionaries.

The second thing you need is a curriculum. And it needs to fit a framework that goes from the novice to the advanced levels. One of the wonderful things about English as a second language is that there's been lots of work done on it, so there are pretty good standards for different levels of accomplishment, whether it's reading, writing, speaking, or listening. If you took those standards and provided a curriculum and diagnostic tests that would help missionaries master English, you could then continue moving forward by keeping them learning English throughout their missions and postmission.

Such a curriculum would help missionaries end their missions with a 2,500- to 3,000-word vocabulary instead of being at about a 1,500-word vocabulary. Then they would be ready to select one of two tracks as they come home from their mission. The one track would be employment English, and that's going to be the responsibility of the Self-Reliance Centers internationally. These are like the employment centers in the U.S. The Self-Reliance Centers have discovered the quickest way to enhance somebody's employment opportunities is to enhance their English and do it through teaching them employment English. The other track is academic English. That's a much higher level of English. That's the level of English that will enable a student to get an English-based higher-education degree. We are working to add more online English courses that will assist with each of these.

**Woods:** *I've read online that BYU–Hawaii's mission statement "is to integrate both spiritual and secular learning, and to prepare students with character and integrity who can provide leadership in their families, their communities, their chosen fields, and in building the kingdom of God."<sup>3</sup> What are some of the things BYU–Hawaii is currently doing to fulfill her mission statement, beyond what you have already articulated?*

**Wheelwright:** Clearly one is academic excellence, which is where our faculty is focused. That's their main charge and they do a great job of that. On the spiritual learning side, which is also an integral part of that mission statement, we really look to the campus stakes and wards as well as the temple

and the opportunities that the students have to serve both places. One of the great things about our students is that with more and more of them being returned missionaries, they understand why it's important for them to be engaged, accept a calling, and fulfill that calling. The fact that they're in this environment has a lot to do with helping them accomplish the mission—an environment where classes start with prayer, an environment where they're learning from faithful Latter-day Saints who inevitably are going to include their personal testimonies and examples in their teaching. The fact that they're with other students who have a similar belief, even though they may have a very different cultural background, is beneficial. You get all of that mixed together, and that's all part of how we help them accomplish this mission of becoming learners, leaders, and builders.

**Woods:** *How does the triad of BYU–Hawaii, the Polynesian Cultural Center, and the Laie temple complement each other?*

**Wheelwright:** At a very fundamental level—and this is part of our mission—we're trying to integrate all aspects of learning so there's a single foundation for a lifetime of learning. So, whether it's spiritual learning, employment and work practices learning, academic learning, or social learning, we want all of that to be part of the same foundation so that our students will be lifetime learners. One of the things that happens if you work part-time either in the temple or at the PCC is that you'll end up testing what you're learning in the classroom in those other settings. We see all three of these learning environments as complementing each other. It's doing them all regularly in parallel that allows a student to get the most out of each one of them individually, but also to get the most out of all three of them collectively. If you're going to become a learner, leader, and builder, you need to have all of these aspects working together.

**Woods:** *How will the new BYU–Hawaii academic calendar operate, and what were the reasons behind the changes?*

**Wheelwright:** An academic calendar is a very interesting set of challenges, as most people can appreciate. Historically, everybody needed to be off from May to October because that's when they were needed on the farm. These were farmers in an agrarian society, so people got in the habit of thinking that you go to school for two semesters (fall and winter) and then you're out the rest of the time. Well, that's not a very effective or efficient way to use the resources of the Church that are supporting the Church Educational

System. Both BYU–Hawaii and BYU–Idaho have been asked to look for ways to better utilize those resources and serve more students.

Our new calendar, which will start this summer, was suggested by the faculty with student and staff input. The new calendar has three equal semesters, one starting the beginning of August, another the beginning of November, and another the beginning of March. The winter semester has a two-week break for Christmas and New Year's. Following the spring semester there is a seven-week break from about the second week of June until the end of July. Those seven weeks correspond to when the Hawaii public schools are out. It also corresponds to when the PCC has its busiest two-month period. Since most of our international students don't leave, three semesters a year means that we can serve more students, better utilize the resources, the faculty still get time off with their families in the summer, and they get a break at Christmas. Plus we have a week between each of the semesters. We think for BYU–Hawaii this calendar is going to work very well.

**Woods:** *What are some of the tutorials you've learned while functioning as the ninth president of BYU–Hawaii?*

**Wheelwright:** One of the great things that I've learned is the difference between a CES institution and a secular institution—how they work and why they work and what's important to each. Probably the thing that is easiest to summarize regarding this difference comes from Elder Ballard's book *Counseling with Our Councils*. The Church works on councils, and so does CES when it works best. We have a Dean's Council. We have an Academic Council. We have the President's Council. And each of my vice presidents has a council with their direct reports.

One of the places where this difference is most visible in counseling with councils is when it comes to hiring faculty. Within the Church Educational System, the way we choose faculty is we form a search committee whose job it is to find the best candidates, get the two or three best to campus, have a wide range of people interview them, and have each candidate teach and present. Then we have a council that meets, so this is the hiring council, which is advisory to myself and the academic vice president. Rather than the search committee deciding whom they're going to hire, we instead have a very thoughtful and prayerful discussion about how we would rank these candidates and why, and what would be most useful to the university, this department, and the students at this time. With that counsel, it is then my

responsibility to decide whom I'm going to take to the executive committee for their approval.

This is what councils do. You counsel with other people. You then make it a matter of prayer and then you decide who the Lord thinks ought to be here. That's worked very well for us. But that is so different from the secular world. So one of the lessons I've learned is how councils really work in an academic setting because I knew how committees worked in the secular academic world. In CES it's more like counseling in a bishopric or a stake presidency or even as a mission president. This is different from the secular model, but it works well for us. And so that's probably one of the biggest lessons that I've learned.

A second lesson I've learned is about change. When I arrived, the executive committee was very clear on some imperatives that we needed to address, and I felt very accountable to them for delivering on those. So it wasn't a matter of "Well, do I want to do this or not?" It was a matter of "How's the best way to do this, and how do I use my councils to help me do this?" so that they would understand why we needed to do this. Then we'd collectively come up with the best way to do it. In the end you sometimes have to make a hard decision and move forward. In the secular world, everybody understands that, but in the Church employment world, they don't all understand that. And that was something I had to learn because I had never worked in a Church employment situation.

*Woods: Knowing what you know now, what would you do differently?*

**Wheelwright:** One of the things I've learned is that you need to give people options whenever possible. Now, they might not like any of the options, but at least if they have options, then they get a chance to use their agency when you say, "Here's the range of options that are possible." It always works better if you can find a way to give people at least two options, and it took us a while to get that established as a pattern.

A second thing is that I've learned some things about hiring. I think we've done very well on the faculty side with our counseling approach. On the staff side it's been a little more mixed because of how long people had been in their positions. One of the nice things about academics, at least in a place like this, is the deans and the department chairs turn over every three to five years. And so no faculty member sees administration as their career. Whereas on the staff side, once you reach a certain level it's very hard to either move up or out and to keep them there if they're not doing their job. Then it's hard to find options. I think if we'd have done a broader and more extensive educational

effort on counseling and councils earlier and made it deeper on the staff side, that would have helped. You can always look back and say, "I wish we would have done this a little differently or that a little differently."

*Woods: What do you think are the contributions that you either have made or you're striving to make that you feel strongly about?*

**Wheelwright:** This is my crystallization of what the executive committee and the board wanted me to do: continue to improve the quality of every aspect of the university, continue to lower the cost of the university, and continue to serve more students. Now, the first two have been the ones that I have spent most of my time on, because I knew if we made real progress on those first two, number three would happen naturally. But in fact, number three is probably the most important. For example, we went after getting a higher percentage of our students their degrees before they leave. We've increased the number of degrees awarded fairly dramatically. And it's about helping them develop a plan to finish in a reasonable number of semesters. Students now understand what their responsibility is and what their opportunity is while they're here so that they really take advantage of everything because that's part of the expectation.

We also had some buildings that were at their end of life, and we needed to either completely renovate them or we needed to tear them down and build new ones. Fortunately, they built the original campus to last, and we've been able to renovate many buildings and get another fifty years out of them. All of those things are important. In addition, I think one of the most important is the university's role in the broader community and in partnership with the PCC, the temple, and Hawaii Reserves Inc. (HRI) in making our community more sustainable.

*Woods: Drawing upon the many experiences that you've had at either Harvard, Stanford, or other areas, what do you think it means for a person to be truly educated?*

**Wheelwright:** I heard an interesting talk recently about the transition from data to information, from information to knowledge, and from knowledge to wisdom. Now, this was a secular talk, but this was clearly somebody who had thought a lot about what it means in the secular world to be educated. It means to have wisdom. It means getting away from the data through the information that's in the data on into the knowledge and really understanding. But then it's the application of that understanding, which is where the wisdom comes in. I think about it more in terms of President McKay's

teaching of becoming a learner, leader, and builder in the gospel sense. We're here on earth to gain an eternal education, to lay a foundation for who we're going to be in the eternities.

The way President Ezra Taft Benson used to say it is that thoughts lead to acts, acts lead to habits, habits lead to character, and character determines our eternal destiny. Character is what we're really about at BYU–Hawaii. It's the character of our learning and how we think about learning. It's the character and integrity of our leadership and what we're willing to take responsibility and accountability for. It's the character of what we build. Are we building an eternal family or something temporary, whether it's our family, our profession, and so forth? I think that our mission statement about developing learners, leaders, and builders is probably the best summary of what it means to be truly educated.

**Woods:** *What do you love most about BYU–Hawaii?*

**Wheelwright:** I love teaching, and I love students. That's why I got into academics. I haven't gotten to do as much traditional teaching here as I have in the past, but every week at devotional we make sure at the luncheon we try to have a dozen students there, and I love hearing their stories. I love asking them what they are thinking—about their major, about their classes, about what their plans are. I love the idea of still being able to teach, and so I've told our faculty that I'll teach a class for them anytime they'd like me to. Obviously those in business ask most often. I've also done some sessions in intercultural relations and in peace building, and it's been very interesting. Plus I view the opportunity to speak at a devotional each semester and at commencement as additional teaching opportunities.

**Woods:** *This last fall while driving across the country, I was listening to a book tape with my wife on the life of Larry Miller, titled Driven. This leads to my final question, which is what drives Steven C. Wheelwright? I'd just like to have you share your thoughts about that, your core of what motivates, what drives you, going back to your childhood and up to the present.*

**Wheelwright:** I had a mother who taught me that you can do anything that you put your mind to if you really work at it. Work was the answer to most goals—not gifts or talents or anything else. And she believed it. It had been true in her life, and she taught her kids that same thing. I also had a father who owned his own business, and so I worked in it from the age of twelve on up. I got to where I really enjoyed work. I could see what you could learn while you were working and what you could accomplish. I also had the

good fortune of having an excellent math teacher in about the fifth grade who pulled me aside and said, “You know, you could be really good at this if you really work at it.” And I took that to heart and decided that I was going to be an excellent student and that if I worked hard at it, and with the Lord's help, I could do it.

I always had tremendous faith that the Lord would help me if I did my part, and I wanted to make sure that I was doing my part so that I'd feel comfortable asking for his help. Those things really set a standard for excellence, hard work, and faith in the Lord in my life. I went into teaching because I loved it. Even on the hardest days, I loved it. And I loved the fact that I was learning while the students were learning and I could see my learning as well as theirs, and that's been rewarding.

I thought I was going to retire after our mission. We sold our house before we left Boston in 2000. Then I got recruited back to Harvard by my good friend Kim Clark, and that was an exciting three more years that I wouldn't have had otherwise. Then we had the missionary opportunity in Idaho, and frankly I would never have applied for this job had it been an application. But you know, that's not how it works. We have been delighted with our BYU–Hawaii experiences thus far and have learned a tremendous amount. We love the students and being involved in their lives. And we enjoy having them keep in touch after they leave. I get emails almost every day from former students who give me an update on their life and express their appreciation for BYU–Hawaii. I love hearing from them and how they are doing. Those are the real rewards of being president. **RE**

## Notes

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, Hale La'a Boulevard groundbreaking address, October 25, 2003, in *Something Wonderful: Brigham Young University–Hawaii Foundational Speeches* (Laie, HI: Brigham Young University–Hawaii, 2012), 80.

2. Marion G. Romney, Aloha Center dedicatory address, January 26, 1973, in *Something Wonderful*, 42.

3. <http://about.byuh.edu/mission>.