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Kevin J Worthen, shown here with his wife, Peggy, became the thirteenth president of Brigham Young University on May 1, 2014. Photo courtesy of Brigham Young University.

Two Challenges Facing Brigham Young University as a Religiously Affiliated University

Kevin J Worthen

The following message is adapted from remarks given by BYU President Kevin J Worthen at the annual BYU Studies Academy Meeting on March 28, 2015.

I am grateful to be here with BYU Studies editors and affiliated scholars. The first thing I want to do is thank you for what you're doing, and for the energy and spirit, thought and prayers that you put not only into BYU Studies but many other things as well. I commend you for your work at BYU Studies and for its impact on this organization, on the university, on the Church, and on the world at large. I appreciate the many scholars who make BYU Studies a success. You have many things to do in your professional lives, and this is a very impressive group that lends its time to furthering the mission of BYU Studies, which really furthers the mission of BYU, which furthers the mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I was struck when I read the latest unit review of BYU Studies that even the outside reviewer picked up on how well BYU Studies is aligned with the mission of the university.

I thought about where that alignment comes from, and it probably starts at the very first sentence of the mission statement of Brigham Young University: "The mission of Brigham Young University—founded, supported, and guided by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—is to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life." That's what BYU Studies is doing. In the most recent issue of *BYU Studies Quarterly*, which arrived on my desk yesterday, Jack talks in his editor's note about involving readers in the Latter-day Saint academic

experience.¹ What you're doing is taking what we hope happens here on campus and sharing it with others.

As just one illustration, BYU's mission statement talks about its four major educational goals. The first is that all students at Brigham Young University "should be taught the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ." That's the foundation at which things begin. The second educational objective talks about a broad general education. But the way it is phrased makes it clear that students at BYU should receive "a broad university education" because "the gospel encourages the pursuit of all truth." I note the diversity of topics covered by articles published in *BYU Studies Quarterly*. I recognize that such breadth presents challenges for a publication, but at the same time it presents a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate that our theology encourages the pursuit of all truth, wherever it is found, and we believe that all truth can be brought together and harmonized in some ways that we may not have figured out yet, but that we're sure will happen. And having articles dealing with physics and folklore and linguistics reinforces the idea that the gospel really does encourage the pursuit of all truth. That, by itself, is a pretty stunning alignment with the mission of the university. So I thank you for that. And *BYU Studies*, given the scholarly depth of its articles, clearly supports the third and fourth educational goals of instruction in specific fields, and scholarly research, and creative endeavor.

Now, what I thought I would do today is try to place your work and the mission of the university in both a broader context and also a narrower one by addressing the challenges Brigham Young University faces in pursuing its mission. I will start with a broad overview that places BYU in a wider American university setting.

Religiously Affiliated Universities

To begin, think with me about religiously affiliated universities, where they are today, and where they've been. Among law schools, there is an organization of religiously affiliated law schools that I was actively involved in for a number of years. I once gave a presentation on that topic² and asked, "How many religiously affiliated law schools are there in the country?" That was a really hard question to answer, and it's not

1. John W. Welch, "From the Editor," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2015): 4.

2. Kevin J. Worthen, "Religiously Affiliated Law Schools: An Added Dimension," *Clark Memorandum* (Fall 2007): 10–21. Most of this portion of the remarks comes from that presentation.

just because I'm not very good at math. Two things made the question hard to answer, and I think this difficulty is also true of universities. First is the question, What does it mean to be religiously affiliated as a university? Even among faculty members at some of these schools, they will disagree about whether they are still religiously affiliated. Almost everyone will acknowledge that many of these schools certainly started off that way. Whether they are still religiously affiliated now or not is a different question.

By the way, funding of universities by churches in the United States has decreased considerably, with three main exceptions—the three BYU schools. There are very few schools that have the kind of financial support we have and can expect to continue to have. That kind of institutional support has changed for most universities over time as the characteristics of previously religious schools have changed over time.

Steve Barkan, who is the former dean of the Marquette Law School, said, “With the exception of occasional elective courses and extracurricular activities, Jesuit law schools show relatively little objective evidence of their religious affiliation. For the most part, Jesuit law schools are virtually indistinguishable from their secular counterparts.” Now, I'm not sure that's true of all Jesuit law schools, but for a number of them it is true. And Steve pointed out, “Depending on one's perspective, those comments might either be compliments or criticisms.”³

Second is the question of where this trend will go in the future. The point is that there is a clear trend over the last 150 years of universities that started off as religiously affiliated becoming more and more secularized, to where we don't consider them religiously affiliated anymore. I was surprised to find that as recently as 1937, in his inaugural address, Yale University president Charles Seymour urged that the maintenance and building up of the Christian religion be implemented as a vital part of university life. He called upon “all members of the faculty freely to recognize the tremendous validity and power of the teachings of Christ in our life and death struggle against the focus of selfish materialism.”⁴ Now, at some places, merely mentioning Christ would be enough for people to say, “That's a religiously affiliated university.” I'm not sure

3. Steven M. Barkan, “Jesuit Legal Education: Focusing the Vision,” *Marquette Law Review* 74 (1990): 102–3.

4. George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 11.

that's true. But what I am certain of is that no one today thinks of Yale University as a religiously affiliated university. Something pretty dramatic has happened since that time.

So we don't know how many universities are religiously affiliated. And of those that are, some are headed out the door. And the trend is so strong that Mark Tushnet, who is quite well known in legal education, said that any religiously affiliated university "'will find it extremely difficult' to maintain its religious affiliation if it also seeks to attain and preserve a national reputation."⁵ In other words, there are those who say, "You have a choice—you can either be secular or second-rate. Make your choice." Now, this is not a lost cause by any stretch of the imagination, but that's the trend, and we are sort of a countertrend for many reasons.

Challenges Facing Brigham Young University

So in that environment, you ask, what are the challenges Brigham Young University faces in maintaining its unique focus and its unique mission? When people ask what I stay awake at night worrying about, it's these two things:

Outside Regulation. Number one is the sheer volume of outside regulation. I brought with me a list, eleven pages long, single spaced, containing 225 statutes. These are the laws all universities are dealing with at the moment: they include the Consumer Debt Protection Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Genetic Nondiscrimination Act—I'm just picking some at random—the Ethics in Government Act, Regulation E: Electronic Fund Transfers, OSHA, the Energy Policy Act—they just sort of go on and on and on and on. While I do not object to these laws in principle, they are overwhelming in the aggregate. There have been efforts published by some schools in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to determine how many millions of dollars a year they spend on compliance with federal regulation. I can tell you it's probably in the millions for us as well. Just diverting resources and spending the time and energy to respond to those regulations is by itself somewhat a challenge.

5. Robert John Araujo, "'The Harvest Is Plentiful, but the Laborers Are Few': Hiring Practices and Religiously Affiliated Universities," *University of Richmond Law Review* 30 (1996): 713, 718, quoting Mark Tushnet, "Catholic Legal Education at a National Law School: Reflections on the Georgetown Experience," in *Georgetown at Two Hundred: Faculty Reflections on the University's Future*, ed. William C. McFadden (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 322.

But there are some regulations that concern me the most. These are the kinds of regulations that might cause some to suggest that we need to fundamentally change the nature of the university in order to comply. In many instances, the concept of religious liberty will be the key to what happens. And right now, I'm quite optimistic about religious liberty. It's a contested proposition, to say the least, but there are some provisions in the law that recognize this liberty. For example, the Higher Education Opportunity Act requires that accrediting bodies acting on behalf of the federal government "must apply and enforce standards that respect the stated missions of institutions, including religious missions."⁶

There are other religiously affiliated schools in a similar situation. They are very interested in these topics as well. They are also very influential, and so it's not as if we're out there all by ourselves doing this.

You've seen from the Church a lot of effort to highlight the issue of religious liberty, to get people thinking about this issue. In addition, in higher education, we have some colleagues who are not religious believers who are nevertheless advocates for our position, based on the idea that true diversity in the United States is best promoted by having different kinds of institutions with different viewpoints, and religiously affiliated universities contribute to diversity in a significant way.

Those are the kinds of external issues that I worry about diverting us from our mission.

The Internal Challenge. The second thing I worry about—and this is where this BYU Studies group helps more—is what I call the challenge of Doctrine and Covenants 121:35. You'll all recognize that D&C 121:34 and 35 go together. Verse 34 says, "Behold many are called but few are chosen, and why are they not chosen?" The first part of verse 35 answers that question: "Because their hearts are set so much on the things of this world, and aspire to the honors of men." In the academy in particular, there will always be a pull for us to become like others. The prestige lies in doing research that may not be exactly the way we would do it if there were not outside peer pressure. There is pressure to emphasize research more than teaching, to ignore undergraduates. One of the things we need to be constantly concerned about is that our hearts don't get set so much on the things of this world and aspire to the honors of men that we start to drift internally. And that is a real challenge. I don't have in mind any particular concerns, but we are all probably familiar with individual cases where that has happened. What we need to do is convince

6. Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, P.L. 110 315, 495.

people, and provide examples, that we can do the things that need to be done in an academic setting as well as anyone else and do it in our own unique way. But that convincing is hard to do, and there are some skeptics out there who say reason and religion cannot mix, that they simply won't work together. We're committed to the idea that it does work, and we have to not only articulate that view but provide examples of it.

And this is where BYU Studies comes in. You can help extend the LDS academic experience only if, first, the scholarship is unfailingly faithful to the principles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and, second, that it meets the highest standards of rigor for academic study. Though certainly there are those who say, "You cannot do both of those things," we can. It's not easy work. But that's the challenge facing us, and that's where I see BYU Studies providing a wonderful example.

One service BYU Studies offers is as a publishing outlet. There will be some scholarship that is rigorous and meets all the normal academic standards, but because of some biases in the academic world it simply won't have an outlet for publication elsewhere. The work has to be really good because some people are going to be skeptical of it to begin with. If we can get to the point where we can have fair-minded discussions with people, and it's clear that the scholarship is accepted not merely because we agree with the author's viewpoint but because it is quality scholarship, then we're in pretty good shape. If they can read it and say, "It's really not very good" in terms of pure academics, it makes it much easier for them to discount or dismiss it.

And so you have the opportunity to provide this outlet and then at the same time to strengthen the faith of those who are not part of the academic experience here. Those outside the university, who are not faculty members or students, can have their faith reaffirmed by your work. As a result of your efforts, they are better able to explain their beliefs and hopes and rationally defend their arguments. Elder Maxwell quoted Austin Farrer on this: "Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish."⁷ That is an excellent example of what BYU Studies does, but it is really hard work. And I say that not in the way of making it sound daunting to you but to say thank you because you are doing that hard work.

7. Neal A. Maxwell, "Discipleship and Scholarship," *BYU Studies* 32, no. 3 (1992): 5, citing Austin Farrer, "Grete Clerk," in *Light on C. S. Lewis*, comp. Jocelyn Gibb (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1965), 26.

I have been very impressed over the years with *BYU Studies* and have had mind-expanding experiences reading some of the articles there.⁸ I didn't read *BYU Studies* when it started back in 1959, but it was probably only fifteen years later that I did. And I've noted that as a result of changes over the years, *BYU Studies* has become more rigorous, and I am very impressed with the academic quality of what is produced. It really is first rate. But, if you're not constant about quality, it's easy to let it drift. It's easy to get the praise of members of the Church; they're sort of already on the same wavelength, but it takes a little extra to say, "Well, let's make sure that the work also meets the highest standards so that others, even those who may be our critics, will at least acknowledge it meets a high standard." That is the kind of scholarship that will best serve those both within and without the Church.

So thank you for what you're doing. We'll deal with the external challenges we face. Hopefully, you won't have to worry about legal concerns; that's one of the things that the central administration can do. But your work is equally important. You can continue to provide examples of scholarship that is faithful and rigorous so that both our internal and external audiences say, "The Church really does believe in a gospel that pursues all truth, wherever it may be found, and we needn't shy away from it." I really do have a firm conviction that all truth comes from our Heavenly Father. Our task is to find it, to harmonize it, to make it work as best we can, knowing we're imperfect. That is a labor worth pursuing.

Questions and Answers

With that, I see that we've got a little bit of time for a question or two.

Q: In your inaugural address you talked about climbing mountains; you used a metaphor of the mountains here behind us. Today you talked about how in some things we're very similar to other universities and in some ways we're also very different. What are the metaphorical mountains you see that BYU specifically should climb in your tenure?

A: You know, I don't have a really precise answer to that yet. It's a very good question. Part of my lack of precision is because I think some of the answers will come from the bottom up. That's why I've emphasized

8. I think of many examples. For a general discussion of this in connection with the goals and ideals of *BYU Studies*, see John W. Welch, "Thy Mind, O Man, Must Stretch," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (2011): 63–81.

the mission statement and asked faculty, and everybody else, to read it, re-read it, and think about what you're doing in your area that can better fulfill this mission. I am confident that ideas will come up from the local departmental level that we will adopt as a university. Overall, our main goal will be to enhance the learning experience for undergraduate students. That is going to be the main emphasis, providing learning that is intellectually enlarging, spiritually strengthening, character building, leading to lifelong learning and service, as set forth in the Aims of a BYU Education.⁹ Our challenge is to figure out what that really means in today's world, and how we can make sure that those students are better prepared in all of those areas going forward.

One example I use of both things bubbling up from the bottom and things that enhance the learning experience is the emphasis on student mentoring that we now have and that will continue. That emphasis did not develop in a single moment in the ASB; it wasn't that one day somebody in the central administration said, "Aha, no one else has thought of this, but we ought to do mentoring; now go implement this." There were departments that were doing some mentoring already, and in at least some instances we found ourselves in a unique position, in that while we are not a graduate research institution, we get really, really, really good undergraduate students. And we have faculty who increasingly have the ability and the interest in doing research. So the faculty turned to these very bright undergraduate students and said, "I think that maybe you can help me with this, even though you're only a junior or senior." That has now been emphasized enough that it happens over and over again. We've funded it internally and funded it externally so that many of our students have that mentoring experience, and this prepares them for all kinds of opportunities.

It's a different kind of academic experience when students are publishing in some of the top journals while they're undergraduates. This opens up all kinds of opportunities for them to go to graduate school. They're at conferences, and people ask them, "So where are you doing your postdoctoral work?" and they say, "Well, I'm an undergrad at BYU." People reply, "You're an undergrad? Why don't you come and work with me, because it's clear you can already do the things that I want you to do." As a result of this and other factors, in the ten-year period of 2003–2012, if you look at where people who received their PhDs in the United States

9. The Mission of the University and the Aims of a BYU Education can be found at <http://aims.byu.edu/>.

earned their undergraduate degrees, there are only four U.S. universities that had more students go on to receive PhDs in that period than BYU—namely, U.C. Berkeley, Cornell, Michigan, and Texas.¹⁰ That's it. Now, in fairness, there are some really good colleges that are a lot smaller than we are, but there are some really good colleges that are larger than we are, and yet we had more students graduate and go on to receive PhDs than they had. And it's in part because of the mentoring experience students receive at BYU. We do a survey of our students three years out from graduation to find out what they are doing. In 2013, 41 percent of our graduates three years out were either in graduate school or had completed graduate school. Another 31 percent indicated that in the future they intended to go to graduate school. That market is where we have emerged in ways I don't think anyone quite anticipated.

Of course, not all students will go on to graduate school, and so we're also turning to online education. For many, online education is a way to raise money. Once you get courses in place, you can scale it out in a way that may generate a lot of money. I'm not interested in doing online education for that reason, even though I wouldn't turn away resources if they come. I'm also concerned that we not just do outreach at the expense of the experience of our students who are here on campus. But with online courses, we may be able to enhance the educational experience of students who are here and also reach a whole lot more people, and that's a good thing.

Over the last six semesters, we have piloted parallel classes and have taught them online and also in the classroom. We are evaluating what we can learn from this about how students learn online. How do they best learn? Not surprisingly, the data from the pilot classes suggest there are some people who learn better online than others. We need to learn how to help students recognize if that is a better learning method for them. It also appears that there are some subjects that lend themselves better to online education. More importantly, there are ways of using online education for courses that are not solely online. We are learning how to use technology in a blended format. We have some data now that says, this is what works best, this is what doesn't work, here's why it works, here's why it doesn't.

In the long run, students need to understand learning in all of its facets, and online learning is one of those facets. They are going to enter

10. NORC at the University of Chicago, *Survey of Earned Doctorates, Baccalaureate-origins of U.S. Research Doctorate Recipients: 2003–2012* (2012).

a world in which a lot of online learning is required, and if they can have an experience with online learning, it will be good for them. So, we may require a certain amount of online learning—not just to say we’ve done it, but to say we’re going to enhance the experience of these students. Once we do that, I think we’ll be in a position where we can do some outreach and provide it to others, but I don’t want to videotape a class, put it online, and say that anybody who has signed up for this has had the BYU experience—because they haven’t. But if we focus on how online learning can enhance the experience of our students here, I think we’ll come up with some ideas that may have an impact for us and for other people about how online education is done, and that will result in even better learning for our students than we can now offer them.

Q: As you have mentioned funding, what do you see in the future in terms of the Church continuing to fund BYU as it has in the past?

A: I think I can state this with as much certainty as we can about anything that’s uncertain: BYU can anticipate that it will continue to get its piece of the Church budget pie, but we shouldn’t expect a bigger piece of the pie. Elder Nelson said as much when he addressed the deans and directors last fall. Education has always been a priority for the Church, and the Church has continually demonstrated that, as expensive as it is, it is worth the expenditure. And it is an enormous blessing that we have. If you look at state schools and the decline in state funding, that’s been a real challenge for them; and that’s true of private universities overall as well. We are really blessed to have consistent solid support for most of what we do, and by all present indications, that’s going to continue. We need to be grateful for that. We also need to remember that with that blessing comes a great responsibility to keep focused on the central mission the board of trustees has given us.