

SOME REFLECTIONS UPON A COLLEGE
PRESIDENT'S TERM IN IDAHO

Richard Bowen—President, Idaho State University

When my wife, Connie, and I were being interviewed for the presidency at Idaho State University, the chairman of the State Board of Education, Clint Hoopes, a rancher, mentioned something about the majority population in the area served by the institution and inquired whether or not I had some idea as to how to relate to them. I responded that Ricks College was nearby and one of the first contacts I would make in acquainting myself with the region would be that college's president. After the ISU presidency was offered us and we had accepted, in February, it seemed sensible to wait until after we were actually on the job to carry out that intent.

In the meantime I had opportunity to come to some understanding of the options available. The staff of the Institute of Religion at Idaho State invited me to visit during one of my preliminary trips to Pocatello. (I took four before assuming the job in July.) Led by Ed Brown, they expressed a good deal of both bewilderment and optimism about the attractiveness of Idaho State to the region's Mormon population, bewilderment because more Mormons did not attend ISU and optimism that many more could be attracted.

When summer came, I asked for an appointment to meet with Ricks College President Bruce Hafen. He graciously assented but inquired about my purpose, which I explained, as I remember it, to be meeting him and to learn what I could about attitudes held by the people of the area. He in turn inquired if I could spend a day and meet with a number of interested people who would be helpful.

What then occurred was a full day's educational seminar. Drawn from the staff of Ricks was a group of very knowledgeable people, themselves holding a variety of opinions about ISU, who engaged in lengthy conversation revealing their differing perceptions of the institution. In turn they described, explained, related personal and family experiences and applied those viewpoints as to how ISU was perceived in the region. Further, they debated and criticized one another's viewpoints, ranging from very critical to very supportive.

This insight was extremely valuable to me. I doubt that better elucidation of the circumstances of my new role could have been obtained anywhere. It was most helpful, and I deeply appreciate having had that experience.

Ricks College and ISU have been good and cooperative neighbors for a long time. During my own association, each Ricks president has actively

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sought good relations. Joe Christensen followed Bruce Hafen. Then Steven Bennion served, followed by David Bednar. During his service on the State Board of Education, Tiny Grant of the Ricks College Development Office saw to an evermore positive and productive relationship with the entire Idaho system of higher education.

What developed are continuing determined efforts by the staffs of different colleges to achieve agreements among the institutions which fitted the various curricula conveniently together so that students could transfer from Ricks elsewhere without losing credits, effort, or time. A student could fit her or his course schedule into the requirements of her/his intended transfer institution after achieving the associate degree at Ricks. The transfer would occur as easily as though the student had begun studies at the institution to which she/he would transfer.

This is not an easy accomplishment, but the good will demonstrated among institutional faculties and staffs provided a positive and mutually supportive environment.

Among the Idaho institutions, ISU particularly benefitted. Ricks became the source of thousands and thousands of ISU's best students.

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THE CHANGE TO BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY-IDAHO

One morning when traveling, as I was preparing in my hotel room for the workday, President Bednar telephoned. He described a decision by the Church to convert Ricks College into Brigham Young University-Idaho. He indicated real concern that I be informed of the intent before the announcement occurred later that day. He assured Idaho State that the transition would occur in full cooperation with ISU and the other Idaho institutions.

The way that announcement disturbed many people in our area reveals an interesting dichotomy of opinion. Recently the most frequently phrased question or comment addressed me during public appearances or by the media concerns the conversion of Ricks to BYU-Idaho. It is obvious that different questions begin with very different presumptions. Some see the change as seriously damaging to ISU; others see it as not damaging at all. Many are inquisitive about how ISU will respond.

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From the time of the conversion announcement, I have responded with essentially the same message. I describe the beneficial relations ISU has enjoyed with the Ricks, now the BYU-Idaho community. I summarize that morning's conversation with President Bednar. And I relate what has occurred since. Then I point at the new opportunities that exist in the new condition. I express full optimism that although the situation is changing somewhat, the new condition can be positive, but noting that ISU needs to adapt in order to prosper.

The transition in Rexburg is occurring as promised. We and other institutions have been regularly consulted about prospective curriculum changes as well as about curriculum decisions made. Clearly there is effort to develop BYU-Idaho upon the great foundation of Ricks as well as to engage emerging needs and to satisfy future demands upon higher education. We witness an effort to avoid duplications where demand is already satisfactorily met.

It would be unreasonable to ask for more.

What are ISU's opportunities in this situation?

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We think substantial transfer activity from BYU-Idaho will continue in majors or professional programs that are not at BYU-Idaho. We expect the ISU graduate school will attract numbers of BYU-Idaho graduates. As long as the personnel of the two institutions relate and work together—which is continuing—eastern Idaho provides substantial opportunity for both of us and for our other colleagues and partners in the region—the University of Idaho and Eastern Idaho Technical College.

The fact is that Idaho is undereducated. While around sixty-five percent of high school graduates across the United States proceed to some form of higher education, only about forty-five percent of Idahoans do. Also, Idaho's economy is significantly changing. A larger percentage of Idahoans will be attending college in the future.

Much opportunity remains.

THE NEW INSTITUTE OF RELIGION BUILDING AT ISU

ISU has grown substantially in recent years, doubling enrollment over the past decade and one-half. But enrollment continues to reflect a preponderance of students from eastern and southern Idaho. Increased numbers stimulated need for expanded facilities at the LDS Institute of Religion. The Church therefore offered the university a business exchange: It would donate the Institute of Religion building to ISU in exchange for land upon which to construct a new Institute building, along with cash to compensate for any difference in value revealed by a professional appraisal.

ISU needed facility space. The Institute building was in fine condition and could easily house ISU academic programs. Obviously there would be mutual advantage, since ISU owned considerable land available for the "swap."

So an exchange proposal was agreed to, drawn up by competent attorneys and property appraisers, to provide the desired result.

Three public hearings permitted the public to respond to the proposal. They were chaired by the director of the LDS Institute and by the president of the university.

Turnout for these hearings was remarkable and very definitely bipolar. Most of the many who testified before audiences of hundreds clearly favored the “swap” or firmly opposed it. Transcripts allowed the State Board of Education to review public reaction when the proposal came to them for decision. These transcripts remain available for historical evaluation. They could prove valuable for characterization of frequently sharply divided emotions.

The State Board of Education approved the “swap” after thorough analysis. But the transaction was to be delayed for many more months as persons and groups, even the American Civil Liberties Union, attempted to block it in federal court.

The courts in time refused to prevent the transaction.

Currently at ISU the LDS Institute of Religion is providing experience and learning supplementary to that provided by the university in a way that is highly valuable to interested students, as do the other campus ministries representing other religious denominations. Most knowledgeable observers consider this supplementary experience a valuable part of students’ college-years activities when the students volunteer interest.

THE STUDENT BODY AT ISU

Idaho State University students as a whole are serious, quality people. As one would expect, the student body is basically comprised of persons between seventeen and twenty-three years of age. But many others are twenty-four and older, persons who simply started college late, persons shifting occupations, persons starting late because of disruptions in their lives or because of tardy understanding of opportunities and pitfalls of life.

Bob Pearce, now a college president in Iowa, used to comment when he was ISU Vice President for Financial Services that anyone going to Harvard would have gotten a college degree somewhere, even if Harvard did not exist. He asserted, however, that many students at ISU, were it not available, would miss the opportunity, however capable they might be. This is right.

Many, maybe most, ISU students understand that the institution is not easy. People who graduate have accomplished very well. And, for the most part, they are much better prepared for the world than otherwise they would be.

I am now working with the seventeenth group of leaders in ISU student government. They, as others before them, are outstanding—responsible and knowledgeable. They participate in the governance of the university. They control a million dollar plus budget. They decide, from the students’ perspective, what will be done and what will not be done in much of campus life.

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I've never seen failure in ISU student leadership, nor have I seen particular weakness.

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Connie and I are privileged to live and work essentially as co-presidents in Idaho. There is much opportunity for worthwhile service.

In a previous position in another state, we sometimes encountered an attitude that we should be constrained fairly strictly to the values of the majority population.

We have found greater freedom in Idaho. We live essentially in accordance with our own values and choices. We respect the values of others, as we expect them to value ours. We have not encountered determination to enforce compliance with values we do not share.

We thank Idaho for this. ☺