

# Seven Steps to Greatness



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Leonard J. Arrington

With 25,000 full-time students from each of the fifty states and 101 different countries; with 25,000 part-time students; with physical facilities as extensive and beautiful as those of any university in the nation; with an intense commitment to academic excellence and a large corps of faculty peering over the edges of existing knowledge; and with a broad basis of financial support from a large and growing Church and from private philanthropists, Brigham Young University is one of the great institutions of higher learning in the world.

It seems appropriate, at the beginning of this centennial year, to review the paths we've climbed, we and those before us, to reach this prominence. For BYU it has been a steep ascent, better scaled by steps than in a gradual climb. I seem to see seven steps, and in studying this history I have been reminded, as was the psalmist, of the architect who inspired their design: "Thou hast enlarged my steps under me," acknowledged David to his God, "that my feet did not slip" (Psalms 18:36). The steps to BYU's greatness have come about by the blessings of the Lord on the labors of people whose efforts were enduring, often ennobling, and as often humbling.

## Step One: Revealed Instructions

The history of Brigham Young University goes back to Kirtland, Ohio, where in 1831, just fourteen months after the organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Lord revealed to Joseph Smith, Jr., the importance of educating the Saints for the parts they would play in the Restoration.<sup>1</sup> Envision one of the resulting "Schools of the Prophets" or elders schools—this in Missouri:

The place of meeting was in the open air, under some tall trees, in a retired place in the wilderness. . . . To attend this school [wrote Parley P. Pratt] I had to travel on foot and sometimes with bare feet . . . about six miles. This I did once a week. . . .<sup>2</sup>

In each forced moved of the beleaguered Saints, they tucked into their already full trunks and wagons "every book, map, chart, or diagram that may . . . gain the attention of children, cause them to love to learn to read," and be useful in building Zion.<sup>3</sup> Finally, in their Great Basin Kingdom, they built schools, one in each ward usually, where their children were taught. Joseph Walton went there during the winter of 1858–59 in what he called "the happiest moment of my life."

I had my little Primer under my arm. . . . One of the big boys led me in. . . . The teacher was kind to me and placed me on the long seat by the fire. The books I saw were a dictionary, Bible, Testament, Book of Mormon, Blue back Spelling book, and the Deseret News. The bell was a wagon tire, school seats were made of split logs, and they had one long table sloping on both sides for a writing desk. . . . The floor of this old log house was of dirt, but not dirty. No, it was scrupulously clean, packed down hard. . . .<sup>4</sup>

### **Step Two: The Dusenberry Grade School**

While it is true that the territorial legislature established a University of the State of Deseret in 1850, the Saints found it hard to sacrifice some of their peas and carrots, butter, and sheepskins to pay a teacher. Brigham Young scolded them into action, and in the 1860s a renaissance began with the founding of fine private schools taught by well-trained teachers, new converts all, such as John R. Park, Mary and Ida Ione Cook, Karl G. Maeser, all in Salt Lake City; Louis Moench in Brigham City and Ogden; and Warren and Wilson Dusenberry in Provo.

### **Step Three: Founding Brigham Young Academy**

But these were elementary schools. For education beyond what was available here, Brigham Young, like others, had to send his sons east, hoping that they would not, as a contemporary put it, “learn what [we] would hardly be able to unteach them all their days.”<sup>5</sup> Brigham Young confided in a letter to one of those student sons his better dream:

I hope to see an Academy established in Provo that shall do honour to our Territory, and at which the children of the Latter-day Saints can receive a good education unmixed with the pernicious atheistic influences that are found in so many of the higher schools of the country.<sup>6</sup>

The dream would soon be realized. By October 1875 the Deed of Trust for Brigham Young Academy had been drawn up and seven trustees selected. It is the date of this Deed of Trust that we celebrate as the beginning of Brigham Young University. It was a notable year. That was the year Alexander Graham Bell first demonstrated his telephone and formed the Bell Telephone Company. That year the first Kentucky Derby was held at Churchill Downs, the first major baseball league was founded, and Mark Twain published *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Closer to home, it was the year of the founding of the Orderville United Order and the organization of the first Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association. And during this year the first BYA coed eloped, causing her instructor to remark that she had mistakenly put the heart before the course.

Warren Dusenberry was elected first principal of the Academy, but his appointment was temporary. The first permanent principal was Karl G. Maeser.

Maeser was born in Saxony, now East Germany, the son of an artist and master painter of Dresden chinaware. After graduation from the public schools in his small town, he was invited to attend the Dresden High School for the gifted, and finally to the *Schullernerseminar*, where prospective teachers took an intensive curriculum .

His teacher's diploma completed with high honors, Maeser tutored the children of prominent Protestant families, taught a district school, became headmaster of the Budig Institutes, and married the daughter of the principal of that famous school. Hearing of Mormonism, Maeser sent persistent requests to European Church officials who responded by sending William Budge there in 1858, in spite of considerable personal danger. Knowing they would be "scourged from the city" when their conversion became known, the Maesers and another convert family left Germany in 1858 under cover of darkness.

After two detours, one to Scotland and another to the American southern states to preach the gospel, Maeser finally reached Utah in 1860. He entered the picture just as the educational renaissance provoked by Brigham Young was beginning. Teaching in one of the ward schools in Salt Lake City, the German intellectual got his initiation to the life of a territorial schoolmaster. A saw and a mop as standard equipment for a teacher were strange to Maeser, but he adjusted and began to promote not only an enlarged physical structure but also systematic instruction by which elementary schools would feed students into high schools and colleges.

After small successes, large failures, and interruption for another mission, Maeser was teaching in 1873 at the Twentieth Ward Institute in Salt Lake City, which he had made into a competent teacher training school. In April 1876 an explosion at the old Salt Lake Arsenal on the hills north of Salt Lake City shook the whole northern half of the city, causing extensive damage to the Twentieth Ward schoolhouse. Maeser went at once to report the matter. Finding President Young, he said, "As you can see, I will not be able to teach school until the building is repaired." "That is all right," the President answered cheerfully, "I want to give you a mission to teach in the Brigham Young Academy at Provo."<sup>7</sup> The next day Maeser was formally appointed by the Board.

It is doubtful that Maeser realized fully what he had committed himself to do. Arriving at the academy in April of 1876, he found a badly run-down building surrounded by a half-built fence, a sparsely furnished office, "no records, not much system, certainly no regularity, the former principal being so busily engaged with his court duties that school began at any time between 9 and 11 o'clock, and sometimes not at all."<sup>8</sup> He soon learned that the building doubled as an entertainment hall, shaken by round dances on the upper floor while students tried to study downstairs.

Only twenty-nine students showed up for Professor Maeser's first term. The first student to register, incidentally, was Reed Smoot, later to serve for thirty years as United States Senator from Utah. Reed was the son of A. O. Smoot who, as stake president mayor, and chairman of the Board of Trustees, did more than any other person to keep the academy alive during the poorly financed years of the 1880s and 1890s.

Maeser's most formidable challenge was his students. An early student who later distinguished himself as an associate justice of the United States Supreme Court described himself and fellow students then as shoeless, self-sufficient country boys who were careful to wear their hats in the classroom, and, when they weren't in school, were cutting wood, milking cows, carrying swill to the pigs, currying horses, plowing fields, hoeing corn, or picking potatoes. One of these country boys who attended the academy in its early years was J. Golden Kimball, destined to become senior president of the First Council of the Seventy of the Church. This six-foot-three-inch lovable beanpole of a man, who had previously been a freighter and mule skinner, received his training from Dr. Maeser; and it is certain that some of his fire, his tolerance, and his conviction, as well as his creative wit and homespun wisdom, are a product of his days at Brigham Young Academy. Zina Huntington Young, another of Maeser's early students, described the first upperclassmen as "eager, manly, and . . . ignorant."<sup>9</sup> These were the persons the converted German schoolmaster was supposed to turn into saints, gentlemen, and scholars—in that order.

Without question Maeser was well-chosen for the task. On one rare occasion when he was late for class—because they were always penalized when they were late—some of the boys hurried outside to search the neighborhood for a donkey, which they brought back to the classroom and tied to the teacher's desk. Then they waited in anxious silence. When the professor finally entered the room and saw the newcomer, he turned to the class and dryly remarked in his thick German accent, "I'm happy you chose the smartest student in the class as my replacement."

Maeser was more interested in students than in ideas, and his work "bore exceptional fruits in character." A generation of Mormon leaders remembered Brother Maeser as the promoter of their spiritual and civic achievement. "Everyone's life is an object lesson to others," Maeser told students. "Don't be a scrub."

As good words about the academy got around, more young students enrolled. By the end of Maeser's administration, Brigham Young Academy included a kindergarten, an elementary school, a high school featuring teacher training and college preparation, and a college department of offering either four years in academics or three years normal training.

Dr. Maeser's basic philosophy became the foundation of the Church's approach to education: concern for the moral as well as the intellectual well-being of the students. Under Maeser BYA became an institution, with loyalties and alumni, and provided teachers for scores of common schools throughout the West. But Maeser's indelible contribution was the spiritual architecture of the academy. It was his emphasis on practical religion that became a distinctive characteristic of Brigham Young Academy.

#### **Step Four: Two—Becoming University**

When Benjamin Cluff succeeded Maeser as president of Brigham Young Academy in 1891, he had just returned from the University of Michigan full of enthusiastic, progressive ideas about education. Raised in Provo, Logan, and on the Laie plantation in Hawaii, Cluff received his elementary education solely from his mother. Returning to Utah, he served for a period as a librarian in Coalville and in his nineteenth year walked the sixty-five miles to Provo. There he was introduced to Professor Maeser, who took him by the hand and said, "It is an honor and a pleasure to meet and welcome into our school a young man with an ambition to fit himself for service in God's kingdom. You will be happy here."

Over the next eight years Cluff attended the normal school, served a long mission to Hawaii, and returned to teach at the academy until he was called by President John Taylor to continue his education at the University of Michigan. There he was an outstanding student and a faithful Latter-day Saint. The Benny Cluff who returned from Michigan was thirty-two, eager to share his talents, but easily wounded by people who were leery of the eastern-educated young miracle worker called to take over the academy presidency.

Determined to upgrade the academy to university status, Cluff faced many difficulties. First, everyone wanted a hand in raising the baby: the former principal, the Provo Board of Trustees, the Utah Valley Stake presidency, the General Board of Education in Salt Lake City, the family of Brigham Young, and of course the General Authorities of the Church.

Exactly *how* to raise this child was unclear—was the academy to become the center of the Church educational system, or was it destined to simply continue as one of the best of the thirty or more stake academies? As a major LDS school, the Academy had to compete with two other Brigham Young schools, Brigham Young College in Logan and LDS College in Salt Lake City. At the same time, the General Board of Education of the Church was finalizing plans to create a new "Church University" in Salt Lake City that would become the center of Church education; BA was saved from the latter possibility by the Depression of 1893, which ruled out a new institution.

But the depression also left the academy in a precarious condition. No one, not even the Board of Trustees, wanted to share with Cluff the responsibility of paying the bills. The faculty of the academy was its finance committee; they struggled to secure their own salaries as well as operating expenses for the school. Tuition continued to be paid in kind and teachers were compelled, as one of them wrote, “to make monthly peregrinations with huge wheelbarrows to collect the school fees paid in turnips, molasses, and pumpkins.”<sup>10</sup>

Assisting Cluff during these years and eventually succeeding him was George H. Brimhall, son of a territorial civic and church leader, man of remarkable energy and tact, and an inspiring teacher—not the scholar that Cluff was but always good for a stimulating five-minute talk in the academy’s required chapel service. What Cluff found distasteful Brimhall enjoyed—raising funds. The school’s outdoor privies, for instance, were a disgrace to its name and to the community, and Cluff had no success in getting the trustees to finance indoor plumbing. Then Brimhall went to work. He wrote Cluff: “The Board is now in good condition to take into consideration the sewage proposition, as all three of the Salt Lake members were under the necessity of using our outside conveniences before the meeting.”<sup>11</sup>

Cluff, meanwhile, lengthened class periods from thirty minutes each to an hour, created a Collegiate Department for advanced studies beyond the normal school and high school level, and started a summer school to which he invited national speakers such as John Dewey. Finally, in October 1903—in a meaningful step—Cluff was given permission to change the name of Brigham Young Academy to Brigham Young University.

But what a modest step it was. The new university had only fifty-eight college students, all properly decorated with the mustaches, beards, and whiskers that were customary in those days. Their pride was lifted so much by the “promotion” from college to university that within two years the so-called sorghum lappers from St. George, beet diggers from Spanish Fork, and pea pickers from Driggs had joined to put the large block Y on the mountain and had originated Y Day. It is also said that this was the year a fellow took the first buggy ride with his girl through Rock Canyon, while his roommate started the tradition of escorting his girl home by way of Lovers’ Lane along the canal below Maeser Hill. They also began the traditional autumn leaf moonlight hikes, and I’m told it was soon thereafter that the first authentic submarine race was held in Utah Lake.

### **Step Five: Accreditation**

A 1921 statement from the First Presidency suggested that some of the churchwide fears during the Cluff and Brimhall era were being resolved:

After separating ourselves from the world, the world has come to us. . . . We are an integral part of the great world, and whether we desire it or not, we must be influenced by the environment with which we are surrounded.<sup>12</sup>

A new surge of interest in progressive eastern education demanded a new president with background in the best of the new learning. President Brimhall, who, in spite of poor health and modest academic training, had energetically implemented many of Cluffs proposals, was asked to resign in favor of Franklin S. Harris. Stepping down, Brimhall manifested an exemplary graciousness: he became the new president's supporter and emissary and a student counselor of unexpected gentleness.

Franklin Harris as a boy, said his mother, always wanted to study out his problems without help and was well advanced in reading long before he went to school. Having attended BYU under the nationally recognized scientist, John A. Widtsoe, he proceeded to earn a doctorate at Cornell University in New York. As a specialist in agricultural chemistry, Harris had published numerous technical papers and articles in scientific and farm journals and, at the time of his appointment, was director of the Agricultural Experiment Station in Logan.

Coming to BYU with zest and grand plans, he declared in his first speech to the faculty, that "We are the greatest university in the world in embryo."<sup>13</sup> Some faculty members concluded that his sail was too big for his rudder—after all, BYU had only 438 students. Most of them soon decided that Harris' rudder was big enough. What he wanted most was to see BYU become a respected academic institution. In his time, as through BYU's history, there was tension between the desire to have the best secular learning that could be obtained and the desire for the type of educational experience that would build testimonies. Harris always contended that rational thought was compatible with spiritual belief and that thorough academics need not weaken healthy religion. The history of BYU during these years demonstrates the soundness of this view.

Harris concentrated his efforts on obtaining accreditation, for he knew that the standards of accrediting associations were high and that in meeting them the school would become first-rate. Just as important, he was anxious for BYU graduates to be able to gain ready admittance to graduate schools through the nation. He started first with the school library, the "heart of the university," which, in 1921, consisted of less than 20,000 books.<sup>14</sup> By the time Harris left in 1945 there were a quarter of a million volumes.

Harris knew his faculty lacked academic credentials; only one had a Ph. D., and many had no degrees at all. He began to recruit young Mormon graduates of eastern schools, somehow wooing them to BYU despite sacrifices in salary. Teachers grumbled about the low stipends, for many had large families which they could not support without maintaining a farm on

the side; but theirs was the kind of necessary sacrifice which built the school. In spite of the continued financial problems of the Church throughout the 1920s, and the feeling of many General Authorities that the Church must close all church schools and settle for an expanded program of religious instruction, Harris accomplished a miracle akin to that of the loaves and the fishes: on a fixed budget he provided for an enrollment that doubled and a faculty that increased by a third.

Due to Harris' efforts in continually tightening enrollment standards and raising graduation requirements to meet national standards, in 1928, BYU, with about 1,400 students, was placed on the "approved list of colleges" of the most prestigious accrediting agency in the United States.

### **Step Six: Graduate Work and Research**

During Franklin Harris' administration an even more important step in the history of BYU was the inauguration of a Graduate Division, accompanied by the encouragement of research. Harris believed that research made better teachers. Ironically, World War II, while chopping enrollment to 800 students and absconding temporarily with the faculty, gave a boost to the research program. Some firms donated substantial sums to the school for research. While this expansion of research was in process, Harris resigned to take the presidency of Utah State Agricultural College (now Utah State University) in Logan. He was succeeded by Howard S. McDonald, a graduate of the Logan school with a doctorate in educational administration. Before coming to BYU McDonald had served two years as Salt Lake City Superintendent of Schools where he had, as one Salt Lake teacher said, "led us out of slavery" by fighting for and obtaining greater tax support for schools.<sup>15</sup>

Arriving in Provo during the final months of World War II, McDonald found a dormant wartime campus dominated by women; but suddenly at war's end it bustled with veterans, some of whom lodged in garages or coal bins for lack of housing. McDonald had administrative problems—every step of every plan had to be channeled through a maze of committees that examined, discussed, modified, and then most likely set it aside for meditation. There even developed a feeling that the university should be phased out entirely, a movement which McDonald countered boldly by continuing Harris' efforts to enlarge the graduate program.

### **Step Seven: Expansion**

Graduate study, however, could not become a strong part of BYU's academics until the undergraduate program underwent some restructuring and strengthening. Such an accomplishment was no small endeavor,

and the work fell to McDonald's successor, Ernest L. Wilkinson. What an administration his turned out to be! As President Oaks has stated, BYU "would probably still be struggling around the fringes of community college status had it not been for the remarkable and relentless leadership of the Wilkinson Era."

Ernest Wilkinson rose, by dint of hard work, out of "Hell's Half Acre" outside Ogden. His father's industry and his mother's ambition led their son through Weber Academy to BYU, where he edited the school paper and debated on its forensic team. Graduating from his school, Wilkinson studied law at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Graduating summa cum laude, he finished his education with a Doctor of Jurisprudence degree at Harvard. His career in law took him finally to Washington, D.C., where his reputation as a creative and courageous lawyer solidified. Dr. Wilkinson's was the firm that represented the Ute Indians in a monumental suit over Indian lands, which concluded in a precedent setting \$33 million settlement. His Indian clients referred to Wilkinson, who was sometimes exasperated by delays and red tape, as Chief Frantic Bear.

After he became President of BYU in 1951, Chief Frantic Bear took his whirlwind dynamism along with his lawyer's logic and thorough preparation to meetings of the Board of Trustees. Appreciating his honesty, respecting his research, recognizing that he heeded their advice, the board, led by President David O. McKay, listened to him. In 1953, the board strengthened Dr. Wilkinson's authority by naming him chancellor of the entire Church School System.

Dr. Wilkinson created new departments and colleges at BYU, raised faculty salaries to competitive levels, launched a vigorous recruitment program for qualified LDS faculty, encouraged current faculty members to obtain graduate degrees at schools outside Utah, and built a healthy graduate school. The going was not easy. The mere fact of BYU's staggering increase in enrollment slowed the thorough entrenchment of academic excellence. The rise from 5,200 students in 1950 to 11,600 in 1960, and again to more than 22,000 in 1970, drained the financial resources of the university. Merely to provide classroom and office space required enormous energy and ingenuity.

And there were the spiritual needs of students to be met as well. Even more than the building of the most beautiful campus in America, Dr. Wilkinson was pleased by the organization in the 1950s of student wards and branches. By 1970 there were ten student stakes and more than one hundred wards. Scholastic, social, and spiritual achievement made joint strides, and BYU was coming into its own as a university unique among universities.

## Conclusion

You graduating today know the history of BYU since 1971. You have seen the end of the Wilkinson era and the beginning of the Oaks administration. Prophecy is not part of the historian's prerogative, but you can observe as well as I the preparation of our young president; he brings with him a rudder adequate for the size of the ship, and his sails are full for the voyage. BYU will have storms to weather still, some of them the same storms previous presidents encountered.

As a healthy and improving institution, Brigham Young University will face the perennial problem of its identity. Should it be primarily a place of religious and social training, or an institution of intellectual development? Should it produce bright, questioning students who can be made into creative, responsible scholars, or would we prefer obedient students who are thoroughly inculcated with sound, orthodox doctrine? We find ourselves asking, "Why must it be one or the other? Why can't we have both?" If we smugly contend that they are easily compatible, we're almost as wrong as if we insist that one excludes the other. How do we balance these divergent pulls in our personal and collective lives? And how do we resolve the tensions they produce?

That these tensions exist is a sign of health. The Lord has told us that our individual and group history will be a story of our choices. That is why David found himself petitioning the Lord for the very blessings we find ourselves in need of: personal courage to seek truth and the wisdom to apply that truth in righteousness. The Lord said to David:

Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding. . . . I have taught thee in the way of wisdom; I have led thee in right paths. When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened; and when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble. Take fast hold of *instruction*; let her not go: keep her, for she is thy life. (Proverbs 4:7–13; italics added)

David grew in understanding, and he cried to the Lord:

Order my steps in thy word: and let not any iniquity have dominion over me. . . . Make thy face to shine upon thy servant; and teach me thy statutes. . . . Give me understanding, and I shall live. (Psalms 119:133–35, 144)

May this be the prayer of all who here graduate. May the Lord make his light to shine upon you and give you peace is my prayer, in Jesus' name.

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Commencement address to the graduates of Brigham Young University, April 1975.  
Leonard J. Arrington is church historian of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

1. In preparing this talk I have benefited from reading some preliminary manuscripts of the projected three-volume *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, being prepared under the direction of Ernest L. Wilkinson. I have also benefited from the research and writing of Mrs. Rebecca Cornwall and from the suggestions of Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Jill Mulvay, Davis Bitton, Richard Jensen, and Christine Croft Waters.

2. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography* (New York: Published for the editor and Proprietor by Russell Brothers, 1874), p. 100.

3. *Latter-day Saints' Millennium Star*, 10 (15 March 1848):85.

4. "Walton Biographical Sketch," MS., BYU Archives, p. 38.

5. Thomas L. Kane to Brigham Young, 4 December 1873, MS, Church Archives.

6. Brigham Young to Alfaes Young, 20 October 1875, MS, Church Archives.

7. Susa Young Gates in *Young Woman's Journal*, 3 (August 1892):482.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Young Woman's Journal* 3 (July 1892):434.

11. "Brimhall Papers, 12 October 1900, MS, BYU Archives.

12. *Conference Report*, April 1922, p. 41.

13. Reported by the *Y News*, 24 October 1923.

14. Franklin S. Harris to Adam S. Bennion, 12 November 1925, Harris Papers, BYU Archives.

15. *Deseret Evening News*, 5 September 1944.