

# “By Study and Also by Faith”

## Balancing the Sacred and the Secular at Brigham Young University in the 1930s and 1940s

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At their inception, universities were places where all branches of learning—both the sacred and the secular—were studied. At the great medieval universities, for instance, faith and academic excellence were intertwined,<sup>1</sup> and this strong connection continued in the universities of the New World. Most American research universities began as religiously affiliated colleges whose missions were to develop Christian character and foster faith in order to prepare men for the ministry or work in the government.<sup>2</sup> But, beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing over the course of the twentieth century, the vast majority of these research universities abandoned their religious affiliations to emphasize solely academic excellence.<sup>3</sup> By the early twenty-first century, only nine research universities in the United States claimed a religious

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1. For more information on medieval universities, see Alan B. Cobban, *The Medieval Universities: Their Development and Organization* (London: Methuen, 1975); Lowrie J. Daly, *The Medieval University, 1200–1400* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961); and Alan B. Cobban, *The Medieval English Universities: Oxford and Cambridge to c. 1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

2. Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 6.

3. See George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Todd C. Ream, Michael Beaty, and Larry Lion, “Faith and Learning: Toward a Typology of Faculty Views at Religious Research Universities,” *Christian Higher Education* 3, no. 4 (2004): 349–72; and Arthur M. Cohen, *The Shaping of American Higher Education: Emergence and Growth of the Contemporary System* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

affiliation out of the 207 classified as “high research activity” or “very high research activity” universities using the Carnegie Classification.<sup>4</sup> Brigham Young University was one of these nine institutions.<sup>5</sup>

In many ways Brigham Young University is an outlier. Established in 1875—a time when most research universities were beginning to shed their religious affiliation—Brigham Young University spent most of the twentieth century becoming “more closely tied to its affiliated church and more intentionally religious than any of the remaining religious universities.”<sup>6</sup> This paper examines some of the key steps that the university and its sponsoring institution (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) took during the mid-1930s and the 1940s to ensure that the university maintained its religious affiliation while still pursuing academic excellence.<sup>7</sup> At the core of these actions was an effort to create a space where secular and sacred education could successfully be intermingled. These actions built on the work of previous administrations and provided a firm foundation upon which future administrations could build.<sup>8</sup>

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4. Alan L. Wilkins and David A. Whetten, “BYU and Religious Universities in a Secular Academic World,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (2012): 5. The other institutions were Baylor University, Boston College, the Catholic University of America, Fordham University, Georgetown University, Loyola University Chicago, Notre Dame University, and Saint Louis University.

5. Brigham Young University is closely affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For more information on the relationship between the Church and education, see “Latter-day Saints and Education: An Overview,” Newsroom, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed July 31, 2018, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/mormons-and-education-an-overview>.

6. Wilkins and Whetten, “BYU and Religious Universities,” 5.

7. For more on this subject, see Ernest L. Wilkinson, ed., *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, 4 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975–76); Gary J. Bergera and Ronald Priddis, *Brigham Young University: A House of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1985); and David B. Rimington, “An Historical Appraisal of Educational Development under Howard S. McDonald at Brigham Young University, 1945–1949” (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1982). While these works examine this period and Howard S. McDonald as an educational leader in university administration, the present article fills a gap by examining the unique efforts of the university and the Church during this time to strengthen mutually beneficial ties and by highlighting the important role McDonald played in these efforts.

8. Studying the history of an institution such as Brigham Young University requires access to corporate records. These corporate records are governed by various access policies, and it is not always possible to obtain access to all of the

## The Beginnings of Brigham Young University

Brigham Young Academy was founded in 1875 as a reaction to what Brigham Young saw as the dangers of secularization in public education. Young was not opposed to secular learning; rather it was the removal of the sacred from education that bothered him. He intended the new school to consciously intermix religion and secular academics.<sup>9</sup> Young explained the importance of a curriculum that integrated the sacred and the secular to his son Alfales, writing that the academy would be a place “at which the children of the Latter-day Saints can receive a good education unmixed with the pernicious, atheistic influences that are to be found in so many of the higher schools of the country.”<sup>10</sup> President Young advised the first full-time principal, Karl G. Maeser, “that neither the alphabet nor the multiplication table were to be taught without the Spirit of God.”<sup>11</sup>

Young had a specific vision for his new school. The deed of trust establishing the school specified that “all pupils shall be instructed in reading, penmanship, orthography, grammar, geography, and mathematics, together with such other branches as are usually taught in an academy of learning and the Old and New Testaments, the Book of Mormon, and the Book of Doctrine and Covenants shall be read and their doctrines inculcated in the Academy.”<sup>12</sup> The deed reflected Young’s

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records that could be useful to nuancing the historical story. In the case of this study, the General Church Board of Education records and the records of the governing bodies of the Church were not accessible.

9. For more information on the early history of Brigham Young University, see Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*; Bergera and Priddis, *Brigham Young University*; and E. Vance Randall, “Educating for Eternity: Higher Education and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice* 6, no. 4 (2003): 438–56.

10. Brigham Young to Alfales Young, October 20, 1875, photocopy, box 17, folder 1, Centennial History Committee records, UA 566, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

11. Brigham Young Academy building dedicatory services, 1892, 2, UA SC 33, Perry Special Collections; see also A. LeGrand Richards, *Called to Teach: The Legacy of Karl G. Maeser* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014).

12. Handwritten copy of the deed of trust, October 16, 1875, 1–3, box 10, folder 4, Brigham Young University Board of Trustees records, UA 6, Perry Special Collections.

belief that education involved the “liberal arts, high moral and ethical principles, and sound factual knowledge.”<sup>13</sup>

Maeser devoted his administration to laying a firm foundation for an institution that consciously bathed secular subjects in the light of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. His students acknowledged his erudition, but they focused on his humility, love, and obedience to the prophet of the Lord when they described his influence on them. Maeser played a key role in successfully establishing an institution with the bed-rock principle of the integration of the sacred and the secular.<sup>14</sup>

Although Brigham Young Academy was founded to expressly combine faith with academic excellence, it was not immune to the influences of secularization in education. Maeser’s successor, Benjamin Cluff Jr., appointed in 1892, had been educated at the University of Michigan and was heavily influenced by conceptions of the modern university, especially its emphasis on secular academic disciplines. He was particularly interested in improving the academic stature of the school. He received permission from the school’s board of trustees to change the institution’s name in 1903 to Brigham Young University. Cluff also worked diligently to bring many leading educators with whom he had interacted, such as Francis Parker and John Dewey, to Utah to teach the faculty at the university about pedagogy.<sup>15</sup>

Cluff’s efforts to create a modern university troubled Church leaders, who worried that this model would lead to the exclusion of religion at the school, and Church leaders struggled over the first half of the twentieth century to develop a vision for what a distinctive, modern Latter-day Saint university should look like. They did not completely reject the modern university’s emphasis on academic excellence, but they firmly believed that the secular path being charted by these modern universities was not appropriate for a Church-sponsored school.<sup>16</sup> The competing concepts of academic excellence and orthodoxy created a tension that flared up many times during the first half of the twentieth century.

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13. James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 360.

14. For more on Maeser’s role in the Brigham Young Academy, see Richards, *Called to Teach*.

15. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 1:211–378; Brian Q. Cannon, “Shaping BYU: The Presidential Administration and Legacy of Benjamin Cluff Jr.,” *BYU Studies* 48, no. 2 (2009): 4–40.

16. Thomas W. Simpson, “Evolution and Its Discontents, 1896–1920,” in *American Universities and the Birth of Modern Mormonism, 1867–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 54–91.

For example, the modernism crisis of 1911<sup>17</sup> was an early struggle to determine whether Brigham Young University would become a modern university in the image of its eastern peers, who often denigrated faith-based institutions dedicated to academic excellence. The controversy began when President George H. Brimhall attempted to improve the quality of the faculty at Brigham Young University. As part of this effort, President Brimhall hired two pairs of brothers—the Chamberlins (Ralph and William) and the Petersons (Joseph and Henry)—because of their academic credentials and encouraged them to challenge students to think deeply about difficult issues. The Chamberlins and Petersons boasted academic degrees from Harvard, Cornell, and the University of Chicago and were steeped in the pedagogies of the modern university; they aimed to improve the academic quality of a Brigham Young University education by adapting concepts and methods in use at the universities where they had studied. They were widely regarded as excellent teachers, but Church leaders soon began to receive complaints that the professors were teaching biblical higher criticism and evolution, among other controversial topics. These subjects challenged orthodox Church teachings, and Church leaders advised President Brimhall to ask that the Petersons and the Chamberlins stop teaching them. They were unwilling to do so, and so the Church Board of Education took matters into its own hands. They censured the faculty members and asked them to resign. Three of the four did so after realizing that President Brimhall would support Church leaders over the faculty members' claims to academic freedom.<sup>18</sup> These resignations had a chilling effect on instructors' sense of academic freedom and hindered BYU's ability to attract qualified scholars for nearly a decade.<sup>19</sup>

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17. The modernism crisis of 1911 is one of many instances when the university had to grapple with concepts that had the potential to minimize the sacred. Each of these instances led to ongoing conversations between the board of trustees and university leaders.

18. For more on the modernism crisis and its American context, see Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 1:418–33; Bergera and Priddis, *Brigham Young University*, 134–48; Simpson, *American Universities*, 69–80; Richard Sherlock, “Campus in Crisis: BYU’s Earliest Conflict between Secular Knowledge and Religious Belief,” *Sunstone* 10, no. 5 (1985): 30–35; and Clyde D. Ford, “Modernism and Mormonism: James E. Talmage’s *Jesus the Christ* and Early Twentieth-Century Mormon Responses to Biblical Criticism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 41, no. 4 (2008): 96–120.

19. Simpson, *American Universities*, 85–86.

Changes in Church leadership and educational policy in the early 1920s led to a revival of efforts to make Brigham Young University a modern university—one that espoused both academic excellence and spiritual growth. During this time, Latter-day Saints with advanced degrees joined the ranks of Church leadership in positions where they could impact Church policy and attitudes. These leaders included John A. Widtsoe, James E. Talmage, Joseph F. Merrill, Franklin L. West, and Richard S. Lyman—all of whom either had served as commissioner of Church education or were members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. These leaders advocated for “Mormon students and teachers to keep abreast of broader scholarly developments in the fields of pedagogy, psychology, sociology, biblical studies, and the history of Christianity.”<sup>20</sup> These leaders oversaw the hiring of Franklin S. Harris as president of Brigham Young University in 1921 and allowed him latitude to build an academically excellent university.

Harris was the university’s first president to hold a doctoral degree (which he received from Cornell University), and he quickly recognized the importance of improving BYU’s academics. However, he first had to ensure the university’s survival as the Church retrenched from the network of schools it had built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1909, Brigham Young University was named as the Church Teachers College, the primary teacher-training institution for Church, making it central to the Church’s educational plans.<sup>21</sup> It did not, however, guarantee that the university would survive the Church’s move to reduce its involvement in primary, secondary, and higher education.<sup>22</sup> Harris worried that BYU would be closed, and he worked to reorient the university’s mission to produce both teachers and leaders for the Church and its developing religious-education program, enabling the university to survive.<sup>23</sup>

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20. Simpson, *American Universities*, 92.

21. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 1:398–401.

22. For more information on the Church’s move to reduce its focus on primary and secondary education in favor of a religious-education program, see Scott C. Esplin, “Education in Transition: Church and State Relationships in Utah Education, 1888–1933” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 2006).

23. For more information on the changes to the Church’s educational network in the 1920s, see J. Gordon Daines III, “Charting the Future of Brigham Young University: Franklin S. Harris and the Changing Landscape of the Church’s Educational Network, 1921–1926,” *BYU Studies* 45, no. 4 (2006): 69–98.

Convinced that the university would remain open, Harris turned his attention to academic excellence. He saw a need to improve the physical facilities of the campus and the quality of the faculty. He submitted an ambitious plan to the Church's Commission of Education and went to work.<sup>24</sup> A new library building was completed in 1925, and the university became accredited as a college in the 1920s.<sup>25</sup> In the mid-1920s and 1930s, Harris sent faculty members to eastern universities to strengthen their academic training. Many of the faculty studied religion at the University of Chicago, and the secular approach to studying religious topics that they brought back to Brigham Young University began to concern many Church leaders once again. As their academic qualifications increased, many faculty members attempted to reconcile religion and science. Their efforts were viewed by many Church leaders as attempts to move into areas of Church doctrine that were not their concern.<sup>26</sup>

Church leaders visited Brigham Young University on multiple occasions in the 1930s to reiterate that the university was to be an example of faithfulness to Church ideals. This emphasis concerned many faculty members who worried that academic freedom would be curtailed, and several left the university.<sup>27</sup> An address given by President J. Reuben Clark Jr., a member of the First Presidency of the Church, to instructors in the Church's educational network, which included BYU, highlighted the tension between the sacred and the secular. He pointed out that the primary responsibility of teachers in the Church system, including those at BYU, was to strengthen the Christian faith of the students with whom they interacted.<sup>28</sup> This address gave clear guidance that these institutions should prioritize the sacred over the secular and continues to

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24. The Church Commission of Education consisted of the commissioner of education, his two counselors, and the superintendent of Church schools.

25. For more information on President Harris's efforts to get Brigham Young University accredited and to improve the academic quality of the university, see J. Gordon Daines III, "The Vision That You Have . . . Augurs Well for the Development of Still Better Things': The Role of Accreditation in Securing the Future of Brigham Young University, 1921–1928," *BYU Studies* 49, no. 2 (2010): 63–92.

26. For more on the university's efforts to walk the fine line between academic freedom and orthodoxy, see Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:262–69.

27. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:262–69.

28. J. Reuben Clark Jr., *The Charted Course of the Church in Education* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1938).

have important ramifications for institutions of higher education in the Church Educational System.<sup>29</sup>

President Franklin S. Harris resigned as president of Brigham Young University in 1945 to become president of the Utah State Agricultural College. Though Church leaders appreciated his efforts to strengthen the university, they also felt that his quest for academic excellence needed to be tempered by refocusing on the spiritual dimensions of education. This effort to retrench from modernity's emphasis on secularism and to emphasize the sacred in education characterizes many of the changes made at Brigham Young University during the 1930s and 1940s. Of this period, one scholar has argued that "the success of Mormon scholars, women and men, has filled the Saints with pride, but it has also left church leaders anxious to defend their authority. In the twentieth century, fierce, protracted battles ensued over academic freedom, scientific evolution, and the historicity of Mormonism's sacred past. As a result, education became the main battleground in the twentieth-century war to define Mormon identity, the struggle for the soul of modern Mormonism."<sup>30</sup> Brigham Young University was an important site for these struggles.

### Theoretical Framework for Religious Institutions

Robert Benne has developed a conceptual framework that explains why some institutions of higher education have managed to keep and strengthen connections to the religious traditions that founded them.<sup>31</sup> This framework offers a useful lens for examining the connections between The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Brigham Young University. According to Benne, research universities that remain strongly connected with their religious affiliation have the following key elements in place: (1) a vision that highlights the value and role of

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29. Scott C. Esplin, "Charting the Course: President Clark's Charge to Religious Educators," *Religious Educator* 7, no. 1 (2006): 103–19. The Church Educational System consists of the institutions run by the Church that provide religious and secular education for Latter-day Saint students at the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels. The system includes the seminary and institute program as well as the Church's universities.

30. Simpson, *American Universities*, 3.

31. Robert Benne, *Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001).

religion on campus, (2) a mission statement that clearly reflects that vision, (3) a governance board that rigorously defends the vision and mission, (4) university leadership committed to successfully accomplishing the institution's mission, and (5) a culture—what Benne calls *ethos*—created by university leadership, faculty, and students who value the integration of the sacred and the secular.

Beginning in the mid-1930s and continuing through the 1940s, the university and the Church took a number of important steps to create a situation in which the university could be both academically excellent and spiritually strengthening. These steps, which tied BYU closer to the Church and set the university on its current course, reflect all the key elements of Benne's conceptual framework: leaders of the Church articulated a clear vision for the university; the university's governance board came firmly under the control of the Church; the Church selected a leader in Howard S. McDonald who they believed would be able to carry out their vision;<sup>32</sup> President McDonald emphasized the importance of the faculty's connection to the Church; and a strong campus culture developed that was centered on strengthening the faith of everyone involved with Brigham Young University.

## Vision

Church leaders have consistently reaffirmed Brigham Young's original vision for the university, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, when the university and the Church strengthened their connection with one another. In an address to university students and faculty in 1937, David O. McKay, then serving as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, stated that "Brigham Young University is primarily a religious institution. It was established for the sole purpose of associating with the facts of science, art, literature, and philosophy the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Even more specifically, its purpose is to teach the gospel as it has been revealed in this age to the Prophet Joseph Smith and other leaders who have succeeded him. . . . It is the aim of this university to make students *feel* that life is never more noble and beautiful than when it

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32. For more information on the circumstances of McDonald's appointment, see Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:425–26; Franklin S. Harris, "The New President Howard S. McDonald," *News and Bits from Your BYU Friends* (1945): 1–4; and Rimington, "Historical Appraisal."

conforms to the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>33</sup>

J. Reuben Clark Jr. reemphasized the dual nature of Brigham Young University at the inauguration of Howard S. McDonald as the university’s fifth president in 1945. President Clark said, “The university has a dual function, a dual aim and purpose—secular learning, the lesser value, and spiritual development, the greater.”<sup>34</sup> He challenged McDonald to continue the university’s pursuit of academic excellence and told him that “we look confidently forward to an increased spirituality in this school.”<sup>35</sup> It was clear that Church leaders expected BYU scholars to pursue academic excellence in an environment of faith.

Clark and McKay reaffirmed that Brigham Young University would successfully integrate the sacred and the secular. Faculty and students needed to take this responsibility seriously and help the university be a model to the higher education community.

## Mission

Though Church leadership had clear expectations for Brigham Young University, the institution did not have a clearly articulated mission



J. Reuben Clark Jr. served as a member of the First Presidency from 1934 to 1961. He played an important role in establishing the Church’s views of higher education. Photo courtesy of Perry Special Collections, UA 947.

33. David O. McKay, “The Church University,” in *Educating Zion*, ed. John W. Welch and Don E. Norton (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1996), 10–11, italics in original.

34. J. Reuben Clark Jr., *The Mission of Brigham Young University: Inaugural Charge* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1949), 10.

35. Clark, *Mission of Brigham Young University*, 14.

statement when Howard S. McDonald became president.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the mission of the university was communicated not only to President McDonald but also to local Church leaders. In a letter to stake and mission presidents, the First Presidency stated that the university was to “foster education and learning in accordance with Church Standards. Its crowning purpose, of course, is to graduate men and women who have also faith in the Church, who appreciate its great purposes, and who have a personal testimony of the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>37</sup>

BYU’s current mission statement, codified in 1981, captures that vision, which Church leaders still have for the university: “To assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life. That assistance should provide a period of intensive learning in a stimulating setting where a commitment to excellence is expected and the full realization of human potential is pursued.”<sup>38</sup> The mission outlines four major educational goals for the institution: (1) all students should be taught the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ, (2) students should receive a broad university education, (3) students should receive instruction in the special fields of their choice, and (4) students and faculty should be encouraged to participate in scholarly research and creative endeavors. The mission statement is often accompanied by a document titled “Aims of a BYU Education.”<sup>39</sup> The aims state that a “BYU education should be 1) spiritually strengthening, 2) intellectually enlarging, and 3) character building, leading to 4) lifelong learning and service.”<sup>40</sup> This document articulates how the vision developed by Church leaders is put into practical effect at the university. Members of the BYU community are expected to support the mission and work to ensure it is successfully attained.

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36. The university’s first formal mission statement was drafted and approved by the board of trustees in 1981 under the direction of President Jeffrey R. Holland.

37. The First Presidency to presidents of stakes and missions, February 25, 1947, box 10, folder 7, Office of the President records, UA 1087, Perry Special Collections (hereafter cited as President records).

38. *The Mission of Brigham Young University and the Aims of a BYU Education* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 2014), 1.

39. The “Aims of a BYU Education” were developed under the direction of John S. Tanner, associate academic vice president for undergraduate and international education, and were made available in 1995.

40. *Mission of Brigham Young University*, 5.

Having a clear vision and an accompanying mission (implied prior to 1981 and clearly articulated thereafter) created a strong connection between the university and its faith-based sponsor, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This connection was strengthened when the university's governance board came under the direct control of the Church.

### **Governance Board**

The deed establishing Brigham Young Academy named “six prominent men of Utah County as Trustees—Abraham Owen Smoot, Myron Tanner, Leonard Harrington, Harvey H. Cluff, Wilson Dusenberry, and William Bringhurst.” Martha Jane Knowlton Coray was to “represent women’s interests on the Board.”<sup>41</sup> The newly installed trustees were charged with implementing the vision of the institution as articulated by Brigham Young and played an important role in guiding the institution’s growth after his death in 1877. At the time it was formed, the board was not formally affiliated with the Church, nor was the new school.

This changed in 1896, when the Church incorporated the Brigham Young Academy. The academy had been struggling financially for several years, and the original board of trustees had made numerous pleas for the Church to incorporate the school and absorb its debts. Unfortunately for the academy, the Church was not in a financial position to do so for a number of years. In July 1896, the Church agreed to the board’s proposal that the academy be incorporated. The articles of incorporation explained the school’s financial straits and indicated that the First Presidency of the Church was willing to assume responsibility for the school. The articles also established a new board of trustees. The new board was composed of twelve individuals who would be appointed by the First Presidency of the Church, and the articles stipulated that “at least three of the twelve directors must be descendants of Brigham Young.”<sup>42</sup> Board members continued to be drawn largely from Utah County. This change strengthened the ties binding the school to the Church and laid the groundwork for even greater changes down the road.

The Church moved to strengthen the ties between itself and the university in 1939, when the board of trustees was reorganized yet again. Church leadership had begun exploring the possibility of eliminating

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41. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 1:65.

42. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 1:245.

local boards of education and consolidating them into the General Board of Education in 1938. By late 1938, the decision had been made to proceed. There were two major purposes for this action: to reduce the number of boards that Church leaders were participating on and to ensure that the institutions were complying with the vision that Church leaders had for them.<sup>43</sup>

Franklin L. West, Church commissioner of education, wrote to President Franklin S. Harris to let him know that “the First Presidency have now sent out letters to the Ricks College [later BYU–Idaho] and L.D.S. Business College boards of trustees relieving them of their



Franklin L. West served as Church commissioner of education from 1936 to 1953. Courtesy of Perry Special Collections, UA 947.

duties and making the General Church Board operative at those institutions. You remember Brother [Stephen L] Richards recommended, and I believe the Board approved as the logical procedure, that the B.Y.U. Board meet and officially disband, thereby closing their books.”<sup>44</sup> The dismantling of the existing board allowed the First Presidency to appoint a new board of trustees.

Formal organization of the new board took place on February 2, 1939. The new board included “all three members of the First Presidency and seven members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles,”<sup>45</sup> placing the leadership of the Church in firm control of the destiny of Brigham Young University. Church leadership would provide firm guidance and direction to the institution and work to ensure that the institution met its charge to be spiritually strengthening as well as academically

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43. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:367–68.

44. Franklin L. West to Franklin S. Harris, December 13, 1938, box 1, folder 7, Franklin L. West papers, UA 536, Perry Special Collections (hereafter cited as West papers).

45. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:363.

enlightening. This important step occurred at the same time that the majority of American universities were deliberately breaking the ties that bound them to their faith-based origins. This move also reduced the control that the university president had over the direction of Brigham Young University, which influenced Franklin S. Harris's decision to step down as president.

### University Leadership

In late 1944, President Harris informed the university's faculty that he had accepted an offer to be president of the Utah State Agricultural College,<sup>46</sup> effective July 1, 1945. Harris's departure gave the board of trustees an opportunity to further strengthen the relationship between Brigham Young University and the Church. The board asked Commissioner West to put together a list of individuals to be considered for the presidency of BYU. West compiled a list of prominent Latter-day Saint academics—all of whom held doctoral degrees and had college teaching experience. Among these individuals were George Albert Smith Jr., G. ElRoy Nelson, A. C. Lambert, A. Ray Olpin,<sup>47</sup> Henry Eyring, and Harold Glen Clark.<sup>48</sup>

While educational background was important, the board of trustees was most interested in the candidates' attitudes toward the Church. West went out of his way to gather this information for the board of trustees, writing letters to close associates of the candidates and their local Church leaders. Each letter included a variation of the question that West asked President Edward E. Drury Jr. about G. ElRoy Nelson. West wrote, "Do you know this brother, and what can you tell me concerning his attitude and loyalty to the Church, his faith in its doctrines, and his disposition to work in and affiliate with the same?"<sup>49</sup> West was confident that he had put together a quality pool of candidates who could strengthen the university spiritually and continue to build it academically. He was surprised when the board decided to appoint Howard S. McDonald—someone who had not been on his list—as the university's fifth president.

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46. The Utah State Agricultural College became Utah State University in 1957.

47. Olpin would go on to become president of the University of Utah.

48. "Candidates for B.Y.U. Pres. Correspondence, 1944–1945," box 1, folder 9, West papers.

49. Franklin L. West to Edwin E. Drury Jr., December 22, 1944, box 1, folder 9, West papers.



Howard S. McDonald served as president of Brigham Young University from 1945 to 1949. Courtesy of Perry Special Collections, UA P 2.

West was not the only person surprised by McDonald's appointment. McDonald himself wrote in September that "the appointment to this position during the spring term came as a great surprise."<sup>50</sup> McDonald was a graduate of the Utah State Agricultural College and had later attended the University of California, Berkeley. He began his professional career in California, working for the Unified School District in San Francisco for a number of years. In 1944, he returned to Utah to be the superintendent of the Salt Lake City School District. He had been in this position less than a year when he was summoned to a meeting with President J. Reuben Clark Jr. At the meet-

ing, President Clark informed McDonald that "the First Presidency was looking for a man to take the Presidency of Brigham Young University. . . . He asked me to accept the position."<sup>51</sup> McDonald asked for a week to think over the opportunity. He accepted the position on March 12, 1945.

McDonald was selected as president of the university because the board of trustees believed that his background as a stake president "could bring a strong religious emphasis to the school."<sup>52</sup> They also believed that McDonald would be more willing to accept guidance from the board than his predecessors had been. McDonald accepted this responsibility and worked diligently to augment the university's spirituality.

Like his predecessors, McDonald felt that academics were important to the university, and he worked to provide students with an excellent

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50. Howard S. McDonald to Edgar M. Kahn, September 13, 1945, box 2, folder 4, President records.

51. Howard S. McDonald, *Brief Autobiography* (Los Alamitos, Calif.: Howard S. McDonald, 1969), 57.

52. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:425–26.

education. He wrote to members of the Salt Lake City School District that “my new position as President of Brigham Young University will not take me very far from Salt Lake City and my great ambition will be to train competent teachers for Salt Lake City and other school districts of the state.”<sup>53</sup> McDonald also immediately began to work with the board of trustees to develop a building program that would allow the university to accommodate the expected influx of students resulting from the passage of the GI Bill in 1944. On September 12, the board authorized President McDonald to “prepare plans for the growth of the Campus.”<sup>54</sup> However, the board was still concerned about the percentage of Church resources being dedicated to the university, and after approving the construction of a science building, they voted in 1947 to “proceed with the construction of the Science Building, doing only the minimum amount of work that would make possible occupancy of the building.”<sup>55</sup>

While McDonald’s appointment signaled the Church’s commitment to the university’s spiritual emphasis, Church leaders also remained committed to building a strong academic program at the university. They were determined to have an institution that integrated the sacred and the secular in meaningful ways.

### **Culture and Ethos**

McDonald took a number of steps to strengthen the university’s ethos. Understanding the university’s unique mission, he instituted moral worthiness interviews for potential students, proposed that ecclesiastical units of the Church be established on campus, and strongly encouraged students and faculty to attend university devotionals. His actions were a direct response to the vision of the board of trustees.

Most significantly, McDonald implemented procedures to better ensure that the faculty who taught at the university firmly believed in its mission. McDonald knew that Church leaders wanted faculty who could “be trusted to instill faith in the hearts of students and colleagues,” so he began asking those leaders to interview prospective faculty and to report back on their worthiness. Elder John A. Widtsoe met with

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53. Howard S. McDonald to fellow workers, June 2, 1945, box 1, folder 1, President records.

54. Brigham Young University Board of Trustees meeting minutes, September 12, 1945, box 1, folder 5, President records.

55. Executive Committee of the Brigham Young University Board of Trustees meeting minutes, May 2, 1947, box 1, folder 6, President records.

prospective faculty member Hugh B. Brown<sup>56</sup> and said that “he is a good latter-day saint, who can be trusted.”<sup>57</sup> George Albert Smith, then president of the Church, met with Robert E. Brailsford and reported that “he appears to be a man who understands what we need in our University. I was impressed with him to the extent that he answered my questions regarding what his feelings were about teaching under the influence of the spirit of the Lord. . . . The spirit he manifested while talking with him lead me to believe that he may be the kind of a man that you could employ at the B.Y.U.”<sup>58</sup> Albert E. Bowen, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, interviewed Brigham Madsen and reported that “my interview with him was very satisfactory and so far as his eligibility for a position on your faculty is concerned, with his faith and devotion to the Church and acceptance of its teachings, I find no criticism to offer. He ought to make you a good addition to the faculty.”<sup>59</sup>

The practice of having General Authorities interview prospective faculty had become so routinized toward the latter end of McDonald’s administration that he developed a form letter to introduce prospective faculty to the General Authorities who would interview them. The letter was addressed “Dear Brother,” and a typical example read, “This is to introduce you to Mr. Robert J. Kest, whom I am considering for a position in the Speech Department at Brigham Young University. Would you please have an interview with him in regard to his testimony of the Gospel and report to me in writing how you consider him for a position here at the university?”<sup>60</sup> McDonald understood that faculty played an important part in maintaining the spiritual environment that the board of trustees wanted at the university, and he believed that worthiness interviews were important in helping him identify individuals who would spiritually and academically strengthen the campus.

McDonald further recognized that the students themselves played an important role in maintaining the spiritual environment of the

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56. Hugh B. Brown was serving as president of the British Mission when interviewed. He would become a member of the Church’s First Presidency in 1961.

57. John A. Widtsoe to Howard S. McDonald, April 22, 1946, box 3, folder 7, President records.

58. George Albert Smith to Howard S. McDonald, September 10, 1947, box 10, folder 6, President records.

59. Albert E. Bowen to Howard S. McDonald, April 20, 1948, box 11, folder 6, President records.

60. Howard S. McDonald to “Dear Brother,” May 26, 1948, box 14, folder 4, President records.

campus. He reported to Bishop Floyd J. Griffiths that “we have not made any specifications for scholarships for the coming year, only that those selected are worthy students and good Latter-Day Saints who will profit by a college education.”<sup>61</sup> McDonald tried a number of different strategies to ensure that students were appropriately contributing to this environment. He reported to prospective student Bruce B. Peterson that “not only do we maintain that smoking and drinking should not be maintained on the campus, but all students who come to Brigham Young University should live all the ideals of the Church. In fact, all new students must present a recommend from their bishop before they come to this Institution.”<sup>62</sup>

By September 1946, McDonald had developed a character recommendation that was required for every student applicant wishing to attend the university. He wrote Church Education Commissioner West explaining the need for the character recommendation, stating that “we want people to know that this is a Church Institution, and that the young people here have the highest of ideals. We do not want people here who have no desire to conform to the standards of the Church.”<sup>63</sup> McDonald also wrote to the Presiding Bishopric asking, “When the meeting of the Bishops is held at the Quarterly Conference, if it is possible I should appreciate having three or four minutes to explain this character recommendation. I feel that Bishops and Stake Presidents of the Church should feel a great responsibility in sending students to Brigham Young University. This is a Church Institution, established for the benefit of the members of the Church. We only want students here who are willing to live according to the standards of the Church.”<sup>64</sup>

The spiritual qualifications of students were not the only thing McDonald was interested in. He also wanted students who were academically qualified since faculty and students at the university were to pursue academic excellence. Wesley P. Lloyd, dean of students, expressed this best in a letter to Bishop Louis H. Osterich. He wrote, “We are especially interested in all young men of the Church who are making

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61. Howard S. McDonald to Floyd J. Griffiths, February 25, 1946, box 4, folder 6, President records.

62. Howard S. McDonald to Bruce B. Peterson, July 5, 1946, box 5, folder 1, President records.

63. Howard S. McDonald to Franklin L. West, September 6, 1946, box 6, folder 2, President records.

64. Howard S. McDonald to the Presiding Bishopric, September 6, 1946, box 6, folder 1, President records.



The students at Brigham Young University play an important role in campus culture. Each year a “Welcome Back” assembly, pictured here, was held on campus. Courtesy of Perry Special Collections, UA P 2.

outstanding records in their high school and junior college work. We feel that Brigham Young University is an excellent place for them, and that they in turn can do much for the University and eventually for the Church.”<sup>65</sup> Lloyd reiterated this point in another letter. He wrote that “we are glad to learn that Miss Jean Wakefield, a junior in your high school is interested in attending B.Y.U. She will find here an excellent School of Commerce and a wholesome campus life. We are glad to have students with high standards and good academic training attend the university.”<sup>66</sup> Students interested in growing spiritually and academically were exactly the kind of students that President McDonald and Church leaders wanted at the university.

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65. Wesley P. Lloyd to Louis H. Osterich, March 30, 1948, box 16, folder 1, President records.

66. Wesley P. Lloyd to Donna Facer, April 13, 1948, box 15, folder 3, President records.



In the late 1940s, BYU students were organized into Church branches. For example, the Wymount Branch, pictured here, played an important role in the lives of married students. Courtesy of Perry Special Collections, UA P 2.

The establishment of ecclesiastical units, referred to as wards or branches, on campus in the late 1940s was one of McDonald's most significant contributions to the university's culture. In 1947, President McDonald and faculty member Golden Woolf recommended to Church leaders that "regular organized wards should be established on the campus of Brigham Young University."<sup>67</sup> McDonald and Woolf wanted to provide students, especially military veterans, with opportunities to learn Church governance and to deepen their spirituality. They also hoped to strengthen the relationship between the Church and the university by creating formal organizational ties.

Church leaders supported the concept and decided that organizing branches on campus made more sense than organizing a ward. McDonald recollected that Church leaders chose to establish branches because they provided students with leadership experience that would allow them to serve in the Church after they graduated. McDonald felt

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67. McDonald, *Brief Autobiography*, 96.

that there was “something significant about that. . . . ‘We’ll give them a branch and have the Elders be Branch Presidents and counselors and so forth.’”<sup>68</sup> The first branch on campus was organized in June and a second branch was organized in August 1947.<sup>69</sup> McDonald was convinced that the experiment was a success. In an oral history, he remarked that “more students were developing a religious attitude by having the branch. . . . Both branches, the unmarried students and also the married students and the little kiddies were being taught so it had a great influence.”<sup>70</sup>

In addition to giving students leadership opportunities, the ecclesiastical units on campus accomplished a number of different things, including solidifying students’ connections to the Church and building their spirituality. The branches also had the potential to influence the faith of the faculty since they often interacted with students and participated in their Church activities. This connection and its importance were made explicit very early on when Golden Woolf was called to serve as president of the Provo East Stake, home to the newly created student branches.<sup>71</sup> Student participation in wards and stakes on campus has become one of the hallmarks of the Brigham Young University experience. Classrooms used for teaching secular subjects become places of worship on Sundays, which helps to infuse the campus with a connection between the sacred and secular.

Sunday worship was not the only sacralizing element of campus culture. University devotionals date back to the founding of the institution. Short, daily devotionals were inaugurated by Karl G. Maeser and continued by Benjamin Cluff Jr. and George H. Brimhall. Under Franklin S. Harris, devotionals went from being held daily to twice a week. Church leaders recognized the value of the devotionals and encouraged Howard McDonald to continue holding them, which he did. University leaders and faculty typically delivered the devotional addresses. ElRay L. Christiansen, president of the Logan Utah Temple, wrote that “it is a blessing that students have the opportunity to come together in devotional exercises as they do. To sing the songs of Zion, listen to something that

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68. Howard S. McDonald, Kiefer Sauls, Leland Perry, and Karl Miller, interview by James Clark, August 7–8, 1972, Provo, Utah, MSS OH 1926, Perry Special Collections.

69. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:471–72.

70. Howard S. McDonald, interview by David B. Rimington, June 13, 1979, Provo, Utah, MSS OH 1926, Perry Special Collections.

71. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:472.

is elevating and stimulating to them and to meet in common fellowship in a religious atmosphere.”<sup>72</sup>

In fact, Church leaders felt so strongly about the devotionals that they often gave the addresses themselves. President McDonald was also very interested in having Church leaders participate in the devotionals. In 1946, he wrote to the First Presidency saying, “I am most anxious that the students of Brigham Young University know the Presidency of the Church and the General Authorities. I would like them to feel your spirit and to know of your great testimony.”<sup>73</sup> The First Presidency agreed with McDonald and spoke often to the student body and faculty. Christen Jensen, a faculty member who was assigned to make arrangements for the devotionals, wrote to Commissioner West in 1938 inviting him to speak at one of the devotionals. In his letter, he detailed the purpose of the devotionals and mentioned some of the Church leaders who had participated. He wrote, “During the present year we are devoting these programs to a study of the leaders of our church. The addresses are both biographical and spiritual. We think it very desirable that our students should be given a knowledge of our church leaders by our General Authorities. Up to the present time President Grant, President Clark, and Elder Albert E. Bowen, and Bishop LeGrande Richards have appeared on our programs. Tomorrow Elder Melvin J. Ballard will be our speaker.”<sup>74</sup>

Today devotionals continue to be an important part of the campus culture at Brigham Young University. Church leaders, university leaders, and faculty have the opportunity to share their religious beliefs with students and to demonstrate what it means to be successful disciple-scholars.

Religion classes were another important part of campus culture that continue today.<sup>75</sup> While faculty are expected to excel in their chosen disciplines and to bring gospel insights into the teaching of these

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72. ElRay L. Christiansen to Howard S. McDonald, December 6, 1948, box 12, folder 5, President records.

73. Howard S. McDonald to the First Presidency, May 3, 1946, box 3, folder 5, President records.

74. Christen Jensen to Franklin L. West, December 13, 1938, box 1, folder 7, West papers, UA 536, Perry Special Collections.

75. For more information on the development of religious education on the Brigham Young University campus, see Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:286–295.

secular subjects, Church leaders also consider it important that students learn the gospel of Jesus Christ, so classes dedicated exclusively to religious topics are a core part of the university's curriculum. These classes have a long history that traces back to the early days of Brigham Young Academy.<sup>76</sup> University leadership and faculty were well aware that "parents send their young people here for a lot more than academic training. There is a fine spirit here which is desirable for any young person whether he is academically inclined or not. There is a Religious Education curriculum from which these young people can profit and most parents want their children to have the benefits of it."<sup>77</sup> Today, Church leadership views Brigham Young University primarily as an institution at which Latter-day Saint students can receive "religious instruction in LDS doctrine while receiving postsecondary education."<sup>78</sup> McDonald used religion classes as a selling point to students considering studying at Brigham Young University. He told one prospective student that "here you will find an excellent offering in subjects related to your major field of interest and an opportunity to study courses in religion."<sup>79</sup> The dean of students told another prospective student that "all students attending the University are expected to study courses in religion each quarter."<sup>80</sup> University leaders wanted the unique nature of BYU clear to prospective students.

Branches, devotionals, and required religion courses formed the backbone of McDonald's administrative efforts to create a campus ethos that valued the sacred and secular, but other elements of campus culture were also important. Students actively participated in social activities, and returning military veterans established an honor code to enforce

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76. For more information on the role of theology courses in the early academy, see Richards, *Called to Teach*, 374–78.

77. Wilford D. Lee to Howard S. McDonald, January 8, 1948, box 11, folder 4, President records.

78. Rimington, "Historical Appraisal," 263.

79. Howard S. McDonald to Robert G. Bennion, July 28, 1948, box 12, folder 4, President records.

80. Wesley P. Lloyd to Miss Lola Armstrong, March 6, 1948, box 15, folder 1, President records. Institutes of religion had been established in association with colleges and universities beginning in 1926, and there were only ten in operation at the time that McDonald became president of Brigham Young University. *By Study and Also by Faith: One Hundred Years of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015), 603.

academic honesty.<sup>81</sup> President McDonald highlighted these parts of campus culture to a prospective student. He wrote that “our assemblies, our religious services, and our rich offering of various students’ organizations and activities will supplement your academic life in a way that will amply repay you for the genuine efforts which you will focus on your education.”<sup>82</sup>

Through the creation of this campus culture, or ethos, Howard S. McDonald was able to successfully attract faculty and students who were willing to uphold and defend the Church’s vision for the university. Their willingness to abide by Church standards and to work to illuminate the secular through the sacred strengthened the university’s connection with the Church. The elements of campus culture that coalesced under President McDonald continue to be present on campus today.

While McDonald successfully accomplished many of the aims outlined by the board of trustees, he came into conflict with the board in other areas, including finances and decision-making. McDonald wanted to facilitate the growth of the campus in order to accommodate more students and was continually pushing the board to increase funding for the university. The board of trustees was extremely concerned about the state of the Church’s finances and so was not willing to accede to his requests. McDonald and the board also clashed on finding the appropriate balance between the sacred and the secular at the university and who should determine what that balance was.<sup>83</sup> McDonald had had complete control to make and implement decisions with the Salt Lake City School District and found it difficult to adjust to a situation in

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81. Initially established by students, including military veterans, in 1947 to focus on academic integrity, the honor code grew to include gospel standards by 1949. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:462, 488. “The University Standards Office was created in 1960 to help administer the University’s Honor Code along with the preexisting University Standards Committee and the student-run Honor Council.” “Brigham Young University. University Standards Office,” Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, accessed April 2, 2018, <https://byuorg.lib.byu.edu/index.php/>.

82. Howard S. McDonald to Robert G. Bennion, July 28, 1948, box 12, folder 4, President records.

83. For example, McDonald and the board clashed over a proposed doctoral degree in religion. The idea was proposed by Elder John A. Widtsoe and supported by the board of trustees. McDonald believed that the faculty should have a say in the establishment of the degree and slowed the process down so this could happen. See Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:499–55.

which he needed to consult frequently with a board before taking action. These conflicts were a major part of why McDonald chose to leave the university in 1949.<sup>84</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints value education—both academic and spiritual—and the important role that it plays in shaping young people. This is seen in the steps that leaders took in the 1930s and 1940s to tighten the ties that bind Brigham Young University to the Church. These actions were aimed at helping the Church establish an institution that mixed what they saw as the best elements of the modern secularized university and of faith-based institutions and still impact the university and its relationship with the Church today. These actions mirror those taken at other universities struggling to maintain a balance between the sacred and the secular, as elucidated in Robert Benne’s framework. Church leaders clearly articulated their vision for the university and worked with university leaders to create an appropriate mission to guide the university’s actions. They placed the highest Church leaders on the university’s board of trustees to ensure the board would represent their vision for the university. They chose a university president who valued their vision and charged him with making the university both spiritually strengthening and academically sound. They encouraged President McDonald in his efforts to ensure that students and faculty who came to Brigham Young University had strong belief in the teachings of the Church and a willingness to abide by Church standards. They also encouraged him to develop a strong campus culture that emphasized the integration of the sacred and the secular. This campus culture featured Church branches, devotionals, required religion classes, and wholesome recreational activities. These actions allowed the university to remain tightly connected to the Church at a time when its academic peers were divesting themselves of any connection to their founding religious traditions.

The 1930s and 1940s were a pivotal era in the history of Brigham Young University. The actions taken by Church leadership and by President McDonald built on the foundation laid by previous university

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84. For more information, see Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:479–82; and Bergera and Priddis, *Brigham Young University*, 19–22.

presidents Karl G. Maeser, Benjamin Cluff Jr., George H. Brimhall, and Franklin S. Harris, who each grappled with how to appropriately balance the sacred and the secular. Leveraging lessons learned and actions taken, President McDonald and the board of trustees worked diligently to create a lasting campus culture that would enable the university to successfully find a middle ground between secularized institutions of higher education and faith-based institutions focusing on spirituality. Their decisions and actions laid the groundwork for the university's dynamic growth in the 1950s and 1960s under Ernest L. Wilkinson.<sup>85</sup> The culture they established has continued to influence the course of the university as McDonald's successors have worked diligently to ensure that the campus culture that he helped create remains in place.

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85. For more information on the growth of the university in the 1950s and 1960s, see Wilkinson, *First One Hundred Years*, 2:601–723 and volume 3.