



# 150 Years of Humanities at BYU

by Christopher Oscarson, Dean

For Latter-day Saints, education is not a means to an end but is itself a moral imperative. The early saints of this dispensation were commanded to “become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people” (D&C 90:15). Their obedience to this charge while struggling for survival is one of the unsung accomplishments of frontier history.

In 1841, just two years after the saints began draining swamps on the banks of the Mississippi, the Department of English Literature officially opened as part of the University of the City of Nauvoo. Similarly, just months after the first saints arrived in the Salt Lake Valley, Mary Jane Dilworth opened the first school in the Old Fort. These examples set the pattern in which “every new settlement, as soon as it had planted crops, opened a school—in the open air, in tents, in log house, in adobes.”<sup>1</sup> In the face of famine, crickets, persecution, and poverty, education was understood as a necessity, not a luxury.

Brigham Young University, now celebrating its 150th anniversary, is heir to this legacy. Our ambition to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118) is as applicable and necessary today as it was when the school was founded, and from the beginning, the humanities were at the core of the institution and its mission. Brigham Young said: “Education is the power to think clearly, the power to act well in the world’s work, and the power to appreciate life.”<sup>2</sup>

When approached with an eye toward the glory of God, education has a sanctifying and empowering effect that builds faith and

transforms our character to be more like Christ, who is the source of all truth. For example, reading develops charity and a love for others; the study of languages and cultures fosters meekness, courage, and curiosity to see the world differently; art cultivates gratitude, creativity, and reverence in the face of beauty and terror; and philosophy trains the mind in carefulness, attentiveness, and virtue.

## An education in languages, literature, arts, and philosophy can be a powerful catalyst for spiritual metamorphosis.

The material circumstances of Brigham Young University have improved considerably since the pioneer era, but new challenges have also emerged. Society’s view of the value of education has changed markedly along with a commitment to developing character and virtue. Given this shift, it is not surprising that humanities programs around the country face cuts as many weigh the worth of an education based primarily on an immediate financial return on investment. Being prepared for a career is of great importance (and there is ample evidence from employees and employers of the professional value of the humanities), but even more important is how an education can transform the soul to perceive truth, beauty, and love and how it prepares us for a life of meaningful discipleship and service.

President Kimball warned that BYU needed to “continue to resist false fashions in education, staying with those basic principles that have proved right and have guided

good men and women and good universities over the centuries.”<sup>3</sup> The humanities have always been at the core of a moral education because they invite us to grapple directly with the key question of who we are, of our relationship to God, and of our relationship with others. While many higher education institutions struggle with a lost sense of purpose and meaning, BYU—and certainly the College of Humanities—has redoubled its commitment to its core mission to “assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life” and to help them answer these key questions.

Institutions following false fashions have forgotten that an education in languages, literature, arts, and philosophy can be a powerful catalyst for spiritual metamorphosis, not ancillary to it. We take it as our responsibility to help our students reflect on how their education is changing them. We build classes not only around “content matter” but also always with an eye to the educational experience’s transformative capacity. This is how we strive to live up to President Kimball’s admonition to be intentional in using our education to send light into the world and “to do what the world cannot do in its own frame of reference.”<sup>4</sup>

1. Bolton, Herbert Eugene. “The Mormons in the Opening of the Great West,” *Deseret News*, November 14, 1925.

2. Brigham Young, quoted by George H. Brimhall in “The Brigham Young University,” *Improvement Era*, vol. 23, no. 9 (July 1920), p. 831.

3. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” (BYU Speeches, 1975).

4. *Ibid.*