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Beck A. Taylor, president of Whitworth University

I'm just passing through. Between my appointment as Whitworth University's 18th president and when I officially took office on July 1, campus historian Dale Soden published an updated volume of Whitworth’s remarkable 120-year history. Besides being an outstanding training manual for any new president, the book captures beautifully the efforts of faithful leaders over the years to sustain and strengthen Whitworth's mission to provide students an education of mind and heart. Those of us who are fortunate enough to lead enduring institutions such as universities need to remember that we are entrusted with that responsibility for only a mere fraction of the institution’s history.

That important realization is central to my leadership philosophy. As a leader, although I have an opportunity to have a significant impact on an institution’s success, there will come a day when I will pass the baton to another individual who will take the work I've done and make it better. That respect for the organization, rather than for the individual, should be paramount when we make important decisions regarding current programs or operations and when we're planning for the future.

Facts are good; stories are better. As I've tried to get my head around Whitworth University, I’ve had countless meetings with students, staff and faculty, with alumni, donors and friends and with individuals and groups in the Spokane community. One faculty member stopped me on campus not long ago and made the comment that I must be overwhelmed with all of the facts I’m learning in these meetings. While it’s true that I’m getting a lot of facts, and facts are important as I work with colleagues to chart a course for the next chapter in Whitworth’s history, the stories I’m hearing are much more important in terms of understanding this university’s distinctive culture and mission.

I’ve heard stories about faculty members hosting students in their homes for dinner, reflecting Whitworth’s belief that the best learning happens in the context of relationship. I heard a story of a security officer providing directions to the family of a new student, then offering his personal cell number for them to use if they had additional questions, reflecting Whitworth’s commitment to unmatched student service. And I even became part of a Whitworth story during freshman orientation when I was grabbed by the mother of a student to help her move some furniture in order to locate an electrical outlet. When the woman blushed as she realized that she had enlisted the university president for help, I assured her that Whitworth couldn’t proclaim a commitment to servant leadership if the president wasn’t willing to break a sweat on move-in day.

Strive for excellence. Whoever first uttered the words “Don’t sweat the details” probably never ran a successful organization. The details always matter. In a world in which manufacturers have to be reminded that quality counts and service companies forget that their survival depends on customer satisfaction, perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised that some leaders see excellence as a scarce commodity to which they can’t commit their entire organizations.

In my business, excellence is the standard students bring to every facet of the university. Whitworth has invested more than $85 million in campus improvements in the past two decades so that students' first impression of the university reflects the quality of our mission. Another front door to the university is Pirate Athletics, which won nine out of a possible 18 conference championships last year and has won the award for the best overall athletics program in our conference three years in a row and four out of the last six years. That dominance happens even as we compete in the NCAA Div. III, which puts academics first. With nearly 6,500 enrollment applications this year for about 680 spots in our freshman class, our student-athletes make it through a highly selective admissions process just to get to Whitworth. Once here, they excel in the classroom as well as on the field of play. The lowest team GPA at Whitworth is 3.0. Some schools boast a lousy athletics program as a sign of their commitment to academics. At Whitworth, we strive for excellence in all we do. We believe our mission calls us to that commitment.

Embrace paradox. There seems to be a growing interest in and exploration of paradox - a set of claims that appears to contain an inherent contradiction. One obvious example is the rapid growth of research and academic programs focused on chaos theory. We do have one professor at Whitworth who is working in this field, but our entire university embraces what we sometimes call the "grand paradox." Whitworth is committed to intellectual curiosity and Christian conviction as complementary rather than competing values. That is, we explore the broadest range of voices, perspectives and ideas - even ideas that challenge our most closely held beliefs - with the confidence they can be sharpening stones rather than stumbling blocks to faith.

This "grand paradox" rests on an even grander paradox at the heart of the Christian faith - that a great and majestic God would send his son into the world as a helpless baby, fully human and fully divine, to live a perfect and blameless life and then sacrifice himself to save us from judgment for our sins while we were yet sinners. That is the truth of the gospel. And it is a truth that is not threatened by tough questions and fierce scrutiny. It is truth that doesn't require our efforts to guard and protect it; we usually obscure the truth when we try. It is the truth, as with the truth of a poem or a Pythagorean equation, that we are called to explore with the fullness of our minds and our hearts. That is what I know.
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