

A Road Less Traveled

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By Michael Benson

My path to a university presidency has been unorthodox. Nonetheless, my course has led to some unique perspectives that I hope might prove useful as those committed to a career in higher education try to navigate their own way through the somewhat byzantine maze that is the administrative track.

My initial steps on this road began when I made my first visit to the Middle East, in January 1989. Not unlike Thomas Friedman's recollection in his award-winning book, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, my introduction to the Old City of Jerusalem was as if I had found a place more familiar and comfortable than my own hometown. When I abandoned my desires to pursue a career in law in favor of Middle Eastern studies, my parents were as perplexed as anyone. They regularly inquired of me, the last of their six children (some of whom had more "practical" graduate degrees and one of whom was a Pulitzer Prize winner), "What kind of job can you ever get with that degree?"

Oblivious to the incessant repetition of this query, I forged ahead and completed a D.Phil. in modern Middle Eastern history at St. Antony's College, Oxford. My time in England proved a formative and seminal time in my life. Not only was I exposed to world-renowned faculty and lecturers, I was fortunate to associate with bright and capable classmates who have achieved remarkable things in their respective lives and careers. As I completed the Latin graduation ceremony and exited the Sheldonian Theatre in June of 1995, a newly-minted Oxford doctor with the unique Harry Potter-esque Oxford robes to prove it, I believed the world was at my feet.

Or so I thought. Not only were teaching jobs nearly impossible to come by, but I found my practical skills were less than compelling in the private sector as job search after search rendered nothing. During high school, I had worked as a janitor and basic maintenance man in a large exercise facility, so I had some experience in painting and repair and went to work roofing houses a few weeks after my Oxford graduation. During one particular conversation, I remember asking a co-worker what his father did for employment. He said he worked in development in the Health Sciences Center at the University of Utah; I wasn't exactly sure what that meant but decided to find out. This contact led me to a meeting with the gentleman charged with running the advancement activities for the entire University:

J. Michael Mattsson.

To this day, I thank Mike for his adherence to a hiring principle he had learned years before from J. Willard Marriott: "Hire Friendly, Train Technical." I had some sales experience in life and Mike was convinced this training made me somehow qualified to begin my campus quest as a major gifts officer as the "U" embarked on its most ambitious capital campaign in history: \$750 million. Mike took a huge leap of faith in hiring me, and I owe my career in higher education to his belief that I should be given a shot.

With compassionate co-workers who tutored me and helped me learn the lexicon and practice of sophisticated fund raising, we realized some successes and my reputation caught the attention of Bernie Machen, then president of the University of Utah and now president of the University of Florida. Bernie took another chance on me by hiring me as his special

assistant, which, to his mind and definition, meant serving as his cultural interpreter: helping a southern Baptist navigate his way through the unique and somewhat perplexing political and religious landscape of Utah.

Bernie proved a wonderful mentor and friend and cut me plenty of slack to make my own decisions and commit my own mistakes. I learned a great deal under his tutelage and also recognized that I had the capacity to do what he did; that is, to be a chief executive. So when a letter arrived a year after I went to work for Bernie informing me that I had been nominated to be president of Snow College, I told him of the news and he encouraged me to go for it.

The Utah State System of Higher Education includes nine campuses, and is run by a commissioner and a 16-member governor-appointed Board of Regents. The latter's prescribed duties include selecting presidents, and I realized my task was to convince this body that although I had never managed a single soul in my entire career, I was set to take on a century-old campus with over 300 full-time employees and 2,500 students. From an applicant pool of 85, I made the final cut and somehow got the job at age 36 – the youngest college or university president in the history of higher education in Utah.

I soon learned to not take myself too seriously when, on my first day, I decided to pass out Krispy Kreme donuts and make my way around campus to meet students. The initial group of students I encountered was mingling just outside my office in the administration building. I approached them and said, "Hi, I'm Mike Benson, the new president." A puzzled student looked back at me and said incredulously, "President of what?" This experience was followed by my first faculty gathering the same week during which a senior full professor confessed: "I got tenure here at Snow the year you were born."

My five years at Snow College were some of the best in my professional career. I am convinced I made as many mistakes as good decisions, but we were able to push the institution forward and helped raise more money during that tenure than in the previous 115 years of the college's history combined. Some of our successes caught the eye of others and led to my being nominated to be President of Southern Utah University – originally founded by intrepid pioneers in 1897 as the normal branch of the University of Utah.

Three years into our time at Southern Utah, I am convinced I have one of the best jobs in all of America. To be sure, we face challenges like everyone else in these difficult times but we also choose to focus on the positive steps forward we have made with a belief that, as Nicholas Murray Butler put it, "Optimism is essential to achievement and it is also the foundation of courage and true progress." My combined eight years as president within the Utah system make me the senior chief executive of any higher education campus.

From this unorthodox, long and winding road, as noted at the outset, I have taken away some valuable life and career lessons:

First, never take yourself so seriously that opportunities in higher education – whether they're in development or student affairs or finance and facilities – are passed over for "more traditional" paths in academic affairs or within the regular faculty track. There are all sorts of "points of entry" along a broad spectrum of higher education, and to forgo a chance that may not be ideal in hopes that the "perfect" job is just around the corner may prove costly in terms of time, energy, and opportunities wasted. If some chance presents itself and it helps get your foot in the proverbial door, take it! Further, given the current job climate in academe, positions within administration may be easier to come by than tenure-track teaching posts in certain disciplines. If you really want to work within higher education, there are all sorts of forays into the field besides being in the classroom full-time. Yes, teaching within my area is still the highlight of the day on many occasions but the life of an administrator can be just as rewarding and challenging.

Second, try your best to find a mentor who is willing to help and tutor you. In turn, I promise you will have the opportunity to provide the same service to another. "Pay it forward" as you meet young people looking for guidance and direction in their own pursuits. I would say that nothing is more rewarding, nor do I take more satisfaction, than taking the chance to help someone's trajectory after being helped myself along a similar path.

Third, keep your credentials current. Stay conversant with trends, events, and advancements within your discipline and try to continue to teach. Research and publish within your area. I was fortunate to have my dissertation released in 1997 by Praeger under the imprint *Harry S. Truman and the Founding*

of Israel, which, in turn, led to consulting contracts with the Truman Library in Missouri and the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles while I was working as a fund raiser full time. Also, try and add to your bona fides as time and resources will allow. I am currently pursuing a master's degree in nonprofit administration at the Mendoza College of Business at the University of Notre Dame, which requires two partial summers in residence in South Bend. It is an extremely rigorous course and is forcing me to get out of my comfort zone by taking all those courses I've avoided my entire life: statistics, accounting, finance, and micro economics. The skill set I am trying to develop is helping me better manage daily the multi-million dollar enterprise Southern Utah University represents.

Fourth, keep your powder dry and your circle of contacts expanding. One never knows what conversation will lead you down which path and to whom. Even coincidental encounters can have profound and meaningful consequences. I learned years ago from a business professor the importance of writing personal notes and of saying "thank you" to those who show you kindness and consideration. In a day and age obsessed with instant messaging and email, a hand-written note on personal cardstock makes a powerful impression.

Finally, to borrow the words of Sir Winston Churchill: "Never, never, never give up." Someone asked Abe Lincoln after yet another of his myriad defeats in running for office why he persisted in putting himself up for the abject failure that came with each loss. His response? "I will prepare, and perhaps, someday my chance will come." For those beaten down by the constant rejection and the absence of opportunity, my advice to you – as Pollyanna as it might sound – is to stick with it, to not get too discouraged, and to pursue every single lead and contact that is presented to you. Persistence, determination, and hard work are always rewarded – I can promise you that.

As I reflect back on my own career and my trajectory to my current position, there has certainly been a large degree of serendipity and good fortune – but these have been tempered by myriad disappointments and setbacks. I keep a 3-ring binder on a shelf in my office that contains every rejection letter I've ever received – from graduate schools to potential employers to publishing houses. Every so often I take this binder off my shelf and read through these letters

as constant reminder that every frustration has only steeled me for the opportunity that inevitably followed.

I am under no illusion that my path is typical or that luck and timing have not played a significant role in putting me in positions where I could prove my worth and showcase my abilities. If you are serious about a career in higher education – a field which, I would argue, is as noble, gratifying, and rewarding as anything in our society – I hope you can take away something of value from what I have experienced in my own personal trek. I would not trade the experiences that have come with this path for any other job in any other industry.

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