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Taylor University Master of Arts in Higher Education Program

The History and Foundations of Higher Education in America

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The Presidency of David Gyertson

In the early 2000s, following the presidency of Jay Kessler, David Gyertson took office as President of Taylor University. Considered a “students president” during his time in office, Kessler managed to garner a very respectable reputation during his years of service to the Taylor community in the position. Many were curious what the next course of action would be for Taylor during Gyertson’s presidency. Very quickly, Gyertson’s time as president would prove to be eventful, yet Taylor would remain strong under his God-led leadership. This paper explores Gyertson’s life before Taylor, as well as his experiences during his presidency.

Early Beginnings

Before Gyertson’s time at Taylor University is examined, it is important to look at his life prior. David’s hometown was in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. During his childhood, his alcoholic father left his family when David was 10, while his mother who struggled with mental and physical illness threw him out of the house at age 13. He later dropped out of high school after his guidance counselor said he was “too stupid” to become a good student. Through all of these unfortunate experiences, David felt a sense of calling he never stopped trying to identify as he continued to mature. While there was a lot of pain and hurt that he experienced in his younger years, he knew there was still a lot of goodness to seek out, and a “divine being” who cared about him (Garringer, 2001).

After leaving his home, David was taken in by a local Free Methodist pastor and his family. During a heart-to-heart talk, David was read Psalm 27:10, “For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the Lord will take me in” (English Standard Version, Psalms 27:10). This scripture made David realize that he was a sinner who needed a savior and made him feel free to pursue the goodness he sought in the understanding, love, nature, and purposes of God. After

passing his high school equivalency exams, he attended Lerne Park College of Ontario, where he earned a degree in theology and Bible. Several years later, while preaching at Toronto's Harbor Light Mission, David's father showed up during an altar call. That evening, David's father came to accept Christ. A great sense of joy and peace entered David's heart, and he was able to reconnect with both of his parents.

Despite his former guidance counselor's comments, Gyertson was able to study at several different higher education institutions. He received Bachelors's degrees in Religion, Theology, and Biblical Studies. Later on, he received Master's degrees in fields related to Higher Education and College Student Development. Finally, he earned his Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration & Management at Michigan State University. Before coming to Taylor, Gyertson was president at Regent University for two years, a school that he helped to found. Immediately after his time as president ended, he accepted the presidency at Asbury University for seven years. This knowledge and experience he had obtained over the years would prove to be useful.

Inauguration

David Gyertson accepted the offered role, and the announcement was made on March 13th, 2000 after a nine-month search process. On the same day, he was introduced in chapel to the student body and faculty. Afterward, he was introduced throughout the day in various meetings to different groups on campus, including the President's council, student leaders, and vice presidents. Paul D. Robbins, who was Board Chairman at the time, stated that Gyertson was a highly qualified nominee for his outstanding leadership experience, exemplary personal life, and his embodiment of the distinctive core values of Taylor University. His background in Christian higher education, publishing, and media made him a very desirable candidate for the position. David Gyertson was inaugurated as the 29th president on April 6th, 2001. The

inauguration ceremony took place in Odle Gymnasium. As a part of the ceremony, Jay Kesler shared the stage with Gyertson to show his support for Gyertson to the entire campus. This marked the beginning of what would become a turbulent presidency for both David Gyertson and Taylor's history.

Goals for his Presidency

Throughout his presidency, Gyertson believed in keeping "Taylor Taylor" (Gyertson, 2001). Gyertson had several goals in mind for the school as he began to adjust to Taylor's culture, but he wanted to continue highlighting the mission of Taylor and the many opportunities it provided. He was trying to hear God and follow his direction as to what path to follow during his lifetime. After his time at both Regent University and Asbury University, Gyertson felt like God called him to become a transitional leader. He believed God called him to be in transitional, short-term roles to help institutions make beneficial decisions that will help them in the future. This would guide his decision-making as he handled different tasks at Taylor.

He wanted to help the school become accredited and to gain favorable attention and a reputation to attract students. He also worked to fix a stalled fundraising campaign for the Kesler Student Activity Center. In addition to these aspirations, he restructured faculty in preparation for future leadership to help keep things moving for the school, and set foundations that would allow the school to prosper after his time at Taylor was over. One of these changes involved making Dr. Steve Beatty provost.

Another subject that needed to be addressed was the status of Taylor University's Fort Wayne campus. At the time, this extended campus was bankrupt and costing the school a large amount of money just to keep it open. The decision had to be made to either invest a substantial amount of money into it to keep it open or to finally shut it down. While the final decision was

not made until Gene Habecker's presidency, Gyertson was able to lead the decision-making process towards reaching this conclusion before his time at Taylor was over.

September 11th Attacks

One of the first major historical events to take place during David Gyertson's presidency was the September 11th attacks in New York City. On the day this took place, classes were canceled for the day. Television screens across campus provided live news feeds to students and faculty as the situation continued to escalate and the nation stood still, and Residence Halls held debriefing sessions. That same day, Gyertson led a campus-wide service of prayer and fasting in the chapel auditorium.

Taylor's way of life was impacted by this tragic event. Faculty were encouraged to pray with their students in class and to personally reach out to students affected by the incident, including students who knew people involved in the event as well as Arab students. A few weeks after the event, Taylor sent over 100 students and faculty to New York City to serve those who were still involved with recovery after the attacks took place. A forum was done on campus to answer student questions relating to how students were feeling about their own lives, the repercussions of the attacks, and the future of America as a whole. On September 26th, a special offering was held during a chapel that managed to raise \$8,000 for victims of the New York City attacks.

David Gyertson believed that Taylor University was at its best amid conflict and tragedy, and this proved to be true as the school was united to pray for their world and create a more optimistic future for their community. About a year after 9/11 took place, during a series of President's chapels on the Upland and Fort Wayne campuses, Gyertson shared a passage from the Psalms of Ascent, specifically Psalms 127. He wanted to reaffirm to others of God's power,

and he encouraged the next generation to assess their role in their world so that they could serve their community and open themselves to God's will while being at peace with life. Gyertson also found it important to not only pray for the families of those affected by the attacks but also the families of those responsible for the attacks. He did this to reaffirm that Jesus died for everyone and cares for everyone. He stood alongside students and faculty during these uncertain times for the country and encouraged prayer throughout this period.

Taylor "Riots"

In early December of 2004, an infamous event in Taylor University's history took place. Between Thanksgiving and Christmas every year, there was an expectation for students to perform unpredictable pranks on campus that would not cause much harm and were considered somewhat creative. However, early in the morning of December 4th, a public announcement to the community would provide some students with an opportunity to go beyond these harmless pranks. The area electrical company announced that they would shut down power in the greater Upland community for about four hours to do some upgrades. When this power outage took place, hundreds of students left their rooms.

Within minutes of the power outage, multiple different incidents ended up taking place across campus. There was evidence of public nudity taking place, and reports of male students running through women's halls naked. An unauthorized bonfire took place that required the assistance of the Upland Fire Department, fire alarms were tampered with, and secure buildings on campus were broken into. Campus safety officers had to be involved, but they were mocked by students and there was even damage to a police vehicle during the incident. One of the more notable problems that occurred involved Taylor's nativity scene. Somehow, students were able to

remove statues in the scene that were bolted to the ground and damage them, while also attempting to take down the wooden creche.

The campus-wide incident finally subsided that night around 3:30 a.m., but the damages had been done. Following the so-called “riots” that took place, Taylor’s Student Development team conducted in-depth investigations to find the students responsible for several of the damages and occurrences from the event. While many students did come forward and admit their involvement with these riots, others were eventually caught, and others managed to never get caught. Thankfully, no one was harmed during the incidents. Fines, restitution, probation, and suspension and dismissals were enforced amongst the students that went through the disciplinary process related to the riots. About five or six students were dismissed, and it was estimated that over 100 students faced some form of disciplinary action.

Some major concerns that came out of this incident related to the perception of Taylor University, as well as the reputation of the student body. In a newspaper article regarding the dismissals of students at Taylor, president Gyertson spoke on behalf of the students. He affirmed that the behavior shown by students did not “represent the Taylor student body” and assured the public that these students were cared for by faculty while steps were being taken to recover from these riots (Walsh, 2004). While outside news sources wanted to enter the campus to report, Taylor did not allow for this to happen. At the same time, outside law enforcement was prepared to enter campus, but they were reassured by Taylor’s own law enforcement services that they would be handling the situation.

Relationships on campus were affected by these events. Tension was created on campus between the faculty members who took the results of the event personally and the student body. There was a lot of debate over whether or not a large number of students deserved some grace

over the incident, or if more students should have been dismissed. A while after the riots took place, an evening chapel service took place that was mandatory for the entire campus so that the inappropriate behavior could be addressed. As student misbehavior was something that Gyertson noticed during the beginning of his presidency, he started reaffirming positive behavior from students while also showing that he valued student feedback. David Gyertson admitted that while the students involved with the incident did cause property damage and law enforcement was involved to an extent, he did not believe the events were worth labeling as “riots” simply because they were not as severe as other events labeled with the same term.

Farewell

On January 27, 2005, David and Nancy Gyertson sent a letter to the entire campus stating that he had advised the Board of Trustees of his decision to step down from the President’s position to accept an appointment at Regent University as Distinguished Professor of Leadership Formation and Renewal. After making his intentions clear that he would be a short-term, transitional president during his inauguration, people were still surprised and sad to hear of the news. Gyertson knew this was the next for him and his family, as he stated that “the opportunity to return to Regent and be an active part again of the Christian leadership vision I helped pioneer appears to be God’s next step in my service” (Gyertson, 2005). During Gyertson’s time as president, Taylor University concluded a \$75 million capital campaign, started a comprehensive master facilities plan for Upland and Fort Wayne campuses, and erected three new buildings between two separate campuses. In the Chronicle-Tribune, writer Barry William Walsh wrote that Taylor University was considered to be in the best position in its history “as a result of David’s leadership” and that it was in a good position to make a significant impact on 21st century Christ-centered education (Walsh, 2005).

The announcement was made in chapel for that day, but Gyertson was away from campus at the time. Steve Beatty made the announcement in chapel and told the campus that Gyertson loved them, and that he was not leaving because he was upset or asked to leave. Gyertson believed in the strength of Taylor's commitment to students, and he knew that it would lead Taylor towards continued success in the future. When discussing the end of his time as Taylor's president, David referenced Acts 13:36. It reads "Now when David had served God's purpose in his generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed" (New International Version, Acts 13:36). Gyertson felt like he had completed everything he was supposed to, and that God had accomplished everything he set forward for him at Taylor. Now, it was time to leave Taylor in the capable hands of future president Gene Habecker, and David could now pursue the next step in his life that God prepared for him.

Life Lessons

In the end, David Gyertson's time at Taylor not only reinforced some ideas he had about his calling but also taught him new lessons as well. His experiences reinforced his beliefs about what specifically God had called him to do there. He was affirmed that God worked through him to prepare Taylor for a prosperous future, as well as set up the transitions for Gene Habecker's presidency. He knew there was a lot that God had given him to handle, but it was necessarily his responsibility to solve all of them. That was going to be a task for future leaders after his time as president was over. Ultimately, Gyertson's biggest was that he was able to have a positive impact on the lives of those he interacted with at Taylor. He didn't expect a monument to be made for him, but he just wanted to leave something behind to be remembered for. According to Skip Trudeau, Gyertson was an excellent communicator who was able to speak his mind and

intentions while also building connections amongst his peers. Gyertson's work can be seen today as this institution has continued to grow and flourish years after his time as president was over.

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