

**Baylor University School of Education
Candidate Essay Questions**

Jerry R. Thomas, December 29, 2006

1. What are the most critical roles a Dean serves within an academic institution, and describe how you might function in these roles?

There are five critical areas where a Dean serves the School--representation, visibility, role-model, leadership, and collaboration.

- a. *Representation*--The Dean represents the faculty, staff, and students to the University central administration and is the liaison from the central administration to the School. In order to be effective in this role, the Dean must be highly regarded for academic and personnel integrity and honesty by both sets of constituents. Fairness and trust are the central issues—both groups must believe that the Dean is truthful, honest, and fair. One of my strengths is to understand the University mission and strategic plan, then position my School (and Departments) to support the mission and plan within the framework and scope of our core work. As a result, the value of each Department is increased, resources to each Department typically grow, the Departments work more effectively within the School, and the School is better positioned in the University. I would represent the School effectively. Other academic leaders find me trustworthy and reliable. Recently I have served as Leader of the Chairs Council at ISU and was selected to provide leadership training to new chairs. I think through issues and represent my values and issues aggressively to upper administration while maintaining a cooperative position. I listen carefully to others prior to making decisions. My decisions are made in light of what does maximum good for the groups involved.
- b. *Visibility*--The Dean has many responsibilities and obligations external to the University community--working with alumni, professional activities in administration, and academics. However, equally important is visibility within the University, the School, and Departments to successfully develop the all of the characteristics described in 'a'. I am a reliable person and always participate in appropriate meetings and campus discussions. I make sure the School is represented when scheduling conflicts occur. The Dean is unlikely to influence outcomes on campus unless present and active in the appropriate meetings. However, another important way I assured the visibility of my unit is to know what each faculty member and all units are doing. As opportunities for public recognition and displays, awards and honors arise, I make sure faculty and units are included as appropriate. One way to learn is to accept invitations by Departments, Centers and faculty to observe or read about what they are doing. Finally, I believe the Dean must be visible in the School's Departments; thus, I would make regular visits to academic units to listen and discuss issues with faculty, staff, and students.
- c. *Model*--The Dean should be a model of academic success and integrity that faculty, staff, and students respect. In particular being an academic scholar, excellent teacher, and active professional are important characteristics for the

Dean to possess since those are expected of successful faculty. I have maintained my academic scholarship and university and professional service through publications and presentations as a faculty member, Chair, and interim Dean. As an administrator I have developed leadership and administrative skills, conducted trainings on these topics and published scholarly articles on administration. I like to teach and have always taught. My skills as a teacher are reflected in my ability to successfully organize content into textbooks that have been very successful. I participate in professional groups related to my scholarship as well as administration.

- d. *Leadership*—The Dean must be an effective and efficient academic leader and resource manager. Essential features are an open and democratic style in planning and resource allocation. I believe a good Dean serves the mission and the people of the School, and must be transparent in the decision-making process. I collect and share information for decision-making. I am willing to make difficult decisions, but always seek information and consensus before making a decision. My administrative structure is to form an effective leadership team, delegate with respect, and listen systematically. I have been an effective leader as a Department Chair, Associate Dean, and interim Dean. My interests and skills in leadership are reflected in some of my publications and workshops where I've been asked to express my leadership skills, style and successes. I provide needed information to others so that they can participate in the decision-making process. One aspect of leading is team-building. Competition for resources can be a barrier to teamwork, therefore I believe in a transparent, regular and systematic process for resource allocation. I am a good budget manager and in over 15 years as Chair at three different institutions have never had a deficit. During those times I have also managed to see resources grow, even in difficult fiscal environments.
- e. *Collaboration*—To provide good leadership, the Dean must work in a collaborative style with all constituencies. I believe in seeking consensus among appropriate individuals prior to making decisions. Leading is as much about serving as about leading. I believe that in order to serve one must give more in the service than is gained personally or professionally. This places the School and its units, faculty, staff and students as the priority and center of attention. Decisions must be carefully considered and fully vetted through the appropriate individuals and groups. Collaboration is essential in meeting the goals of the School and to the need of each constituent to contribute meaningfully to the School. I provide good information, listen to others, and make decisions for the good of as many as possible.

2. **In the next 5-10 years what are the greatest challenges that face higher education and a school with diverse programs like those represented at Baylor's School of Education? What expertise do you bring to meet the challenges you identify?**

The mission of Baylor and the programs in the School of Education have common themes—excellence, serving the common good locally and globally, and leadership.

Two of the challenges I see for higher education and Baylor's School of Education are preparing students to work in a rapidly changing world and meeting the needs of a rapidly diversifying constituency. The first challenge for public higher education is the trend in society from the model of 'common good' to 'pay for what you can afford.' This challenge is evident in the decreasing support of state and federal governments for higher education, public education prek-12, and public health care. All of the programs in the School of Education at Baylor are influenced by this dramatic shift. The School must prepare students to deal with the ever increasing disparity in education and health care—and the social issues that result from that disparity. We must prepare students who are idealistic in their sensitivity to a diverse world and realistic in the approach to their professions, for example caring for and educating all children. The second challenge—meeting the needs of a rapidly diversifying constituency—speaks to the first challenge and to the need to diversity in faculty, staff and students. Diversity brings a new level of understanding that must be experienced rather than taught. Whether students gain experience from international educational experiences, service learning, or living and learning within a diverse community, the goal of better prepared graduates is best met in an environment where diversity is a priority. Part of the challenge—especially in a private university where cost to students and perception by potential faculty and staff may become barriers—is to socially and financially support diversity.

First, I care about these issues. I do not believe that education at any level (prek-12, university) should be limited to those who can afford a quality education. Perhaps this is because I was the first in my family to attend college. I was fortunate to benefit from an excellent education at Furman University because of a scholarship. Similarly, universal access to quality health care is important. I have experience in universities where various cultures are impacting the operation of communities, schools, and the universities themselves. For example, I lead the Department of Kinesiology at Louisiana State University in developing ties and exchanges with Southern University, a historically Black university. At Arizona State while I was Associate Dean of the Graduate College, I was involved in developing support for Native American students to attend graduate school. I also supported the National Youth Sport Program (NCAA) which served mainly Hispanic students during the summer. As PI of the one of the first Preparing Future Faculty grants at ASU, we worked to assure future faculty would have the skills necessary to be successful academic citizens in a variety of academic settings. A foundation of this program was helping Ph.D. students think from a variety of perspectives—a skill they would be able to apply throughout a career. At Iowa State University as Chair I have supported programs to bring African American junior high school students from Des Moines to ISU for summer workshops. Our department has found tremendous success with learning communities and peer mentors. Each program gives students a sense of belonging and responsibility. This affiliation reduces attrition and increases the success of our students—in academic and personal terms. Finally, at ISU as interim Dean, I hired increased minority representation in the faculty and administration of the College (5 of 7 faculty hires were minority). The strategy was to recruit as broadly as possible, identify the best academic person for the job, showcase an excellent opportunity in our programs, and make competitive offers to the best candidates who happened to be minority (I believe because of excellent recruitment). This yielded a

female Hispanic chair who was a recognized national scholar in her field as well as 4 other minority faculty.

Financial support to increase low-income, minority or other underrepresented groups in the faculty, undergraduate and graduate student population, and to provide opportunities for staff to develop new or advanced skills is another strategy I have used. A critical issue in growing the graduate program has been to secure support for students. Support that would attract the best students and diversify the enrollment has been and would continue to be a priority. Supporting faculty and staff development increased the productivity and loyalty in the School. These people-based strategies apply outside the university as well. It is likely that Texas schools and health care face the same issue Iowa faces--increasing numbers of non-English speaking children. These children must receive a good education and adequate health care to become useful members of U.S. society. The School of Education must develop sensitive, knowledgeable, and technologically capable graduates to face this challenge.

3. Present your understanding of the mission of a Christian university. Include in your essay your religious affiliation, church membership, and your present church, parish, or synagogue involvement.

In many ways the mission of a Christian university is similar to that of public universities—to provide a quality and broad education. Although I have spent my career at public universities, I continue to value the “Christian Education” at private universities such as Baylor and Furman (where I was an undergraduate) A quality education (private or public) develops values one would consider “Christian” (e.g., helping others, doing good, being sensitive to others). One of the challenges of a public university becomes a strength of a Christian university. That is, the development of responsible citizens. While my Department at ISU has citizenship as a learning outcome, we have struggled with bringing this into the classroom. Certainly a public university expects to produce graduates of character and moral virtue, but the issue is usually addressed indirectly. I appreciate and understand the direct and focused approach in a Christian university. An education is supposed to result in informed, moral graduates who become responsible citizens. It seems the essence of the difference between public and Christian universities on this issue is whether the approach is direct or indirect, and where moral virtue and citizenship fall in the educational priorities.

Within Baylor’s mission statement are the terms “Pro Ecclesia, Pro Texana,” These terms and the text associated with them clearly presents Baylor’s commitment to a liberal arts education for undergraduates as well as graduate and professional education. The critical statement on the issue from Baylor’s mission statement, at least in my view, is “Without imposing religious conformity, Baylor expects the members of its community to support its mission.” This statement allows students, staff, and faculty who support Christian values to function effectively and fulfill their potential at Baylor. Thus, I view the mission at Baylor as promoting the educational enterprise while seeking to ‘do good’ and support Christian values in society, a mission I fully support. I am committed to both

a liberal education and a focus on moral, responsible, informed citizens as core in the educational program.

I grew up in Birmingham, AL, where my family and I were active members of Shades Crest Baptist Church (Southern Baptist). I attended and graduated from Furman University which was then affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. While Furman remains a Christian institution, it is no longer affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. When I married my wife Kathi, she was a Methodist and we continue as members of the Methodist Church (much to the dismay of her Lutheran pastor brother). We attend the Methodist Church in Ames, but are less active in the church than we were when our children were young.

I remain an active alumnus at Furman University. In 1992 the Department of Health and Exercise Science at Furman selected me as their outstanding alumni and established the Jerry R. Thomas Award to be given to the outstanding graduating senior. My family and I endowed that award. In addition I lead the efforts with a substantial gift to establish the Ruth Reid Award given annually to the outstanding Furman graduate who planned to teach physical education. Ruth Reid was my mentor and teacher at Furman.