

Reflections on Nearly Two Decades as President at Augustana

Steven Bahls, President of Augustana College

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Good afternoon. I've been looking forward to celebrating Founders Day with you. Augustana was founded 162 years ago and continues to be true to its mission of helping students grow in mind, spirit and body. Augustana has had only eight presidents in its history – a testament to its stability. What an honor it has been to follow the presidencies of Esbjörn, Hasselquist, Olsson, Andreen, Bergendoff, Sorensen and Tredway. Each put his distinct mark on Augustana, but all held true to its sacred mission. Serving as a link in the chain of these presidents has been the privilege of my life. But, in addition to thanking you for the last nineteen years, I wanted to use this opportunity to share some reflections about what I've learned during my time at Augustana.

When I arrived at Augustana 19 years ago, I could not have predicted the course of world events and the impact those events would have on the Augustana community. We've seen the biggest economic recession since the Great Depression and a global pandemic that would shut the Augustana campus down for the first time in 102 years. We've seen a painful but needed national racial reckoning, a rise in aggression by totalitarian regimes, increasing attacks on freedom of expression by both the left and the right, and behind it all a fractured American political system that is incapable of finding common ground for the good of the people. Polls show that a near-record percentage of Americans believe our nation is on the wrong track.

But through all of this turmoil, a special place called Augustana College has prospered and thrived. The Augustana community has stayed true to its mission and on the right track. I believe the Augustana community has thrived because of the community's optimism and entrepreneurship, and also its commitment to diversity and justice, to the free exchange of ideas, and to caring for each other.

Little did I know when I arrived the abundant blessings the Augustana College community would bestow on me. I've enjoyed interactions with thousands of students, each one having a transformative experience on our beautiful campus. I've had the privilege of being part of moving Augustana from a community that merely hoped to be more diverse to a community that cherishes and celebrates being one of the most diverse colleges in the region. I've had the opportunity to work with faculty and staff to help our workforce build careers of meaning and purpose. I've had the opportunity to innovate, to support the teams creating new programs, new majors and new opportunities for our students. And most of all, I've had the opportunity to lead a community much loved by generations of students and alumni, one with the special mission of helping students grow in mind, spirit and body.

Why has Augustana remained optimistic when the country as a whole is so pessimistic? I would suggest four reasons: **the power of the liberal arts, the power of diversity, the power of shared governance, and the power of exceptional students who bring to our community an unwavering commitment to innovation and continuous improvement.**

When I stood before the Augustana community during my inauguration as the eighth president of the college in the fall of 2003, I talked about the power of the liberal arts. I quoted John Henry Cardinal Newman in his book *The Idea of the University*. Newman contended that those educated in the liberal arts “apprehend the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and its shade, its great points and its little . . . A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom.”

I've witnessed the power of the liberal arts employed through Augustana's mission of helping our students grow in mind, spirit and body. Through the Augustana General Education program, students learn to see the world in a different, more thoughtful way. They learn to look at the world through the eyes of a philosopher, an economist, a political scientist, a theologian, an artist, and so many more. From these different vantage points they develop the skills of critical thinking and clear expression. A highlight of each year at Augustana is the Celebration of Learning where seniors display the results of their research and the ideas they've generated for solving real-life problems, large and small.

Even more impressive for me is what happens when these students graduate. I see our alumni building careers of meaning and purpose, using the critical thinking skills they gained at Augustana to solve vexing problems. One of the most striking examples of this has been the role of Augustana alumni in leading our nation through the pandemic. The nation found itself without a playbook when everything shut down. Dr. Diane Griffin of Johns Hopkins University, a 1962 graduate who had been researching viruses and epidemics for decades, helped provide the scientific basis supporting our response. Dr. Emily Landon of the University of Chicago, a 1999 graduate who became a leading public health authority in Illinois, served as a key advisor to the Governor in helping keep Illinois safe. Both Doctors Griffin and Landon were featured repeatedly in national news stories shared by NPR and other media.

Elsewhere, Dr. Cheryl True, Class of 1990 the medical advisor to Rock Island County Public Health, helped craft the local response. Dr. Dan Gottschling, a 1977 grad based in California, helped our board of trustees understand the elements of an effective COVID response plan. All these Augustana graduates used the power of the liberal arts to create solutions to complex problems, without a playbook, in a way that allowed us to live responsibly with Covid. I know this because each of them worked with me in shaping Augustana's response, all of them as part scientist, part philosopher and part psychologist, part politician and part theologian. All because of Augustana and the power of the liberal arts.

The COVID response is but one example. Critical thinkers like Augustana graduates are urgently needed to lead our country through racial reckoning, resolving political impasses and ensuring that totalitarianism will never prevail.

A second lesson I learned was the liberating **power of diversity** on our campus. We've increased the number of students of color and international students more than six-fold. When I joined the campus community in the summer of 2003, I knew Augustana needed to become more diverse in order to live out its mission. What I could not have predicted is that while other institutions regarded diversity as an imperative for their sustainability, at Augustana, equity and inclusion – the necessary elements in maintaining diversity – would become part of our institutional DNA. We celebrate and truly cherish the many nations, races and religions of our students and faculty as a matter of course, because that is the community Augustana has become.

We've learned that classroom experiences are richer when classrooms include a wide range of perspectives. In 1919, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., wrote in the U.S. Supreme Court case *Abrams vs United States*, "The best test of the truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market." Faculty and students, alike, know that classroom discussions and learning are much richer when many different viewpoints are represented. Equally, student life has been enhanced by our diversity. From the Hindu festival of Holi, to Afrofest, to our Vietnamese students celebrating Pho-Tastic and other cultural celebrations, our students build their awareness of the beauty of different cultures and, at the same time, an understanding that what unites us is far greater than what divides us. Because of our diversity and our ability to talk civilly across difference, Augustana is a truly special place to be.

A third reason Augustana has thrived and remained optimistic is the **power of shared governance**. Sharing governance is often discussed and seldom successful in higher education. At its core, it's a commitment by the board, the administration and the faculty to learn from each other's expertise to make decisions together, respecting each other's expertise, for the benefit of our students. Shared governance is hard work. Faculty are charged with providing the strongest education for today's students, administrators are focused on 3-to-7-year strategic plans, while trustees are focused on the "forever" viability of their colleges.

Augustana has been a leader in shared governance with our commitment to solving issues together. We've had board retreats with more faculty than board members in attendance. We had a COVID response team made up of faculty, trustees and staff. We had a diverse and creative Augustana Future Initiatives Think Tank. Augustana trustees, faculty and staff work with each other, not against each other, to address the needs of our students. Has it worked? The proof is a national ranking for innovation and in a dozen new academic programs, seven new Division III athletic teams, our flagship Augustana Choice program (awarding every student up to \$2000 for high impact learning experience), our innovative Senior

Inquiry that combines student research with vocational reflection. These were all developed by trustees, faculty and staff working together to improve outcomes for our students.

During these post-COVID days when employers in every sector are seeing employees resign and retire in record numbers, many could learn a valuable lesson from higher education. When you value employees and engage them in setting directions, those employees value their employer and will engage themselves in improving their institution—or company.

The biggest surprise to me, however, has been the **transformative role of students** in making Augustana a better place. When I first came to Augustana, I told students during opening convocation that if there was a group or activity that a student wanted but couldn't find, that they should identify five other students who agreed, and we would help start that activity. Nearly 100 new student organizations and activities later, Augustana provides all students with enjoyable activities with communities of friends, along with opportunities to lead. But the impact of students in making Augustana a much better place extends beyond the many new activities. And many of the most important improvements to Augustana have been through student activism.

Let's reflect on student activism. When I came to Augustana, there was not much of it. My generation were activists during the late 1960s and early 1970s. More recently, students have started to engage in those levels of activism again – activism around diversity, equity & inclusion, around eliminating sexual violence, around the growing mental health crisis, and around environmental responsibility.

Student activism is an interesting thing for college presidents. Activism often leads to protest, and protests on the Quad or outside of the president's office aren't always the most comfortable part of the daily life of a college leader. Will there be counterprotests? Is one side trying to shut down the free speech of the other? Will there be negative press? Will it scare away newly admitted students? Many presidents view student activism as something to be tolerated and managed.

But I've come to believe that student activism is something to be cherished. Today's students are different from the activists I remember in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Instead of demonizing those in authority, they want to work with them in search of solutions. For example, after a protest, students have always been gracious in meeting with me to determine how together we can help Augustana grow in that area. Students have helped us build support systems for our increased diversity. They have helped Augustana cherish not only diversity, but also equity and inclusion. They have helped us create better systems to prevent and address sexual violence. And they have developed actionable ideas to become a more environmentally responsible college. Yes, today's students can be impatient. They don't necessarily want to hear how far we come. Rather, they focus on how far we have to go. A little impatience, I've learned, is just what we need in doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with God.

What unites the power of the liberal arts, the power of diversity, the power of shared governance and the power of student activism? The power of community. I am honored to be a link in the chain of presidents dating back to Lars Paul Esbjörn, who answered the call to lead the Augustana College community, and found here the calling of a lifetime.

So much for looking back. As we look ahead, I am inspired by the words of Conrad Bergendoff who in 1960 observed, "The stream that flows from the campus is always changing, as one generation follows another to generate power and give productiveness to the land. And though the campus will never hold just the same people again, the identity of Augustana will be kept clear."

Dr. Bergendoff was correct. Augustana has both adapted to the changing needs of each generation of students and held true to its mission of helping students grow in mind, spirit and body. Augustana has evolved and will continue to change. We do not pine for the old days, rather we embrace opportunities to meet the needs of a changing student body in a changing world. Faith, reason and hope will guide us and sustain us in the years to come.

Augustana's best days are ahead. May God bless and keep you, and may God bless Augustana College.