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Balancing the Five Faith Commitments of Augustana College

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Augustana College takes pride in being considered a church-related institution connected with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Therefore, the college institutes a document entitled “The Five Faith Commitments of Augustana College.” This document outlines how the college interprets its religious background and how each commitment is used in the operation of the college today. The term “church-related” is discussed in the second Appendix written by the current president of the college, Stephen Bahls. He references a phrase used by retired Professor of English, Roald Tweet, when talking about Augustana as “living with a hyphen.” Bahls then elaborates to explain the ambiguity of the hyphen present in the term “church-related” and what it infers to the reader. While one may see the hyphen as a way to distance the academic institution from a spiritual focus, another may interpret the hyphen as a way of showing how these two are closely connected.

The complexities of this problem lead me to return to the five original commitments with a new perspective. While I was reading, an underlying theme of balance arose from this reading and revealed a new meaning for the hyphen, which connects the entire document. Instead of connecting or repelling, the hyphen in “church-related” could represent a teeter-tauter, which requires balance to be kept stable. In each of the commitments, which I will outline and elaborate on in the following paragraphs, there is an aspect of balance present which needs to be maintained in order to accomplish the spiritual goals in which Augustana, as a church-related institution, set out to achieve when the college was founded in 1860.

The first commitment states, “Augustana College offers every student the opportunity to develop a life-shaping opportunity.” Through the subcategories, the focus

of this first commitment is to provide a place where students can partake in spiritual activities if they so choose. However they are not required, outside of one Christian Theology course, to participate in anything they do not believe in. The balance I see present here is in the choice each student is able to make for him or herself. While one course in religion is required, the balance between academics and religious views is seen in those classes as well. The classes focus on the understanding and learning of Christian Traditions, rather than concentrating on the practice of faith. The word “theology”, as discussed in class, comes from the root “theos” meaning “God” and “logos” meaning “word” or “understanding.” The requirement of a theology class is not to impose beliefs on any person, rather it simply adds to the balance between knowledge and faith that every student has the opportunity to explore.

Balance between faith and reason is seen again in the second commitment: “Augustana College encourages our campus community to wrestle with ways in which faith and reason challenge and enrich each other.” This balance is less about the opportunity to be religious on campus, but instead, more about how to approach topics in the classroom that may seem to contradict lessons heard in church. Being a liberal arts college, Augustana offers many different courses with a variety of perspectives of thinking. As discussed in class in response to the reading of Hyers, the separation of thinking between science (or any other subject) and religion is the most successful way to keep a balance between what is learned in a science class and what is preached about in church.

In my opinion, the trickiest to understand, but most important aspect of balance is seen in the third commitment, which states, “Augustana College affirms that work and

career- indeed, all human effort- are aspects of an understanding of vocation, which the Lutheran tradition in higher education helps illuminate.” By encouraging students to uphold Christian values while pursuing a degree, students are able to implement these principles into their future work communities. Barbara Brown Taylor addresses this concept towards the end of Speaking of Sin. She acknowledges that many people in today’s society fear being “meaningless” (59). She argues that people focus too much of having a purpose in life instead of slowing down to become a better person, which involves living with a set value system. I feel as if this is the hardest goal to uphold in a college setting because most students focus on the importance of academics and lose sight of the importance of giving back to the community. I think that Augustana should put more stress on helping others because it is the right thing to do, rather than because it would look appealing on a job or graduate school application. The combination of wanting to help others out of the goodness of one’s heart and also striving to be the best individual possible is the balance necessary to fulfill the third commitment.

The fourth commitment is derived from the history of the college. It states, “Augustana College celebrates God’s regard for the worth of all persons”, meaning that one can broaden their own perspectives on life by questioning and learning about other’s perspectives. Augustana was named after the “Augsburg Confessions” written in 1530, in which the concept of ecumenism was the focus. Ecumenism references the cooperation and acceptance of the teachings and values between all Christian denominations. The principle of unity among various people regardless of religious views can be expanded to the present day movement for the equality of all students. This includes race, gender, religion, ethnicity, cultural practices, appearance and sexuality, just to name a few. The

aspect of balance comes into play when looking at the way in which people can develop their own views based on the understanding of others. It is easy to judge someone based on pre-conceived notions, but in order to grow into a well-rounded individual, one must learn and understand how differing viewpoints can be woven together to create a cohesive community in which everyone can thrive. This comprehension of individualistic views helps one balance out their own perspective of the world.

The fifth and final commitment states, “Augustana College encourages the development of a campus community which seeks justice, loves kindness and acts with love and humility.” This statement relates mostly to the ways in which people treat each other in a social setting rather than in the classroom. There must be a balance between justice and kindness in the treatment of others. In the imperfect world we live in, there has always been suffering and wrongdoing. The concept of a “church-related” solution does not prevent such acts from happening. However, the Christian tradition teaches people to seek kindness in everyone regardless of the sinful nature of humankind.

In a diverse and ever changing world, it may be difficult for the core values of Augustana to be upheld. Many people believe that more contemporary issues, such as race and gender equality, should take precedence over religious beliefs. While current matters are surely important to students living in the twenty-first century, there must be a balance between worldly issues and the Christian ethics, which have been engrained in the structure of Augustana throughout the last 155 years. Although the weight of today’s concerns may shift the balance on the teeter-tauter, it is the responsibility of students and staff who uphold Christian traditions to keep the church-related community at equilibrium.