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## "Food for the Soul"

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*Augustana College*

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# "Food for the Soul" | Augustana College

**Augustana Magazine, Winter 2004**

**Steven C. Bahls, President of Augustana College**

Last winter when I was asked to consider applying for the presidency of Augustana College, I was attracted to the College for many reasons. One of the biggest was its clear and unequivocal commitment to liberal arts education. As many colleges and universities try to be all things to all people, Augustana stands out because of its clear and abiding commitment to the liberal arts.

When I arrived on campus, I made it an early priority to visit with the faculty from each of Augustana's 27 academic departments. While I understood Augustana's steadfast commitment to liberal arts, I wanted to learn more about the history and values of the college and the dreams and aspirations of my new faculty colleagues. The most interesting of the meetings was with the faculty of the philosophy department. As a law professor, I have spent the past 18 years engaging students in a Socratic dialogue about law and public policy. To my surprise, faculty members in the philosophy department wanted to engage me in a Socratic dialogue about the value of the liberal arts education. Professor David Hill posed the first questions: How would society be worse off without liberal arts colleges? Wouldn't the economy and government still operate without liberal arts colleges? Would anyone other than our graduates notice if we disappeared? Wouldn't major universities and community colleges continue to provide adequate education? We addressed these questions for 90 minutes, vying for who would play Socrates and who would play student. We all agreed it had been an invigorating afternoon. For the first of my columns in Augustana magazine, let me take this opportunity to reflect on the questions raised in the dialogue.

Perhaps America would be adequately educated without liberal arts colleges. I believe, however, that adequate education is not sufficient education. We owe the next generation more than adequate, low-cost education. There is no better education in America today than one in which students live together, engaging in intimate learning experiences with faculty devoted to undergraduate education. Augustana alumni, almost to a person, recall relationships they developed with faculty who helped them chart their courses in life. The hallmarks of a liberal arts college - small class size, interaction with faculty both inside and outside of class, a rich array of student organizations and opportunities to grow in body, mind and spirit - prepare our students to be leaders in their diverse fields.

Liberal arts colleges nourish the life of the mind in ways no other type of education can. Cicero was right: *animi cultus quasi quidam humanitatis cibus* (the cultivation of the mind is a kind of food supplied for the soul of man). Eight years before President Lars Esbjörn founded Augustana College, John Henry Cardinal Newman wrote 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 shades, its great points and its little...A habit of mind is framed

which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom." Those with an active life of the mind are healthier, happier and more engaging.

Not only do liberal arts college graduates have an active "life of the mind", they apply their minds to today's most complex problems. Augustana College graduates think integratively, critically and creatively. These skills have opened doors for the College's graduates to serve as leaders in the church, in government, in the scientific community, in business and in education.

It is my privilege to be called to help cherish and strengthen Augustana's commitment to the liberal arts and sciences.



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