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# Tradition, Change and Truthiness

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# **Tradition, Change and Truthiness | Augustana College**

**Augustana College for Vocational Reflection, May 9, 2008**

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

I want to thank Bob Haak and the Center for Vocational Reflection for permitting me to talk about the values of Augustana, from my vantage point. It is an honor to be able to share this forum with our previous speakers, Jason Peters, David Crowe, Lou Belby and Paul Olsen. The papers of each materially added to the collective discussion of the vocation of Augustana College.

I appreciate the thoughtfulness of those who gave papers before me, and I am certain that any one of us could add valuable insight to this conversation. Each of Augustana's 650 members of the faculty, administration and staff has a particular vantage point from which to view Augustana. Likewise, we all look at Augustana through our lens on the world, which is shaped by our experiences. So thanks for allowing me to share a few observations about tradition, change and truthiness from my vantage point.

Lou Belby started his paper by observing that some might find it ironic that "an Irish Catholic kid from New Jersey" was musing on the topic of Augustana's traditional values. Well, some of you here today may find it ironic and surprising that a lawyer, with no Swedish blood, would even become the president of Augustana, let alone give this talk. Lou said that 29 years ago, when he was hired by Dr. Tredway, he could not have imagined giving his talk. Again, 29 years ago, I was preparing to take the bar exam and start a career as a lawyer in Milwaukee - the last thing I would have guessed is that I would one day have the honor of leading an institution as fine as Augustana.

It was about five and a half years ago that I took a call from Academic Search Consultants from my office as dean and professor at Capital University Law School. The consultant asked if I would be interested in submitting my name for the presidency of Augustana College. I knew about Augustana College - the brother of a childhood friend of mine had attended, and Augustana was one of the teams I could never beat as an Iowa debater. Furthermore, a good law school friend of mine attended Augustana and could never stop talking about it.

I told that consultant that I didn't really think I was interested, but that I would think about it. After all, my passion was as a lawyer and law professor. My passion was playing my part in helping lawyers to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God.

I saw being a law school dean as a calling to facilitate the preparation of lawyers who did more than practice, but who were philosopher-servants in the process. Lawyers who were philosopher-servants could mean a better legal system and a more just society. But, at about the time of the call from Augustana's presidential search consultants, I was beginning to have doubts about the legal system's capacity to create a truly just society. There were too few lawyers who were truly philosopher-servants, as evidenced by a legal system that could neither adequately deal with national tragedies like Guantanamo Bay nor provide justice to troubled children and disadvantaged populations. At the same time, I had seen the impact that a good liberal arts

education had had on my sons, Daniel and Timothy. Thanks to their liberal arts education, I watched them develop a "life of the mind" and a values system that will sustain them during life's inevitable ups and downs. And, during this same time period, I had been facilitating a series of discussions among local lawyers, judges and law professors focusing on how great works of literature might inform our understanding of justice.

So when the second call came from Augustana, I decided to let my candidacy go forward. I admired those whom I knew who had attended Augustana. Perhaps serving Augustana might be a calling to play a part in helping undergraduates prepare for lives in which they might do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly as philosopher-servants. Perhaps justice is not solely in the domain of lawyers; indeed, perhaps a new generation of teachers, preachers, doctors, business persons, psychologists and other liberally-educated people can do more to fashion a just society than lawyers ever can.

When I came to interview at Augustana, like many of you, I wondered if I was a good fit for the college. I wondered if the faculty and staff at Augustana had the same exceptional sense of ownership of the campus that Capital University law school faculty had. I liked the robust discourse at Capital law school because they pursue a strong group deliberative process and strong shared governance. It was clear from my visit to Augustana that faculty and staff had a great sense of ownership regarding the college. I still recall the tough and passionate questions. That passion and sense of ownership is the reason I came to Augustana and is, I believe, the single strongest attribute of our college.

A bit to my surprise, I was given the opportunity to serve Augustana. I think the board selected me because they sensed I could manage a budget, raise money, and prepare strategic plans. But that is not what excited me about Augustana. What excited me was the opportunity to help students to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly. Whatever administrative and fundraising skills I have, they are not an end, but a vehicle to facilitate the efforts of others in helping students become philosopher servants.

That is the primary value of Augustana, that I think we all share - an absolute commitment to our students. Professors Crowe, Peters, Olsen, and Belby all talked about this commitment, though each used different language. We each call it different things - some call it a commitment to helping students master critical and creative thinking, others call it attending to the development of students as whole persons. Whatever we call it, we are united by our shared commitment to holistic growth of our students. But we are united by more than that. For most members of our community - faculty, coaches, staff and administrators alike, we are so deeply committed to the holistic growth of our students that it has become our life's vocation.

Our shared vocation of promoting holistic growth of our students represents our core collective strength. The college is only as strong as our continued commitment to our students. And we are passionate about our students. But just as our passions strengthen the college, this same passion for our students sometimes causes friction, particularly when changes beyond our control may necessitate changes at the college.

My title today - Tradition, Change and Truthiness - was intended to be a bit provocative. But exploring tradition, change and truthiness also gives a chance to explore a tension at Augustana that arises because of our passions; namely, how do we mediate honoring our traditions with making the changes we must make to remain strong as an institution? No one is naïve enough to believe that the college should never change - the issue is the pace of change.

Augustana has traditionally wrestled with how quickly to change. As Roald Tweet has observed, the college has wrestled with the "hyphen issues" and how hyphenated words might change in meaning. His examples are Swedish-American and church-related college. To those hyphenated words - and the inherent tension they embody - we might add teacher-scholar.

For much of its history, the college wrestled with its Swedishness. The Americanization of the college was, indeed, controversial. The move away from instruction in Swedish surely involved passionate debate. How might all of these "American" students dilute the college and its mission? What about the movement from a college dominated by Lutherans for Lutherans to a college with a more ecumenical stance? And then there was the elimination of mandatory chapel. Whether it was the Americanization of the college...or the transformation from a college for Lutherans to a college for all (that honors its Lutheran traditions)...or the relaxation of the in loco parentis rules during the 1960s and early 1970s...the college has changed to address a changing world. Some of these changes, it is clear, threatened to tear the college apart, but it was our common passion for student learning that kept the college together - meaning that in the process, these changes have made the college better.

Major change at Augustana often comes because the college has no choice but to respond to external changes. In the late 1800s, it was clear that there were not enough Swedish immigrants to fill the classrooms at the college, and in the 1950s it was becoming clear that there were not enough Lutheran students, Lutheran faculty and Lutheran dollars to adequately support our college. In the 1960s and 1970s, an activist generation of students made it clear they would no longer tolerate a college that viewed them as children and itself as their parents.

I believe that the college may be entering another period of change. Again, the change will be forced by outside factors. I see four factors that will challenge many of our assumptions over the next ten years.

- **Demographics are changing.** Augustana has historically been good at attracting white students from middle-income families in Illinois. That pool of students will shrink dramatically over the next ten years. If we cannot more effectively recruit from a broader demographic, this college will shrink dramatically. What's more, if we remain a college primarily catering to mainly middle-income families, our students will not be exposed to the diversity of our changing world, thereby threatening our college's relevance. Even if we are able to attract students from this changing demographic, it will be more expensive to do so - meaning less revenue for the college.
- **Faculty members are changing.** It strikes me that our faculty demographics are changing just as are those of our students. Historically we have recruited faculty fairly easily - from a traditional demographic - white faculty members from good schools who put teaching over scholarship. Heightening PhD shortages will make it more difficult to recruit. More than ever, new PhDs desire support for scholarship, even though they are attracted to Augustana because it emphasizes teaching. Without providing that enhanced support for teaching, scholarship and service, we will not be successful in attracting new faculty members. Increasingly, our faculty members are coming from abroad and often need more mentoring because of cultural difference. Faculty members are increasingly mobile - meaning that like most Americans in their 20s and 30s, they are hesitant to make a lifetime commitment to any institution, and they anticipate moving around. If we continue to look for only entry level faculty who will fit our traditional profile, we will not maintain the critical mass and

quality of faculty needed to provide our students with a world-class education.

- **Students have changed.** Students, fortunately, are changing for the better. I sense in this new generation of students a renewed spirit of activism - like the students of the 1960s and early 1970s, wanting to change the world. They are more self-reliant, concerned about diversity and the environment. They demand to be active learners. Thanks to our faculty, we have seen these changes and are adapting appropriately. Had we not changed our curriculum and moved from teaching to learning, Augustana would be increasingly irrelevant to this generation.
- **The economic model upon which private higher education is based will collapse.** Notice that I did not say, might collapse. It will collapse. Our tuition increases at double the rate of inflation and our tuition discount increases at 1% per year. If this continues, the bad news for our students is that in 60 years our tuition will be \$1,237,038.41. The good news for students is that our tuition discount rate will be 100%, meaning no one pays any tuition. It is a deeply flawed model. Sadly, we don't have a solution. Institutions that have tried to alter the model have been punished by the market. I sense that we are coming to a breaking point. Our most recent tuition increase could be our last big tuition increase. With the national outrage about college tuition, we will be forced to respond with lower rates of increase, at the same time as the demand for more expensive programs is increasing. The solution to fixing this economic model will not be easy and will not be without pain. Compounding the problem is decreasing state and federal subsidies to college students and families who do not save sufficiently to be able to pay for a higher-quality college education. We will not see the growth in revenue that we have enjoyed in the last four years, and demand for available dollars will only intensify - this includes better salaries, more financial aid and the need to reduce deferred maintenance while constructing and renovating buildings to advance our mission. The problem of the collapse of the economic model is a bit of a Gordian knot.

Failure to respond to any of these problems will yield the same result - Augustana will slowly, but surely, become marginalized.

Though these problems, some days, can seem overwhelming, I believe we can make the changes necessary to address them. We have a strong faculty and an able administrative team. Our \$100 million comprehensive campaign will be successful. The college is at full-enrollment, even running an operating surplus that can help address some of our problems. We have tackled equally large challenges in the past, because of our shared vocation and our shared commitment to student learning.

But I do have concerns. Though the changes presenting challenges to higher education are largely external to higher education and are, therefore, beyond our control, the greatest obstacle to adequately address these problems comes from within higher education. Disagreements about how to respond to these external factors too often devolves to nonproductive talk behind closed doors and anonymous blog entries, rather than productive face-to-face conversation with each other. Ironically, too often we run away from controversy or keep our heads down, letting issues fester. For the sake of our shared commitment to student learning, we owe it to ourselves not to hunker-down. Instead we must, as a community, act with transparency, engage in open discussions and hold each other accountable as we address the many challenges ahead.

Well, the title of this talk is Tradition, Change and Truthiness. I have talked about tradition and change. But what

does truthiness have to do with it?

I hadn't heard of the word truthiness until this past Friday. My son, Daniel, was taking a break from his canvassing work for one of the presidential candidates in Indiana. Over dinner, I was opining (or, Daniel might say, pontificating) on one of the many issues we like to debate and he accused me of truthiness. I hadn't heard of the word, but it was clear to me that it wasn't a compliment, especially when he explained the origins of the term.

Comedian Stephen Colbert coined the word to describe that which we think we know "from the gut," without regard to demonstrated evidence, sound logic or the facts. Great, I said, but it isn't a real word and I really don't care much about Stephen Colbert. He pointed out that truthiness was recently added to Merriam-Webster's dictionary.

So I was thinking about truthiness over the past few days. Do I fall victim to truthiness? Do we in higher education fall victim to truthiness? I think so. And I think that falling victim to truthiness will impede our ability to develop the consensus necessary for us to make the changes in higher education, and at Augustana, demanded by the problems identified above.

Let me give you a few examples of truthiness that might be standing in the way of working together to effect the careful, deliberate and consensus-driven changes needed at Augustana. Caution - I am about to gore nearly every consistency's ox in higher education. So, let me start by goring college presidents.

Truthiness can infect meetings of college presidents. We like to react from the gut. It is easier that way. When college presidents meet, there is sometimes much hand-wringing. Inevitably, the discussion turns to faculty relations. The conversation that comes next is predictable. Eventually someone will start the conversation by trotting out this old saw: "yup, dealing with faculty is like herding cats." Then someone will throw in this pearl of supposed wisdom: "you know, they just can't take 'yes' for an answer" or "it seems when it comes to shared governance, faculty want to be asked to dance but have no plans to get out on the floor." After the last beer is tipped, we wrap up our gripe session by concluding "aw, the dogs will bark, but it is our job to move the caravan along." This is truthiness. It comes from the gut. It feels good, because it helps us think we can explain the world. It makes it easy to explain the difficult and not always successful work of shared governance. But it is not based on fact. Sure, faculty relations are often difficult. But is it herding cats, or is it working with a group of passionate individuals possessed of a rich diversity of opinions and talents that might be used to strengthen a college? Is it that faculty really can't take "yes" for an answer, or is it that faculty are bright, critical thinkers and know that the impertinent question is often the important question? As to shared governance, is it that faculty members refuse to "dance" or is it that we fail to provide meaningful opportunities to truly engage faculty members in a way that is respectful of their time? Are faculty critics really barking dogs - or can we learn from those who might say "wait a minute" or "you need to consider this"? Have so many colleges been able to survive for more than 100 years because, unlike businesses, the caravan occasionally pauses to take stock of things?

Presidents who create their own truthiness about faculty and shared governance lose the ability to build respectful relationships that will help their colleges prosper.

The fact is that those presidents who fall into the trap of truthiness do so to avoid real engagement with the faculty. Shared governance is like a marriage and is hard work. Lines of authority in shared governance are grey. It is easier to believe the myths about faculty than to understand the complexities of faculty. If one believes the myths, one can more easily ignore shared governance and wrongfully justify top-down management.

Likewise, we often see truthiness in how some view boards of trustees and administrators - they are "suits" engaged in drive-by management. They don't know the college - they just want bragging rights to be able to pad their résumés by saying their college is like Harvard, Williams or Middlebury. They pay "lip service" to values, but they are really bean-counters who care only about the bottom line. We say that they are enamored with such terms as integrated marketing, brand identity, enterprise risk management, and fiduciary responsibilities, but don't understand learning outcomes, general education and capstone requirements. They don't talk our language, so they aren't able to make good decisions that impact our lives.

Truthiness like this makes it easy to understand trustees. If we believe such truthiness, we don't really have to wrestle with the complexities and challenges of shared governance - we can simply write them off as unknowledgeable.

Presidents, of course, are not the only ones who suffer from not digging a little deeper than truthiness. We all do. Could it be the trustees are actually proud graduates of the colleges upon whose boards they serve? Could it be that they simply want to give back to a college that was formative in their lives and careers? Could it be that they really don't want to be like Harvard, Williams or Middlebury, even though they long to have an endowment of the size of these schools in order that an even wider cross-section of students is able to benefit from the experience that was so decisive in their lives? Could it be that their real motives are not to radically change the college as some sort of power-trip, but that they love the college and want to make sure that the college is true to its values? Could it be that they give up the 10 days a year they spend on college business and the millions of dollars they donate, not because it satisfies their ego to be on the board, but because they want to support the efforts of faculty to build something larger than any of them? Could it be that they genuinely believe good management of the college amounts to more than counting beans, but that it will free up the resources to provide better learning?

In Augustana's case, I have never heard a single trustee wish we could be like any of the "elite" schools. Those trustees who are graduates of such schools uniformly believe that an Augustana College education is equal to or better than the elite school education. In my own case, I have some familiarity with Williams and Middlebury. I can tell you, we do as good as or better than those schools in helping students grow in mind, spirit and body.

Creating our own truthiness about boards is as harmful as presidents creating their own truthiness about faculty. It is the easy way out. When we choose that path, we can avoid the hard work of shared governance. We can ignore, to the extent possible, the trustees, and go about our merry way.

There are many other examples of truthiness that we see in higher education. Do we have gut feelings, not based in fact, about those who have different views of scholarship, teaching or service than we do? Do we have gut feelings, not based in fact, about those who teach in disciplines very different than ours? Do we have gut feelings, not based in fact, about those who have been at Augustana longer or shorter than our own tenures? Do we have gut feelings about those who pursue different gifts than we pursue, whether those gifts are the gifts

of administration, teaching, or serving others?

The list can go on and on citing ways that "gut feelings" can help us make that which is complex very simple. It can be comforting to put others in a box based on our feelings and, at times, demonize others.

But we must resist the temptation to do so at Augustana. Truthiness, in this context, often eviscerates trust. And without trust, shared governance does not work. When shared governance is ineffective, the college either experiences stasis or the administration or board crosses borders that they should not, in order that decisions be made. With the difficulty of the decisions ahead, we must have effective systems of shared governance at the college.

I said earlier that the college has always risen to the occasion in addressing past challenges, whether it be the Americanization of the college or the shift from a college of Lutherans to a college for all students in the Lutheran tradition. Can we assume that we will make the appropriate changes this time? I think it might be rougher this time. The responses to earlier demographic shifts were made in the pre-Tredway era. Tom Tredway introduced strong shared governance systems to what had been a more top-down management style. It is easier to make timely changes when it is top-down, but the risk of error is far worse than with collaborative decision-making. Responses to the current demographic changes will be far more difficult, because we cannot move forward in a meaningful way, except through the hard work of shared governance. Lack of respect and gut feelings unsupported by fact would block our path to effective and deliberate change. Without effective shared governance, change could be too slow or too unilateral - in a way that does not respect our traditions.

The antidote for truthiness, particularly in higher education, is critical thinking. We debunk myths and stereotypes by probing behind the simplistic answers, always asking what facts and what logic support or do not support our positions.

But it is also a question of motivation. Getting past the truthiness to what lies beneath is hard work. How do we in higher education make sure we are doing the hard work of getting past gut feelings about others who are different?

Here are a couple of modest suggestions for those of us in higher education:

1. We, in higher education, need to be more deliberate in each creating a culture of acknowledgement that celebrates the accomplishments of not only our friends and colleagues, but of people with very different roles than our own - whether they are faculty, staff, trustees or administration.
2. We need more face-to-face discourse. Communication by anonymous blogs does not lead to mutual understanding and respect. It can advance gossip, distrust and hardness, and promote truthiness, at a time when face-to-face communication is needed. There is no substitute for addressing disagreement with a face-to-face discussion.
3. We need to understand that our increasing diversity does mean changes. We have fewer people at Augustana with the same backgrounds, interests and world views. Community will feel different as we continue to lose the "sameness" that some remember at Augustana. Because we are more diverse, we may have more disagreement. We need to be deliberate in building a new, more diverse community as those around us change. New members of our community, who are different from us, may need more support. And

- to use a golf term - they may need a few mulligans for the mistakes they make in getting to know our culture.
4. We need to do the hard work of embracing and mentoring new members of our community - just as we embrace and mentor students. Effective mentoring, particularly of those who are different from us, is challenging and sometimes frustrating work - but it is work we must do. Do we indoctrinate new faculty to the prevailing truthiness? Do we expect them to choose sides or do we expect them to be critical, independent thinkers? Do we really want to be a community where the best advice to new faculty is "keep your head down" until you achieve tenure? We will be passing Augustana's torch, someday, to those who are new members of our community today. Will we have done what we can to prepare them to assume that responsibility?
  5. Most importantly, we need to understand that in truth, faculty, staff, administrators and trustees are motivated by our common mission - student learning. From the lunch room to the classroom to the board room, we are all indispensable and equally important parts of the college.

Well, so much for my preaching. Thanks for your patience. I know that I am preaching to the choir.

I am optimistic that together we will address the challenges facing the college. As president, I do not have the roadmap to change. We need to develop it together. And we need to do so in a way that respects tradition and honors and empowers each of us. And in a way that students, faculty, staff and trustees work together to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly throughout our lives.



Accounting	Communication Studies	Geography	Music	Pre-Optometry
Africana Studies	Computer Science	Geology	Music Education	Pre-Pharmacy
Anthropology	Creative Writing	German Studies	Music Performance	Pre-Physical Therapy
Art	Economics	Greek	Neuroscience	Pre-Physician Assistant
Art History	Elementary Education	Graphic Design	Non-Profit Leadership	Pre-Seminary
Asian Studies	Engineering	History	Development	Pre-Veterinary Medicine
Biochemistry	Engineering Physics	International Business	Philosophy	Psychology
Biology	English (Literature)	Japanese	Physics	Religion
Business Administration	English (Writing)	Landscape Architecture	Political Science	Scandinavian Studies
Chemistry	Environmental Management	Latin	Pre-Dentistry	Secondary Education
Chinese	& Forestry	Library and Information	Pre-Law	Sociology
Classics	Environmental Studies	Science	Pre-Medicine	Sociology (Social Welfare)
Communication Sciences	Ethics	Mathematics	Pre-Music Therapy	Spanish
& Disorders	French	Multimedia Journalism	Pre-Nursing	Theatre
		& Mass Communication	Pre-Occupational Therapy	Women's & Gender Studies