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Employing Critical Thinking in the Power of Persuasion

First-Year Opening Convocation, Aug. 16, 2012 Steven C. Bahls, president of Augustana College

On behalf of the Augustana College Board of Trustees and Faculty, it is my distinct honor to welcome you to Augustana College. One hundred and fifty two years ago, Augustana College was founded. You are continuing in a great tradition begun 153 years ago with a college that opens doors for its students, and helps them become the leaders of tomorrow.

Students, we know you've worked hard to gain admission to a selective college like Augustana. You can rightfully be proud of your accomplishments. We thank you for selecting Augustana College, and congratulate you for the hard work that got you here. And congratulations, too, to your parents. As the parent of two sons who recently graduated from liberal arts colleges as well as of a current Augustana student, I know the investments parents make of time, energy and money to help students succeed. The college sincerely appreciates your commitment to your students.

There were 4,232 applications for our class of 667. This was among the most selective in admissions years in memory, meaning each of you has earned the right to be here. In addition to the 667 first-year students, there are 50 transfer students joining us and several visiting students. And I am proud to announce that 22% percent of our students are multicultural students, among the most diverse in our history!

As a way of talking about the four years ahead (yes, I said four, not five), I'd like to make reference to the book that we asked all first-year students to read, *The Prince* by Machiavelli. The book is a disturbing discussion of leadership. Machiavelli seems to argue that the ends justify the means. To him, the only end that matters for those in power is to remain in power. The means that they should use, he writes, often includes using ruthlessness and violence to intimidate into submission those living in their dominion. When it comes to acting virtuously, Machiavelli is cynical. He says, if a prince wants to maintain his rule he must be prepared not to be virtuous because his subjects will view him as weak and take advantage of him.

Machiavelli's blueprint for leadership has been followed by tyrants around the world - we seem to be seeing it in Syria now, but it has no place in the United States - be it in government, business, education or other institutions. The challenge for your generation of leaders is how to be both virtuous and effective in leading. At Augustana, it is our mission to help our students grow in virtue, while at the same time learning to be effective in leading. At Augustana, it is our mission to hope our students grow in mind, spirit and body. In the words of Fredrick Buechner, we want to help you find the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need. It's a place we refer to as your vocation, or calling.

It would be easy to write of *The Prince* as a book about Italy in the early 16th century. But why has it endured, even though its message is so offensive to our sensibilities? Though the thesis of the book, the ends justify the means, is wrong, the book does offer some enduring observations about human behavior. Michael Lind, a columnist for Salon magazine, makes an astute observation about Machiavelli and today's political leaders. He talks about the difficulty of reforming our laws and government - something most Americans think is badly needed. What he says could apply to any leader who advocates for reform. Listen to this statement form

Machiavelli and ask yourself whether it is true:

It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order, this lukewarmness arising partly from fear of their adversaries. . . who do not truly believe in anything new until they have had actual experience of it.

Students and parents, think about times in your own lives when you have witnessed this kind of resistance to change. When there is a need for changes, do people with vested self-interest rally around the status quo, making reform very difficult? I often see it in government, within business and nonprofit organizations, and yes, in education, sometimes right here at home. Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher was right in saying that change is the only constant, and Machiavelli was right in noting there is tremendous resistance to change. Leaders need courage to stand up to this resistance, though not as Machiavelli suggests by being ruthless. I would suggest that when it comes to effecting change, the alternative to ruthlessness is the power of critical thinking.

At Augustana, we emphasize helping you gain critical thinking skills, so that you will be able to use the power of persuasion to lead and participate in the needed changes ahead.

What is critical thinking? First, let me tell you what it is not. Critical thinking is not being self-righteously critical of everything. Rather it is a structure for thought. Critical thinkers question assumptions. They question the facts. They ask about logic. They ask the tough questions: why is it this way? How do we know it must be this way? What if we look at it differently? The key to becoming a critical thinker is to look at problems from different angles and different ways of knowing, with the goal of developing a more creative solution to the problem.

Have you ever noticed what children do when given a crystal? They look through the crystal, turning it to see various parts of the room from different angles. The child might hold it up to the light, so that the crystal separates the light into the component parts of a rainbow.

At Augustana, we will challenge you to turn the crystal and hold it up to the light to ascertain the truth. We turn the crystal by looking at issues from different angles. How does this problem look from the perspective of a philosopher, an economist, a scientist, a theologian, a psychologist or a sociologist? We look at issues from not only our own culture but different cultures. We consider seriously the arguments of people who disagree with us. Using what we learn, we then develop a conclusion and, often, an action plan to persuade others of our conclusion.

By stepping outside of yourself and looking at things from a different angle, you will engage an important type of thinking; namely, reflective, critical thinking. You will turn the crystal.

Practical advice

Well, enough high-mindedness (not that high-mindedness is all bad!). Let's get down to the nitty-gritty. I'd like to share four bits of practical advice about how to make the most of this special community called Augustana College.

First, recognize that learning at Augustana is about more than the classroom. Much happens outside of the classroom. You'll have many opportunities to get involved in campus life, choosing from nearly 200 clubs and organized activities. Many of you will organize service projects. Still others will travel abroad or do internships with businesses, non-profits or government organizations. Through our Augie Choice program, we'll give you \$2,000 in your junior or senior year to assist you in such special learning opportunities. But, beware: No one will force you to take advantage of the many opportunities outside of the classroom at Augustana. You need to take the initiative. Augustana is a community of doers, not observers. Resolve now to be a doer at the college. Resolve to be fully invested in your Augustana experience.

Do something new and outside your comfort zone. Row crew, try out for a theater production, join a music ensemble, start a radio show, join debate, or get active in student government. Get active in Campus Ministries. Participate in a new club sport or intramural sport. We've started more than 50 new clubs here in the past decade. In most cases, not much experience is necessary. You'll meet new friends and broaden your horizons, and you'll have a lot of fun. If we don't have a club that meets your interests, come to me with your friends and I will try to provide the seed money to start a new club.

Second, and very important, get to know your professors outside the classroom. Augustana College has one of the most favorable student/faculty ratios you'll find. Our faculty members are among the most impressive and brightest people I know. And they are here for you. Many of you will have the opportunity to work on a research project of your choosing with a faculty member. This is an important opportunity at Augustana, one that most schools do not make available to undergraduates. Take advantage of these opportunities. There is no better way to finish your college years than to add to the body of knowledge or to serve the community through a senior research project. And besides, getting to know your professors will help them write good letters of reference!

Third, don't take yourself too seriously. Be a bit easy on yourself. You all have distinguished high school records, but for most there will be a few bumps in the road. You might find the courses here a bit difficult at first. You might not hit a home run on every exam. You might find the transition to college is a time of soul-searching, which is not always easy. You may find that the major you thought was a good fit is not, but another major appears to be a better fit. That is OK. Be easy on yourself. Give it time. Few students flunk out of Augustana College and almost all students eventually find the right major, the right group of friends and the right activities. And speaking about being easy on yourself, have some fun at Augustana College. Study hard, but do more than study. It isn't only academics here. This is a seven-day-a-week, 16-hour-a-day campus. The friendships you build here will last a lifetime. Most of you, when you reach your parents' age, will count your college years among the most important, and most enjoyable, years of your life. Take advantage of it. Look around the room. Many of your lifelong friendships will start here.

Fourth, savor the journey. Your college years are not to be rushed through. Don't regard Augustana as just a ticket to get a degree and then a job. Regard it as a place of growth. Regard Augustana as an "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." Invest yourselves fully in the Augustana experience, for you'll never have an opportunity like this again.

Well, my time is nearly up. Let me conclude by saying to the Class of 2016 that I am anxious to get to know you

better. Parents, we invite you back for Family Weekend, and my wife Jane and I will have an open house so we might get to know you better, as well.

Best wishes to the Class of 2016. I strongly suspect the next four years may be some of the best four years of your lives!



AUGUSTANA COLLEGE

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