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Employ your liberal arts education well

First-Year Opening Convocation, Aug. 22, 2013

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. Like you, we have been looking forward to this day.

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 choosing Augustana College. And while I'm at it, congratulations to the parents of our new students. As a parent of two sons who recently graduated from liberal arts colleges and as the parent of a daughter who graduated from Augustana this May, I know the investments parents make of time, energy and money to help students get where they are now. The college sincerely appreciates your commitment to your students.

Your class has already set several records. Augustana is no longer a well-kept secret! There were 6,159 applications for our class of 640 degree-seeking students. Your class was most selective in memory, meaning each of you admitted has earned the right to be here. In addition to the 640 first-year students, there are about 50 transfer students joining us and several visiting students. And I am proud to announce that 23 percent of our U.S. students are multicultural students, the most diverse class in our history! We are pleased to welcome 37 new international students, the largest number in our history.

This year is a very special one at Augustana. The college has invested nearly \$40 million to improve its facilities. Our award-winning renovation of Old Main is sure to impress, as virtually all of you will take classes there. And, opening in September will be the Austin Knowlton Athletic Complex, housing our football field, our track and the new Ken Anderson Sports Club, a great venue for gathering at football games and throughout the year. And we are very proud of our new Center for Student Life, which is surely one of the nicest in the nation. We opened the Center last week to our students who returned early, to rave reviews.

Choosing a liberal arts college

Students, over the last year you most likely visited quite a number of colleges and universities. You've considered the advantages and disadvantages of each. In picking Augustana, you have made a deliberate determination to select a small, residential college that will help you grow in mind, spirit and body.

What does it mean for you that you have chosen to attend a liberal arts college? It means a number of obvious things. You will not be in classes of 100. In fact, last year only 1 in 100 classes offered had more than 50 students. You will be taught by Augustana professors, not by graduate students working on their PhDs. You will be a name and not a number.

And, by selecting a liberal arts college you have selected the best path into careers and graduate school that is available. Did you know:

- The current issue of *Money* magazine calls the idea that a liberal arts degree doesn't prepare students for

careers one of the “Top Five Myths in Higher Education.” The magazine pointed out, for example, that the top 25 percent of history majors earn more than computer programming majors.

- Consider the facts: Though only 3 percent of America’s college graduates were educated at small, residential colleges, they represent 8 percent of Forbes magazine’s listing of the nations’ most successful CEOs and 8 percent of Peace Corps volunteers. I like this statistic, since it shows that a small residential college degree is wonderfully flexible. Why is it that you are nearly three times as likely to be a successful CEO and three times as likely to be a Peace Corp volunteer? It’s because small college graduates don’t get lost. They are fully engaged in their education and fully engaged in the work world. In addition to these statistics, 3 percent of Americans attending liberal arts colleges represent 19 percent of U.S. presidents and 20 percent of those elected to the National Academy of Sciences.

- In a 2011 survey conducted by Hardwick Day, 76 percent of liberal arts college graduates rated their college experience as highly effective in preparing them for their first job, compared to 66 percent who attended public flagship universities.

As important as graduate school admissions and first jobs are, a small, residential college education is about so much more. It is about have the skills that will sustain you in the first job and the last job. It prepares you for life. In a recent survey of new college graduates, 60 percent of liberal arts college graduates said they felt better prepared for life, compared to 34 percent who attended public flagship universities.

We’re about developing the skills to be a leader. We’re about developing the personal qualities that will make you a great spouse or partner and a great parent. We’re about developing the fortitude to handle the inevitable disappointments in life. And we’re about enjoying the finer things in life — the arts, traveling, discussing ideas and developing lasting friendships. And we are about spiritual growth — asking the big questions about life and creation.

Why are graduates of liberal arts colleges so successful? It is because we focus on the skills demanded by employers and civic institutions – critical thinking and problem-solving skills, writing skills, cooperative working skills, multicultural awareness and an ethical sense of self.

Perhaps the most important of these is critical thinking, so that you are able to use the power of persuasion to be leader and participate in the needed changes ahead.

What is critical thinking? First, let me tell you what it is not — it is not being self-righteous and being derogatory of everything. Rather it is a way of thinking. 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 idea of developing a more creative solution to the problem.

Have you ever noticed what children do if you give them 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 — from the perspective of a philosopher, an economist, a scientist, a theologian, a psychologist, 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.

Critical-thinking skills allow you to be creative problem-solvers. And that is what employers and graduate schools are looking for. They are looking for those who solve problems by turning the crystal to view questions through the lens of a historian, a theologian, a humanist, an economist, a political scientist or a psychologist.

As a way of talking about the four years ahead, I'd like to make reference to the book that we asked all first-year students to read, *Never Let Me Go*. Because all of our students have read and reread this book, parents and friends, let me tell you a bit about it. It is about the students of the mythical Hailsham Academy. These students are raised in a special way. They have one purpose in their lives — to provide vital organs for normal people. After they leave their school they will make a series of organ donations that will inevitably lead to their deaths. Students are told that when they die they have “completed” — that is they have completed the purpose of their lives.

The truth about their lives and their purposes is gradually revealed to the students. But as the students learn about the purpose others have assigned to their lives they never question it — they simply accept their lot in life. They don't try to run or escape. And they don't seriously question why they are the donors and not the more normal beneficiaries of donations. They simply don't do anything about it – either because they can't think that deeply, they can't make moral judgments or, most likely, they don't know how to do anything about it.

Though the story behind this novel might seem extreme, I think it speaks to us here today. That is, do we simply accept the plans that others have for us? Or should we look critically at those plans — asking whether those plans are our plans or the plans of others?

So take a minute to think about your plans for the future. At Augustana, we will ask you to carefully examine and re-examine those plans. And while you are examining those plans, we will ask you to develop a strategy for implementing those plans.

So what are your plans? Why did you choose to come to Augustana? What do you hope to accomplish in four years?

Well, I know what some of you parents are thinking: I hope they get a degree and then a job. That's not a bad goal: a degree and a job.

Let's talk about getting a degree in four years — yes, I said four years, not five years. Here is what a degree from Augustana looks like: a nice degree holder, high quality paper, the Augustana seal and my signature. The cost of the actual degree and degree holder is about \$18 — \$20 with postage.

But you are paying tens of thousands of dollars for this degree. It should be worth so much more. How much more is largely up to you. I am sorry to say that if you go to an employer or a graduate school and simply show them your degree, you aren't likely to simply get the job. Instead they will want to know what is behind the degree.

To meet your second goal, that you get a job (or get into graduate school), you need to make a plan, starting in your first year, to make sure there is value behind the degree. To make sure you have what employers and graduate schools want.

Unlike the students of Hailsham and unlike high school when you had your parents to help at most stages, you need to take charge of your own future.

So how do we help you do that? First we help you think more deeply about your career plans. More than half of you will develop new career plans before you graduate. As you think about those plans, we will facilitate this deeper exploration through courses, through conversations with your faculty advisors, by encouraging you to do internships and service learning and by talking to alumni and friends of the college. Doing so not only helps you test those preliminary goals you have set for yourself, it helps you develop valuable contacts.

And we help you develop and implement a plan to achieve those goals. We aim to give you a portfolio of experiences that will make both graduate schools and employers interested in what you have to offer. But no one will force you to take advantages of those experiences.

Here are the experiences I suggest you decide to include in your portfolio:

- The first is an internship experience. Our Augie Choice program will actually pay you a stipend of \$2,000 for most internships. These internships are available in the Quad Cities, across the U.S. and increasingly around the world. Use these experiences to develop connections that will help you after you graduate, even as you reflect on you own calling in the world.
- Second, see your faculty advisor and our career services office. We also have the Center for Vocation Reflection that can help you match up your passions with careers. The more you discuss your plans with faculty and staff the more insight you will have. For my daughter, a 15-minute conversation with a faculty member helped her develop her career plans and another 15-minute conversation helped her with her choice of graduate schools.
- Third, be fully invested. We often say that Augustana College students are doers, not observers. And so to properly recognize that our students are doers, we are starting a new program at Augustana that will give you two transcripts describing your time here. One is the traditional academic transcript, and the other is the co-curricular transcript. The latter will list your internships, study abroad experience, research experience, as well as your leadership experiences, service and campus involvement. Employers and graduate schools are interested in more than simply grades. They want to see that you are a well-rounded, fully-engaged person. Get involved in student activities at Augustana so you have a robust co-curricular transcript.

Learning at Augustana is about much, much more than 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.

Before I close, three pieces of practical advice:

Do something new and outside your comfort zone. Row crew, try out for a theater production, join a choir

or dance club, start a radio show on WAUG, join debate, or get active in student government. Engage with campus ministry. Participate in a new club sport or intramural sport. We've started more than 60 new clubs here in the last 10 years. In most cases, not much experience is necessary. You'll meet new friends and broaden your horizons — not to mention the fun you will have. 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, don't take yourself too seriously. You all have distinguished high school records, but for most of you there will be bumps in the road as you transition to college. You might find the courses here a bit difficult at first. You might not hit a home run on every exam. You might find this 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 don't forget to 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.

Third, enjoy the journey. Your college years are not to be rushed through. It is not simply about doing well on exams. Don't regard Augustana as little more than a punch-card to pass exams and get a degree and then a job.

Speaking of exams, will you all repeat after me: "Professor is it on the exam?" OK, you said it once and that's the last time I want you to say it. Augustana is about more than exams. Regard it as a place of growth in mind body and spirit. Regard Augustana as a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." Invest yourselves fully in the Augustana experience, because you will never have an opportunity like this again.

Well, my time is nearly up. Let me conclude by saying I look forward to getting to know each of you a bit better. Parents, we invite you back for Family Weekend. My wife and I will have an open house so we might get to know you better. Students, stop by to visit me during my open hours in our library coffee shop. And we also hope to see each student at events at the Dahl President's Home.

Best wishes to the Class of 2017. I strongly suspect the next four years may be the best four years of your 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