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## On Recruiting Diverse Students, Rooted in Mission

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# On Recruiting Diverse Students, Rooted in Mission



*Jason Mahn interviewed Eric Rowell earlier this spring to discuss the recruitment of diverse students at Augustana College (Rock Island, IL), the college's response to the Supreme Court decisions on affirmative action this past summer, and how this important work is rooted in Augustana's commitment to its Lutheran identity and to educating for vocation.*

**Jason:** How long have you been working at Augustana?

**Eric:** I have been at Augustana College now almost 22 years.

**Jason:** And you were a student here before that, correct?

**Eric:** Yes—class of 1993.

**Jason:** And so, you're a black man going to Augustana at a time when Augustana was far less diverse (ethnically, racially,

and otherwise) than we are today. What was your experience in the late 80s and early 90s like?

**Eric:** One of the most relevant things is how I was recruited to Augustana College. I'm from Chicago. I grew up on the south side in a predominantly African American community. There was an Augustana representative that came to visit my high school during a college fair. I wanted to play basketball, so he told our head coach about me, and the coach came to Chicago to see me play. But I was also senior class president and captain

of the basketball team, and those leadership positions mattered to Augustana.

Augie, at that time, was about 95 percent white. But it was also very interested in bringing kids from a variety of different backgrounds to Augustana. And now we've expanded that by searching beyond the region of the Midwest to the rest of the nation and the world.

**Jason:** Why is recruiting a diverse set of students so important to schools such as Augustana?

**Eric:** One of the reasons that we do so is because there's a lot of competition in the Chicagoland area (our traditional "market") and so now we recruit students from all over the country. But beyond the fact that we need *a certain number of students*, we also need *a certain blend of student backgrounds and experiences*. Having a diverse classroom is really important. Not only do the students get to learn the subject matter, they also get to learn from each other. What's so wonderful is the opportunity to learn beside and from students who come from a variety of different backgrounds so that you, as a person, can feel comfortable with those individuals now and in the future. That comfort and ability to work across lines of difference leads to greater

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opportunities, both personally and professionally. That comfort, in turn, allows students to contribute more to society as well because they have formed new skill sets.

**Jason:** As I remember it, one way that advocates of affirmative action during last summer's (2023) Supreme Court cases argued their point was to say that colleges and universities depend on a diverse student body in order to deliver the kind of deep, holistic education they promise. Is that true in Augustana's case?

**Eric:** Absolutely.

**Jason:** What was the conversation like around the Admissions Office at Augustana when these Supreme Court cases restricting affirmation action were coming down the pipeline?

**Eric:** I think we realized that not much was going to change with us here at Augustana. We really focus on the academic attributes of the students that we admit to Augustana. We just believe that academically talented and promising students come from all parts of the nation and world—from rural Illinois to inner city Chicago, from Pakistan and California—and so we need to go far and wide to find them. So we didn't and don't have to change anything in terms of any sort of "race-conscious" admittance. We focus on offering admissions to all promising and deserving applicants. We are certainly not going to bring in fewer students or a more monolithic student body because of those court decisions. We continue to go out to a variety of communities—as Augustana did when I was recruited 35 years ago.

**Jason:** Is affirmative action a word that you use in admissions?

**Eric:** Not very often. And not when I was a student here. I think what's important is, again, just being an institution that really works hard to create a classroom where kids get to learn from one another. This means you have to go out and find kids from a variety of backgrounds. We are now competing on a national level for our students, but our practices are still the same in terms of finding kids that are eager to have a great education and will value what they experience at Augustana.

**Jason:** Does having more students of color help us increase our diversity even more?

**Eric:** Absolutely. Oftentimes students of color want to go someplace where there's representation of themselves. But again, we live in an era where the world is smaller. All students and people are much more comfortable with people that are different through their experiences with social media, arts and entertainment, and athletics. So there is a snowball effect when it comes to recruiting and admitting diverse students, when you already possess a variety of different cultures. Having diversity definitely makes enhancing diversity easier, but you still have to reach out.

**Jason:** Is there a link between the Lutheran values of Augustana and the fact that we're a Lutheran liberal arts school, on the one hand, and the goals that you've articulated in terms of recruiting a diverse student body, on the other hand?

**Eric:** Definitely there's a connection. As a Lutheran College, we talk about vocation. We talk about being able to find meaningful work and your purpose in life. We talk about being proud of the reflection you want to have staring back at you in the mirror. We help our students find something that allows them to feel whole, and to be able to contribute to the good of society. I saw this Lutheran emphasis on vocation already in the early 90s, when I was a student. I also saw it when I worked in the Advancement Office and got to meet alumni who graduated 50 years before I did. So much has changed, but that Lutheran ethos—this calling to do good work in the world—has remained the spirit of this place for the whole history of our school. We don't have nearly as many Lutherans now, and that also has something to do with becoming much more ethnically and racially and religiously diverse. But the conditions that were set forth in 1860 still remain at Augustana. This is a place that I'm extremely proud of. I enjoy working here and trying to find those kids I believe will be great fits, and then help shape their minds, bodies, and spirits so that they can go out there and make the world a better place.

**Jason:** Thank you, Eric.

**Eric:** My pleasure.