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Letter to Angie

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Letter to Angie | Augustana College

College president's advice to daughter: Learn to ask the *Really?* questions

In this uncertain and rapidly changing world, parents ask me as a college president what advice they should give their children as they head off to college. I found myself emotionally invested in the response this year, because one of the eager young students I saw on opening day at Augustana College was my youngest child and only daughter. And so, not just as a college president but also as a father, here is what I would like to tell my daughter, and by extension all of the young people starting college.

Dear Angie,

It's been 37 years since I left my parents' house and went off to school, but I still remember it clearly. I knew just what I was going to do with my life. If you had told me I would someday become a college president, I would have laughed. There's a lesson in that. Despite the questions you keep getting from adults about what you're going to do, the next four years are not about preparing you for your first job. They're more about preparing you for a life well lived, including your first career and your last one.

When I was in your shoes, back before the Internet, the environmental movement and the war on terrorism, I had no idea how much the world would change.

My generation bears responsibility for much of this change, for good and ill. Though we came of age as the most educated generation in human history, our spectacular lack of perspective and restraint led to America's largest economic meltdown since the Great Depression, a mess I am ashamed to say we are leaving to you to clean up. On the other hand, my generation worked hard to tear down walls of division in our own nation and around the world. We look forward to the ways you will build on this work to create an even stronger, more diverse America.

How do you think the world will change in your future? Odds are that change will be more dramatic and faster paced than anything you can imagine. That's why these next four years are so important. The way you approach your college education will play a major role in determining how well you will navigate the uncharted waters that lie ahead for you and your generation.

So what's my advice? I don't plan to tell you what classes you should take or what you should choose for a major. I trust that will come into focus for you over the next year or two. And I hope you'll remember that a real education doesn't simply offer you a street map to a job. It opens the atlas on a world of possibility. No matter what you study, make sure you stretch your horizons, broaden your perspective and take time for introspection. That will get you started on what Socrates, one of the greatest teachers in all history, called "an examined life." That's what you will need -- along with the kind of creative, critical thinking that comes with it -- to thrive in the troubled world that awaits your generation's leadership.

I believe these qualities are what my generation too often lacks. Most of our failures as a society stem from a dearth of critical self-examination. Too often, my generation has failed to turn the crystal. We've looked at problems from one narrow perspective. What if our financial leaders had considered long-term sustainability rather than short-term profits? What if our business leaders, who have put us at risk for global climate change, were serious students of science, geography and ethics? What if today's leaders had taken classes in religion and political science with students who came from Iran, Pakistan, Israel or the Sudan?

In facing decisions that matter, highly intelligent people too often failed to ask what one of my colleagues calls the "Really?" questions:

-- I can get a mortgage even if I don't have a job. *Really?*

-- I can enjoy a 10-percent return on this investment without any risk. *Really?*

-- We can keep building gas-guzzling SUVs even though our access to cheap gas is near an end. *Really?*

By now I expect you're wondering what all this means for day-to-day decisions as you begin college life. That brings me to some hopes I have for you and every other college student. I hope you will stretch yourself. Leave your comfort zone and do constructive things that will surprise not just your parents, but even your best friends from high school. Go on a spring break service trip to a medical clinic in Nicaragua, help your classmates address a social problem, help your campus become more environmentally sustainable; help children from off campus learn to read.

I hope that you will take advantage of overseas study. When I was in school, these opportunities were limited to a few programs in Europe. Today your college has student programs on six continents (and even some opportunities on the seventh). It can be life changing to study energy policies in Brasilia or geology along the Yangtze River.

I hope you'll do your homework, pay attention in class and not be afraid to challenge your professors. When you come home, I want you to know the difference between an opinion and an informed opinion. To meet our world's needs for social, economic and environmental justice, we need educated people who know that difference.

I hope you will slow down long enough to reflect. Too many first-year college students are in such a hurry that they fail to spend much time thinking about bigger questions, but this can be an extraordinarily fruitful time to ponder your path in life. Remember that there's a big difference between a job and a calling. Thinking seriously about your calling means reflecting on who you want to be more than on what you want to do. That's a lesson our nation's most admirable leaders have learned. Discern your talents, passions, values and beliefs, and do so within the context of the world's needs as you see them. The jobs will fall into place.

I'll add my hope that you have some fun. Some of the friendships you will make over the next four years will sustain and nourish you for a lifetime. One of highlights of my job is getting to speak to 50th reunion classes

each spring. Every time I do, I am reminded that the college years are among the most important, and most enjoyable, years of your life.

If you pursue your education as I hope you will, then I'm confident you will be equipped to ask the "Really?" questions when your time comes. My final hope for you and every student who starts college this fall is that you will have the courage to do so.

Love,
Dad

Steven Bahls is president of Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, where his daughter Angela is enrolled as a first-year student.



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