

8-19-2010

Critical Thinking: The Solution to Drinking From a Fire Hose

Steven C. Bahls
Augustana College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/presidentsstatements>

Recommended Citation

Bahls, Steven C.. "Critical Thinking: The Solution to Drinking From a Fire Hose" (2010). *Speeches and Statements*.
<http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/presidentsstatements/46>

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the President's Office at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Speeches and Statements by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

Critical Thinking: The Solution to Drinking from a Fire Hose

Remarks to the First-Year Convocation, Aug. 19, 2009 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 years ago, Augustana College was founded. You have the special distinction of starting at Augustana in our 150th year!

How many institutions do you know that are 150 years old? 1860, the year of our founding, was the year that Pony Express made its first run from Saint Joseph, Missouri, to Sacramento, California. But more importantly, your college was founded on the eve of the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln was elected as president in 1860 and South Carolina seceded from the Union. Our founders believed that education was serious and important business. The fact that our country heading into the Civil War did not eliminate the need to education recent immigrants to our country.

It is an honor for me to be among the first to welcome you, the members of the Augustana College Class of 2014. Please allow me to congratulate you, on behalf of the faculty and staff, for your admission to the college. Applications to Augustana were the highest of any class in the college's history. There were 4,070 applications for our class of about 750. We were the most selective in admissions in any year in memory, meaning each of you admitted has earned the right to be here. Augustana is no longer a well kept secret!

In addition to the 750 first-year students, there are 52 transfer students joining us and nine visiting students. You come from 19 states and eight countries. And I am proud to announce that 17% percent of our students are multicultural students, making this the most diverse class in our history!

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 while I'm at it, congratulations to the parents of our new students. As the parent of a two sons who recently graduated from liberal arts colleges and as the parent of a current Augustana student, 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.

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, liberal arts college that will help you grow in mind, body and spirit.

What does it mean for you that you have chosen to attend liberal arts? It means a number of obvious things. You will not be in classes of 100. In fact, last year only one 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.

But there is more to this to a liberal arts education. Albert Einstein said this nearly 70 years ago:

"It is not so very important for a person to learn facts. For that he does not really need a college. He can learn

them from books. The value of an education at a **liberal arts** college is not learning of many facts but the training of the mind to think something that cannot be learned from textbooks.”

What do you make of what Einstein says? It is “not so very important for a person to learn the facts?” Students, didn't you spend much of your high school education learning facts and gaining a knowledge base? How many of you forgot most of what you crammed for after the exam?

The average American can expect to have five careers and 10 jobs. If all you take from college is a detailed knowledge base in one area, you will be prepared for only your first job. At liberal arts colleges like Augustana we give you a broad, skills-laden education that prepares you for both your first and last jobs.

Einstein is correct to draw a distinction between “learning the facts” and “training the mind.” In today's world, the facts are more accessible than ever. Let me give an example. Assume you develop an illness or have a legal problem. Twenty five years ago, it might have been hard to find detailed information about the illness or the legal problem. It was only doctors and the lawyers that had access to the knowledge necessary to address the problem. Today, by surfing the internet you will find whole medical libraries and law libraries that are easily accessible. You can access almost the same amount of information as doctors and lawyers. But you will quickly surmise that having access to mountains of information does not allow you to identify solutions to your medical or legal issues.

Why? It is difficult to determine what parts of the information you access is valid and reliable. More importantly, it is difficult to determine how to use the information. What information is relevant and what is not? How can the information be translated into a plan of treatment or an action plan? The problem, of course, is that there is too much information. In these days of easy access to vast quantities of information, we often feel like we are drinking from a fire hose. There is just too much information coming at us too quickly.

So Einstein is correct. While access to facts and information is important, what is more important is how we use this information. And that is what liberal arts colleges are all about: how to effectively use information to solve problems. We are not about cramming facts and figures into your head that you will forget after the exam, though it is important to master a knowledge base. Instead we are about focusing on the most important skill of the 21st century – critical thinking. Those who learn to be “critical thinkers” will also be problem solvers.

When we engage in critical thinking, we seek the truth. We do so by clearly examining, in an unbiased way, the facts. We identify the applicable issues and apply various ways of thinking when analyzing the issue to develop a deeper understanding. The first year book, selected by the faculty, *Bottlemania*, was a good example of an author, Elizabeth Royte, applying critical thinking to a very complex problem of safe drinking water. Why, she asks, have sales of bottled water exploded, “in a country where more than 89 percent of tap water meets or exceeds federal health and safety regulations” and “regularly wins in blind taste tests against name-brand waters” How can this be the case, especially when bottled water costs 240 to 10,000 times more than tap water?

I must admit, I had mixed feelings when I started reading the book. I expected the book to be 250 pages of bashing Big Business or being cynical about the intelligence of American consumers. Though there was a bit of that, the book was about much more. It was a rather complete analysis of the impact of the bottled water industry on communities, on the health of its customers and on the environment. But it also looks critically at tap

water – problems with aging water systems, problems with filtering systems, and problems with uniformity in the quality of the water. It carefully examined assumptions instead of jumping to a conclusion and, therefore, amounted to a rather nuanced look the advantages and disadvantages of bottle water. In doing so, the book considered the issue of safe drinking from the viewpoint of various scientists, landowners around the wells, city officials, consumers and others. It considered safe water practices from not only the United States, but from around the world.

What I liked about the book, is how the author looked at the issue from many angles, before coming to a conclusion. That is what we call critical thinking. I call it turning the crystal.

Have you ever noticed what children do when they are 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 lights 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.

I believe that the sum of our experiences creates a lens through which we engage the world, and no two of these lenses are identical. While you are at Augustana, I hope that you will step back from your lens and work to examine the lens from which you view the world. You do so by being open to seeing the world through the lens of others – whether it be your fellow students, your faculty, or the great scholars whose ideas you will encounter here. Try to think about what it would be like to walk in their shoes.

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

Your generation is faced with many significant and vexing problems – the war on terror, climate change, a health care crisis and more immediately, and an economy in the dumps. One needs to turn the crystal by viewing the monumental problems of your time through the lens of a historian, a theologian, a humanist, an economist, a political scientist and a psychologist.

Could we have avoided the meltdown of our financial systems and of the economy, if nation's business and policy leaders had been more reflective? What if they had graduated from a liberal arts college like Augustana that combines business courses with ethics courses? What if they had taken a few more economics courses or history courses so as not to repeat past mistakes with the economy? What if they had taken a few more philosophy, religion and ethics course to get their priorities in line?

Had our business leaders looked at the economy not only through the eyes of those with stock option plans, but through the eyes of a widow with a fixed pension, would have been more reflective about not putting short-term gain before the long-term health of our economy? And would they have been more careful, if they looked at the economy through the eyes of your generation – a self-reliant generation of people who are not only concerned

about more than profit and year-end bonuses, but are also concerned about economic, social and environmental justice.

During the next four years, you'll learn to turn the crystal in a way in which you will discover self-evident truths by viewing problems from many angles. You will learn that there is more than first meets the eye about most of the problems we face and things we take for granted, like drinking water.

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 externships with businesses, non-profit or government organizations. Through our Augie Choice program, which you will be learning more about, we'll help you fund those projects. But, beware: No one will force you to take advantage of the many opportunities outside of the classroom at Augustana. You must 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 the Augustana experience, but in a way that is unique to who **you** are.

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 our radio station (WAUG), join debate, or get active in student government. Join with campus ministry. Participate in a new club sport or intramural sport. We've started 35 new clubs here in the last six 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, and very important, **get to know your professors** outside the classroom. Augustana College has one of the most favorable student/faculty ratios in the Midwest. 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. Socially, you may not click immediately. 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, **enjoy the journey**. Your college years are not to be rushed through. Don't regard Augustana as little more than 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 I look forward to getting to know each of you a bit better. Parents, we invite you back for Parents' 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 presidential home.

Best wishes to the Class of 2014. I strongly suspect the next four years may be some of 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 |