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Opening Convocation 2010

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Opening Convocation 2010 | Augustana College

Opening Convocation remarks by Augustana College President Steve Bahls, Aug. 16, 2010, Centennial Hall.

Welcome back to Augustana. This is the 150th opening meeting at the college, and I would ask that everyone please mark their calendars for Sept. 1, when we will celebrate the first day of classes 150 years ago. We will hold that evening celebration in Rock Island's Schwiebert Riverfront Park — if you have not yet been to Schwiebert Park, I encourage you to visit. It is a wonderful community asset and will provide a beautiful setting for our celebration.

We intend to reach out to the greater Rock Island community and thank our hometown for its wonderful support of the college over the years. We truly are blessed to be in this community.

The actual date of the 150th anniversary of the founding of the college occurred on June 5. I had the pleasure of spending June 5 with a few of you in Jefferson Prairie, Wisconsin. At least I thought it was going to be Jefferson Prairie, Wisconsin. The Lutheran church at Jefferson Prairie was the place at which the college was founded, but about 100 years ago that congregation moved its church building three blocks south, so it is now Jefferson Prairie, Illinois.

[We had a wonderful celebration there.](#) We decided to have the other Augustana College join us — Augustana, Sioux Falls — and we celebrated our first time together in 142 years...so we have apparently buried the hatchet with them, and it was a wonderful celebration.

The celebration made possible what was probably the most humbling moment in my seven years at Augustana: standing at the pulpit where Lars Paul Esbjörn would have stood, had the church not been reconstructed, and reflecting on 150 years of Augustana. It's been 150 years of outstanding commitment and extraordinary dedication to this enterprise.

As I thought about those 150 years, I thought about values associated with the college which I think have held true throughout that time. Those values are as relevant today as they were 150 years ago. Those values include:

- Intellectual curiosity that advances our mission to inspire the students we serve.
- A willingness to share our expertise, passion, time and attention with all in a way that helps our students grow in mind, body and spirit.
- An understanding of the importance of balance, and of leading a balanced life — balancing work and play, balancing our commitment to our discipline with our commitment to the college.
- A remarkable perseverance that has helped us ensure that we deliver on our promise to students, in good times and bad.

It's customary to talk a little about where we've been at the opening meeting, and where I see us going. First of all, it has been a good summer for the college:

- The college has been notified by those who administer the National Survey of Student Engagement that

Augustana has been exceptional in promoting student growth when compared to other colleges and universities, and we have been invited with a small group of other schools to engage in a deeper study of this success.

- We are pleased about our incoming class. We are expecting our largest-ever first-year class — 750 students — and we are meeting our goals for transfer students. Notably, a number of the students who suspended their studies in response to the recession are now returning to campus.
- We are expecting the most diverse class in the history of Augustana College. Seventeen percent of the incoming class identify themselves as persons of color. We can all be proud of this accomplishment. Together, we set as a goal several years ago that we would build enrollment toward better reflecting America and its diversity. We have not arrived at that goal, but we have made substantial progress.
- This class has very strong credentials, and I'm very proud of the work of the Admissions team in recruiting this class.
- We have set a new record for unrestricted giving to the college last year. With congratulations to Lynn Jackson and her Advancement team, we have now reached \$120 million in our comprehensive campaign, and expect to close the campaign in December of 2011 at approximately \$130 million.
- We certainly see more construction on campus than we have seen in recent summers. That's due to our commitment to invest in our infrastructure. It is wonderful to see Old Main's renovation underway, and we anticipate asking the Board of Trustees to establish a timetable for moving ahead with the second phase of the project, focusing on Old Main's interior remodeling.
- At a time when many other colleges are not hiring faculty, we have added 20 new faculty (albeit almost all non-tenure track), as well as several new administrators.
- Revenue was down 3% last year and is stable this year. This is due in part to the decline in average family income and the resultant increase in financial assistance to students, though the picture appears to be stabilizing.
- The campus is as beautiful as it has ever been, despite challenging weather throughout much of the summer, and I would like to thank our Grounds Crew for keeping the campus so polished.
- And thank you to those who served on the staff this summer — we have had more events than ever this summer, and I'm grateful to the staff members who helped welcome guests to campus.

I've been reporting to you regularly since 2008 about the financial condition of the college and the impact of the recession on the college. I am pleased to report that the college is continuing to remain strong. We are still not out of this recession — unemployment is stubbornly high, and people are concerned about retirement savings and what that means for families investing in a college education. It is a more cautious, less wealthy set of parents with whom we interact at Augustana.

We are coming through the recession, but it is not over. And I think that because of the recession, the ground has shifted under our feet. One of the new realities we are facing is that young people are increasingly focused on career education and outcomes when considering majors and their selection of colleges. Many have misinterpreted this trend, believing it to mean that liberal arts colleges like our college will fall out of favor compared with community colleges and state institutions. While this year's record first-year class disproves that contention, many students are nonetheless asking value-oriented questions. They want to know what skills they can expect to gain at Augustana College, what the world will be like for them after Augustana, and whether they will be able to find fulfilling jobs that speak to their sense of calling.

I believe this is part of a shift in students and their families asking about value and outcome, and that is precisely what we have been working on for the past 10 years at Augustana: shifting to an outcomes-based education, assessing student learning, and providing more internship, research and international experiences — all of which lead to great outcomes.

The second trend we need to deal with is less tuition revenue per student. Why do we have less net tuition revenue per student than in the past? Our statistics indicate there is less net family income and less overall family wealth. That stands to reason: ten percent of people in Illinois are unemployed, many are underemployed; there is less income available. Likewise, there is less net family worth — you may feel this yourself as you look at your retirement accounts and compare where they were two or three years ago.

Another element of this trend — and one we were anticipating — is that our students represent a broader spectrum of socio-economics in the State of Illinois. As the college becomes more diverse in reflecting a more diverse state, our greater economic diversity will impact the average income of the families we serve.

Finally, when it comes to net revenue per student, maybe we guessed wrong. Perhaps we were a little too generous in putting together financial aid packages and perhaps we were not as aggressive as we might have been in setting our price. Each year we set our price in January, and we don't know for certain if we set it correctly until about this time of the year. You might recall that two years ago, we set our price a little too high, and last year at this time we had too few students; it may be the case that this year we set our price too low, and now have more students than we might have anticipated. I would much rather be in the position we're in today than last year.

We will be looking very hard at the pricing of Augustana, and asking how we might price Augustana in a way that we have the revenue and resources we need to provide the quality of education that we would like without “pricing-out” those who might not have seen us as a viable option in the past. We need to have a lot of discussion about this in the next year, and I invite you to participate in that conversation.

As we look forward to the coming year, please let me digress a little bit.

As I told our new faculty last week, it was 25 years ago that I took my first job in higher education, as an assistant professor at the University of Montana in the mountain town of Missoula. Little did I know how fulfilling a career in higher education would be. And little did I know how much change in higher education we would see over the following quarter century.

Twenty-five years ago, I had never heard of the internet. While 25 years ago we talked a great deal about diversity at colleges, we didn't understand what it takes to achieve diversity. We didn't make a commitment to change our ways in order to make our campuses more welcoming to more diverse populations. That has significantly changed. Twenty-five years ago, I recall sitting in endless faculty meetings talking about curriculum and teaching — the words “assessment” and “learning” were not uttered back then. At Augustana, together we have made that shift. New faculty members: one of you may be standing here 25 years from today...I know I won't...what shifts will there be then?

Although it was 25 years ago that I started teaching, it was 51 years ago that I started going to school, at Byron

Rice elementary school in Des Moines, Iowa. So it has been more than a half century since I was first asked to address – in an academic setting – “What I did last summer.”

This year Jane and I decided to spend two weeks camping on and near the Arctic Ocean in Ivvavik National Park in the far Northwest corner of Canada, abutting our Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. We rafted down the Firth River with a group of 13 others, ending at the Arctic Ocean.

In preparation for the trip, I was a little nervous about what type of clothing to bring. It is summer, so should I bring shorts? It's also the Arctic, so should I bring a parka? The best advice we received is, I think, sage advice indeed: “There is no such thing as bad weather, there is only inappropriate clothing.” So we packed up *everything*; everything from short-sleeve shirts to long underwear and even insulated snow pants.

I've been thinking about that advice, as it relates to Augustana. You could argue that we in higher education have been through bad weather, some rough sailing as it relates to the nation's economy. I think, however, that you could also argue we have taken the appropriate measures to respond. Perhaps we might change that adage to “there is no such thing as a crisis in higher education, there are only inappropriate responses.” It's not very different from Shakespeare's advice: “The readiness is all.”

At Augustana, I think we have been nimble and adept in responding to this economic crisis, and I am very proud of what we have done in weathering it.

Another story from our trip: We met our group of fellow travelers in Inuvik, a First Nations town in the Northwest Territories, above the Arctic Circle. During late June and early July, the sun never sets that far north. We decided that we would not take our watches with us, and try to do without them for the next couple of weeks in this land of the midnight sun.

That was really tough for me. I live by my watch, and tend to schedule my life in 15-minute increments. I like my routine, and my routine is tied to my watch and my cell phone and my Blackberry. When I get up every morning at 6:30, I roll out of bed and grab my 'security blanket' – my Blackberry – before starting my day. Each morning when we woke up on our trip, it was light. But of course it was light when we went to bed, too, and I didn't have my Blackberry to tell me what time it was. All I had to reach for when I rolled out of bed was my rubber rain-suit. Not much of a security blanket...

When I get up in the morning, I have a routine. The first part of that routine is my first major decision of the day – I walk to my closet and decide whether I'll wear a blue all-cotton dress shirt for the day or a white all-cotton dress shirt for the day. Well, there were no dress shirts on this adventure, so to maintain a sense of normalcy I started each day by deciding between my blue long underwear and my white long underwear. Even college presidents need security blankets.

We quickly lost track of time. We went to bed when we were tired, and woke up when we were refreshed. We ate when we were hungry and found a scenic place to pause on our journey. We hiked between rain storms and when the wind was strong enough to blow the bugs away. Instead of time being “half past one,” it was half past seeing a caribou or a quarter past seeing a musk ox. It might be an hour after watching the storm roll in, or an hour before taking a dip in the Arctic Ocean...an hour after great and memorable conversations around the

campfire.

It was a powerful thing for me – someone who lives by the clock – to have one of my core assumptions questioned; namely, to question my assumptions about the calendar, and about time. Golda Meir said, “I must govern the clock, not be governed by it.” For two weeks I governed the clock – half-past the caribou. I questioned my assumptions and as a result built a better life.

I’m still working on the take-aways. I’m trying to figure out how not to be so governed by the clock, and I’m also working to question some larger assumptions, especially those related to the pace of life. I would invite us – as a community – to let this be a year of questioning our assumptions. In past years, we have had pressing work to attend to together. You may recall the five buckets strategy we adopted last year – we have filled those buckets and they are overflowing.

I’m not here this year to ask you for new programs and new majors; I’m here this year to ask you to think about some of the larger questions that face Augustana College. Specifically, I would like to ask four questions that I hope we will consider together.

First, I would like us to take a look at our strategic plan. That plan – *Authentically Augustana* – is nearly six years old, and has provided us a playbook in guiding our work together. It is appropriate, now that we are coming through this recession, to ask about what we’ve accomplished under that plan. What do we have left to accomplish? If the ground has indeed shifted under our feet – less family income, students placing greater emphasis on outcomes – what does that mean for the plan?

Some have criticized the plan for being too focused on improving our inputs – our financial situation, our student-faculty ratio, et cetera – without enough emphasis on outputs. We need to take that criticism seriously, and ask whether we have appropriately linked inputs to outputs. We need to continue to ask how we become a more diverse college, because although we have made substantial progress in certain areas, we have not arrived.

I’ve asked Kent Barnds to head up a committee to look at these strategic issues. The committee is made up of representatives from across the campus, and Kent has assured me that there will be ample opportunity for all of us to reflect on the strategic plan.

What would I like to see result from this conversation? I don’t anticipate we will have a new strategic plan similar to our last one. *Authentically Augustana* is a comprehensive plan that shifted our course as an institution. Rather, I anticipate a bridge plan – a shorter-term plan addressing how we might best focus our efforts over the next several years, instead of a grand plan that shifts our direction. We don’t need a change in direction – Augustana College has been and remains one of the finest liberal arts colleges – but instead we could perhaps benefit from a period of introspection about what has changed, and how we might continue to strengthen the college.

Second, and associated with our strategic plan, is an update of our campus master plan. The Board has asked us to update this document with respect to physical facilities. How has the changing economy affected our facilities planning? Should we explore uniting the roles of the study, the living room and the dining room of the

campus in a combined student center, perhaps not unlike Goucher College?

We need to develop principles for prioritizing projects on campus with the overriding objective of improving student learning outcomes. We've had much discussion in recent years about our student center. The Board of Trustees voted to construct a student center between Andreen Hall and Swenson Geoscience, but that construction has been postponed due to the economic downturn. We will re-examine the assumptions that were used in the earlier process, and try to discern how that concept might be changed to reflect an evolving economic environment, as well as new thinking from other campuses, such as Goucher.

As we engage in a programmatic review of our strategic plan and a facilities review of our campus master plan, we will also, of course, be selecting a new academic dean. The academic dean is arguably the most important officer of the college. The president and the rest of the vice presidents try to develop the resources that support the core academic endeavor, overseen by the academic dean.

I have challenged Van Symons and the Dean Search Committee to select a leader who will work with the faculty to focus on advancing student learning, while working with the administration in generating sufficient resources to achieve our academic goals. I hope our new dean makes life uncomfortable for me, but I also hope our dean makes life uncomfortable on the academic side of the house, pushing all of us ahead to help students grow in mind, body and spirit.

It is my hope that the new dean will push us in a way that helps build consensus, in a way that brings us together, and reduces the we-versus-they attitude that has occasionally surfaced with respect to the administration and faculty. I would like all on the faculty to take a personal stake in the selection of a new dean, and participate fully in the process.

I'd like us to have open and honest conversation about what we want as a community. What do we expect from a dean? Is the dean owned by the administration? By the faculty? Or is the dean the link between the administration and faculty, charged with challenging both sides and making both sides uncomfortable?

I believe that if we address those three items thoughtfully and correctly, the next five-to-ten years will be great ones at Augustana. But if we don't do these correctly – if we don't have a meaningful bridge strategic plan, if we don't resolve our facilities issues, or if we invite a new dean to Augustana who finds herself or himself torn by divisions within our campus, I do not think our future will be as bright – and perhaps quite dim.

The fourth question I'd like us to consider is how we might find new ways to thrill our students. We talk about providing a solid and meaningful education, but I'd like us to thrill our students.

Many of you know Marty Carver, who is a former chair of the Augustana Board of Trustees. He was also CEO of Bandag, Incorporated – a company that retreads truck tires. Talk about a dull industry! I asked Marty once what he saw as the key to his company's success – why are his employees so enthusiastic? Why would anyone want to make a career in retreading truck tires? In large part he credits a goal Bandag set some years ago to thrill the customer. If they can thrill the buyer of retread tires, I am certain we can thrill our students.

Let's think about what thrills our students. That which thrills them certainly helps them grow – peak experiences such as faculty-guided research, international study and internships. All of these will continue to expand thanks

to the implementation of Augie Choice. One of the greatest pleasures of my job is meeting with students after a life-changing experience. And while many of these are the result of internships, international study and research with faculty members, sometimes that which thrills students is a campus job, working in the Advancement Office or Campus Ministries, where a possible calling is discerned. Sometimes it's a kind word from a Food Service colleague who knows the student's name, and knows when he or she has been going through a difficult time.

Augustana will remain a top-tier institution if we continue to thrill our students – providing the kinds of peak experiences that change their lives.

I look forward to engaging in these and other conversations with you during the coming year, and I thank you for your partnership in helping Augustana fulfill its mission of helping our students grow in mind, body and spirit, and preparing them for lives of leadership and service in our diverse and changing world.



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