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Steven C. Bahls
Augustana College

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Wanted: Leaders Who Think too Much

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First-Year Opening Convocation, Aug. 18, 2011

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 one years ago, Augustana College was founded. You are continuing in a great tradition with a college that opens doors for our students, in a way that they become the leaders of tomorrow.

How many institutions do you know that are 151 years old? 1860, the year of our founding, was the year that the 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.

Just as our country was in a time of great change 151 years ago, I sense our country is in a time of great change today — technological change, demographic change, environmental change and societal change. Some changes will be welcomed and some will be difficult. Our mission is to prepare you to not only respond to change, but lead within your communities and families to shape the change. To do so we seek to prepare you not only for your first job, but your last job. To do so, we encourage you to ask not only what you want to be, but who you want to be.

Before talking a bit more about your years ahead, let me say it is an honor for me to be among the first to welcome you, the members of the Augustana College Class of 2015. 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 4,615 applications for our class of 717. 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 717 first-year students, there are 50 transfer students joining us and several visiting students. You come from 17 states and eight countries. And I am proud to announce that 17% percent of our students are multicultural students, tying with last year as 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 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.

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, 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 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.

As a way of talking about the four years ahead (yes, I said four, not five), I'd like to make reference to the book that we asked all first year students to read, *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury. The primary character in the book, Montag, lives in a futuristic, mindless society. The emphasis in this society is on conformity and mindless pleasure. Books are burned because they represent a threat to conformity and ask difficult questions that threaten the system. And Montag, like others, is not happy and longs to find meaning in life.

Along his way Montag meets a number of people who cause him to question his society's blind conformity. A former liberal arts college professor name Faber, tells Montag, "I don't talk about things, sir. I talk about the meaning of things. (That's why) I sit here and know I'm alive."

Most interesting to me was his interaction with a young girl name Clarisse. At first Montag was put off by her inquisitiveness. He said to her, "You think too many things." Clarisse observed that in a mindless society, people don't really talk about anything important. She said: "They name a lot of cars or clothes or swimming pools mostly and say how swell! But they are saying the same things and nobody says anything different from anybody else." Montag's boss, Beatty, said this about Clarisse after her mysterious death: "She was a time bomb... She didn't want to know how a thing was done, but why. That can be embarrassing."

Montag, through Faber and Clarisse, begins to question the groupthink so prevalent in his society. Clarisse was right — it's easier to engage in groupthink than think independently.

Groupthink in 2011

Today's society is far freer and far more inquisitive that the futuristic society that Bradbury imaged — but are there elements of groupthink in our society today? Of course.

But, students and parents, think about times in your own life you have witnessed groupthink. Did that groupthink sometimes lead to bad decisions?

How many of your parents have seen groupthink take place on the job, and perhaps have seen groupthink in organizations you are involved in. When this happens and when some poor soul like Clarisse or Faber asks "why" or explores alternatives, what are they told? You know — we have always done it this way.

We certainly see groupthink among political leaders and that is why confidence in our political leaders is at an all-time low. How many Democrats or Republicans have the courage to vote against their party line? Blind adherence to party lines in our country has made meaningful and principled compromise impossible. As a result, many believe that the actions, and inactions, in Washington D.C., are compromising the future of our

country — all to the detriment our students' generation.

We need more leaders that think outside party lines — that think too much. That ask why, not how.

Critical thinking

How do we avoid groupthink? I would suggest to you that it is through the skills of critical thinking that we do so. At Augustana, we emphasize helping you gain critical thinking skills, so you will not be the mindless, unfulfilled conformist that Bradbury warned us about.

What is critical thinking? First, let me tell you what it is not — it is not being self-righteous and being critical 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 a child does 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 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.

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.

A generation's problems

Your generation is faced with many significant and vexing problems — the war on terror, climate change, a health care crisis and more immediately, an economy in the dumps and a government in gridlock. 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? Could we have avoided political gridlock if our nation's leaders dispensed with groupthink and knew how to forge creative solutions? 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? What if they had taken a few more psychology courses, economics course, and humanities courses to help them understand that critical thinking is not being critical of others, but critical thinking is about finding win-win solutions.

What if our leaders had more recently read and pondered books like *Fahrenheit 451* or the other great books you will read? Would they have been more thoughtful? 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 concerned about economic, social and environmental justice than who is ahead in some political horserace.

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 thinking too much is not a bad thing — and asking why, thought it makes other uncomfortable, is often the right thing to do.

Practical advice

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-profits or government organizations. Through our Augie Choice program, which you will be learning more about, we'll give you \$2,000 in your junior or senior year to 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 more than 40 new clubs here in the last eight 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. 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 a "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 parent's 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 2015. 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