

1-1-2003

"Liberal Arts Education and Courageous Servant Leadership"

Steven C. Bahls
Augustana College

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

Recommended Citation

Bahls, Steven C.. "Liberal Arts Education and Courageous Servant Leadership" (2003). *Speeches and Statements*.
<http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/presidentsstatements/2>

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.

Inaugural Address '03 | Augustana College

"Liberal Arts Education and Courageous Servant Leadership"

Chairperson Barnes, Bishop Wollersheim, President Hasselmo [\[1\]](#), Dr. Tredway, Trustees, Faculty, staff, students, alumni, family members and friends.

What an honor it is to stand before you today as the Eighth President of Augustana College. It is an awesome responsibility to follow Dr. Tredway and his predecessors - each of whom has advanced the mission of the college - each distinctively, yet all courageously. I am humbled.

Before making a few comments today, I want to thank the inauguration committee for its outstanding work in planning this wonderful inauguration weekend. I'd also like to thank our grounds crew - the campus is shining! And to our choir and band - the music is heavenly. It is heartening to see representatives from so many colleges and universities. I'm pleased to see so many members of the Augustana faculty and staff here - my respect for my new colleagues is immense. I'm also grateful to see so many alumni, including Dr. Hasselmo, and long-time friends of the college. Jane and I are grateful to our children, Daniel, Timothy and Angela, and to members of our extended family for their support. It is wonderful to see new friends and life-long friends here today. And to our students, let me say a special thank you. You are the reason we are here. Augustana students are second to none! But there is no person that I am more pleased to be on this stage with than my wife of 26 years and best friend, Jane. She will make lasting contributions to both the college and the Quad-Cities.

Jane and I thank each of you for your warm welcome to the Quad Cities, which are truly jewels on the banks of the Mississippi. We've been so impressed by what these communities have to offer-all the theater, art, music, fine food, great parks, welcoming churches, and community organizations and, above all, friendly and entrepreneurial citizens working hard to make this place even better.

I'd like to share my reflections with you today about how our history and our shared values can set the stage for Augustana College's commitment to excellence over the coming years.

The Determination of Our Founders

As many of you know, this college was founded in 1860, when pastors and delegates met in Jefferson Prairie, Wisconsin, to organize the Scandinavian Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Synod in North America. [\[2\]](#) At that time, they approved the constitution for a school of theology - the Augustana Seminary. From its inception, the school was committed to the liberal arts. This included teaching theology, history, geography, mathematics and the natural sciences, plus six languages: Latin, Hebrew, Greek, English, German, and, of course, Swedish.

What would motivate our first President, Lars Esbjorn, to establish a college on little more than a hope and a prayer? Was it foolhardy optimism? I believe it was courage, drawn from a deep and abiding faith. The primary mission of Augustana was to train servant-leaders: pastors and teachers who would minister to the needs of new immigrants from Sweden. Our founders were inspired by Martin Luther's views about the importance of a liberal arts education in understanding the Bible. Luther wrote: "I am persuaded that without knowledge of literature, pure theology cannot at all endure, just as heretofore, when letters have declined and lain prostrate,

theology, too, has wretchedly fallen and lain prostrate . . ." Luther was equally eloquent in his writing about the importance of languages, history, poetry, rhetoric and the natural sciences.

The challenges faced by our country when President Esbjorn founded the college remind me of the challenges facing us today. Like today, America in 1860 was facing an information revolution: April of that year saw the creation of the U.S. Pony Express. There was also a technological revolution on the horizon that would change the face of history and culture: That year saw the invention of an internal-combustion engine powered by coal gas. In November of 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected president. One month later, South Carolina seceded from the Union - the event that helped start the Civil War. Conrad Bergendoff, the college's fifth president, wrote that "Days of shadow lay before the new institution" from its beginning. [3] But its founders believed that what this country needed in troubled times was a generation of well-educated servant leaders. Augustana has always shed light on the shadows, firmly believing that knowledge and faith are indispensable in addressing challenges and seizing opportunities.

Through its history and despite its many challenges, Augustana's presidents have persevered. Presidents Hasselquist, Andreen, Bergendoff and Tredway each served for more than 25 years. Near the end of his long tenure, President Bergendoff observed that when he took office in 1935, no one could have predicted the growth in communism, the splitting of the atom, or the orbit of man-made satellites in space. When Dr. Tredway was appointed in 1975, could he have predicted the global epidemic of AIDS, the ability to clone and bio-engineer, the Internet revolution or the events and aftermath of September 11? As we gather today, what events that we can scarcely anticipate now will change the world over the next 15 to 20 years?

Like the early years of the college, these are both challenging and promising times. There are joys and heartbreaks ahead, many of which we cannot fathom today. How, then, should a liberal arts college prepare its students for the complex challenges of today and the more complex challenges of tomorrow?

The answer, I submit, is found in the enduring values the college has held throughout history. Those values are, first, an unshakable fidelity to the teaching of the liberal arts and sciences, and, second, a steadfast commitment to preparing students who are courageous servant leaders. I pledge to you that I will uphold these values as long as the stewardship of Augustana College is in my hands.

Augustana's Enduring Commitment to Liberal Arts and Sciences Education

Let's explore the first of these values, the teaching of the liberal arts and sciences. Eight years before President Esbjorn assumed office, John Henry Cardinal Newman delivered the lectures in Dublin that grew into the seminal work *The Idea of a University*. I first read this book when I was a college student and have never forgotten it. I don't know if President Esbjorn was influenced by Newman, but I'd like to think he was. In writing about the relationship of theology to knowledge, Newman made a forceful and eloquent case that knowledge is valuable for its own end. He said that those educated in the liberal arts "apprehend the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and its shade, its great points and its little A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom." [4]

We know this to be true today. People who have an active "life of the mind" live longer, are happier and have healthier relationships. Newman recognized, however, "that the training of the intellect, which is best for the

individual itself, best enables him to discharge his duties to our society." He argued that a citizenry educated in the liberal arts and sciences is important in "raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspirations, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life." [5]

Newman also spoke of the relationship between a liberal arts education and professional skills training. He was correct in cautioning that professional training is not the "sufficient end" of a liberal education. [6] Newman understood, as we understand, that professional education, when offered within the context of other studies, has an appropriate place. He said: "I say that a cultivated intellect, because it is good in itself, brings with it a power and a grace to every work and occupation which it undertakes." [7] He cautions professors in professional programs to view their professions "from a height" - by that he means professions should be viewed within the larger "survey of all knowledge." Professional studies, he argued, must gain from other disciplines "a special illumination and largeness of mind and freedom and self possession." [8] Jaroslav Pelikan elaborated on Newman's views in his more recent book, *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination*. He noted that in order "to qualify as a profession, an occupation or activity must involve some traditions of critical philosophical reflection." [9] Training for professions, it follows, is best within the context of the liberal arts so that "training is informed by . . . reflection" and "can be carried on in its full intellectual context." [10] Newman's words hold as true today as when he spoke them shortly before our college's founding.

I also agree with Martin Luther that faith is strengthened by knowledge. I feel the majesty of God when new ideas give me insight into truth and the human condition. I see the hand of the Creator when I learn about the natural and social sciences. I relish the times I see the Lord's signature in great art, music and literature. And I believe that there is a twinkle in God's eye when our faculty works with our students to discover and create new ideas.

There are many opportunities at Augustana to help all of our students explore their spirituality. We must seize these opportunities. If we do, the mastery of knowledge for many of our students will help them touch the hand of God.

In my favorite Bible verse, the prophet Micah calls us to "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God." [11] A liberal arts education well equips our students to live that way. I would submit, furthermore, that the grounds for helping our students grow in body, mind and spirit are particularly fertile at a church-related liberal arts college. At Augustana College, we are deliberate in working with all students to find their vocation-their life's calling. To Augustana students I would say: ask not *what* you want to be; ask *who* you want to be.

There is no doubt that America is stronger because of its liberal arts colleges. The skills most demanded by today's employers are not technical skills - they are critical thinking skills, creative thinking skills, problem solving skills, interpersonal skills and an appreciation for cultural and ethnic diversity. No wonder graduates of residential liberal arts colleges are nearly three times more likely than the typical college graduate to be on the Forbes list of the nation's most successful CEOs, and also nearly three times more likely to be Peace Corps volunteers.

Augustana's Enduring Commitment to Courageous Servant Leadership

Now let's consider the second fundamental value of the college, the commitment to courageous servant-leadership. The Book of Mark says "Those who desire to be great are first servants." [12] Robert Greenleaf, a longtime executive at AT&T, said that servant-leadership "begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead ." [13] Augustana College has practiced servant-leadership since its founding. Esbjorn and the presidents who followed him were themselves servant-leaders. In 1860, our mission was to train servant-leaders to minister to the needs of the immigrant Swedish Lutheran community in Illinois. Today, we prepare servant-leaders of all faiths and all ethnicities, to meet the challenges facing our global village in this new millennium.

Today's student needs a new generation of role models who understand the principles of servant leadership. The excesses and breaches of trust we see in governments, corporations and other institutions make it clear America needs a new type of leader. There are no finer groups of people to help today's students acquire the skills and values of servant leaders than the faculty and staff at Augustana College. Their commitment to helping students find their vocation is a model for other colleges and universities. When students first come to Augustana College, only 27% say they want to be community leaders. By the time our students graduate, that number increases dramatically to 63%. Our students are committed to doing community service, committed to diversity and committed to social justice.

The World War II generation is commonly regarded as the Greatest Generation because of its commitment to the common good. I believe that today's college students share many of the same commitments and will be the next Great Generation. In addition, members of this generation demonstrate a deep commitment to public service, they cherish cultural and global diversity, and they can manage multiple tasks at once. As important, this generation is delightfully idealistic. For our students to be the greatest generation, *my* generation must be faithful to its most noble calling - to provide a quality education to all in the next generation, whatever their background.

Augustana students, I believe, have the potential to make important contributions to this next Great Generation. Augustana's students have a record of outstanding achievement among all colleges and universities. Our athletes rank 5 th in the number of Academic All-Americans, in the company of large NCAA Division I powerhouses like Nebraska and Notre Dame. Our students rank 6 th in the number of appearances in the National Debate Tournament, in the company of elite institutions like Dartmouth and Harvard. We are proud of the high percentage of our students who go on to graduate schools.

Members of the Augustana community exhibit a special type of servant leadership: *courageous* servant leadership. The seven college presidents to go before me shared this important trait. They had courage. President Esbjorn did not wait until financial uncertainties were resolved before he founded the college. Likewise, in the 1880s, President Hasselquist and other Swedish immigrants had a dream of building one of the finest college buildings in the world, right here in Rock Island. Though the cost of the building far exceeded the cost of any other edifice built by Swedish immigrants, they persisted, and the result was Old Main, an enduring symbol of our college. Generations of students have benefited from their courage. The tradition of courageous presidents continued as Dr. Tredway led the college to build some of the finest library, science and technology buildings in the nation.

Martin Luther King talked about courage in 1961 in his sermon entitled "Transformed Nonconformists." His words seem like they could have been written yesterday: "In these days of worldwide confusion, there is a dire need for men and women who will courageously do battle for truth. . . . We must make a choice. Will we continue to march to the drumbeat of conformity and respectability, or will we, listening to the beat of a more distant drum, move to its echoing sounds?" "More than ever before," Dr. King said, "we are today challenged by the words of yesterday, 'Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.'"

[\[14\]](#)

The Challenges Ahead

Do we have the courage to be excellent? Do we have the courage to build on Augustana's reputation as one of the finest liberal arts colleges in our land? It will require us to be transformed nonconformists who use the resources entrusted to us in ways both creative and brave. For the administration, we must have the courage to develop a strategic plan to use our resources wisely. For our faculty, we must have the courage to go the distance as we revise our general education curriculum and consider requiring a senior-year capstone experience. For our students, courage entails pushing themselves academically, even when it is uncomfortable to do so. For our friends and alumni, courage means continuing to invest their time, talents and treasures in making sure the college is rich in human and intellectual capital.

I would be remiss not to mention that each member of our community must be courageous in helping to prepare a more diverse group of servant leaders. This past summer Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, in a landmark Supreme Court decision, observed: "In order to cultivate a set of leaders with legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry, it is necessary that the path to leadership be visibly open to talented and qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity. All members of our heterogeneous society must have confidence in the openness and integrity of the educational institution that provide this training." [\[15\]](#) Let us all commit to do our part to cherish the "marketplace of ideas" that is the natural fruit of diversity.

Augustana College is at an important point in its history. We can solidify and advance our position as one of American's finest residential liberal arts colleges. Though our endowment is small in proportion to our aspirations, student credentials and the level of student applications are at an all time high. We have a faculty, staff and board as talented as at any point in our history. Our campus is beautiful. Would you agree that there is no single word to better describe this college than "brilliant?"

The opportunities ahead are tremendous. We'll endeavor over the next five years to build a stronger endowment, so the quality of our educational program is secure and an Augustana education is available to all high-achieving students regardless of need. With the help of our alumni and friends, we'll continue upgrading our physical facilities in a way that enables the college to deliver the highest quality education. We'll do more than talk about greater diversity; we'll take affirmative steps to achieve it. We'll build strong relationships with the community, modeling for our students our belief that service to the community is a critical part of servant-leadership. Great colleges need great cities, and great cities need great colleges. We'll do our part to serve the Quad Cities. We'll cherish our affiliation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as we engage in a dialogue about the nature of our connectedness.

But most of all, we'll heed Dr. King's call to listen attentively to the distant drum calling us to be courageous as servant leaders, with the object of providing a world-class liberal arts education to the generations to come.

Permit me, please, to insert a personal note. To make this presidency as great as past presidencies, I'll need your help. A strong president needs an empowered faculty and courageous administrative team. An effective president needs visionary trustees. No college president can be effective without alumni and friends who actively work for the advancement of the college. No president can do it alone. I ask for your prayers that I will honor the college in all my actions and that I, too, can be a courageous servant-leader.

Let me close with the words of President Gustav Andreen: "God has been with our fore bearers and with us their children. Surely He will also direct the footsteps of coming generations so they may walk upon his paths and accomplish His work."

If our Swedish fore bearers were here today they would say "Gud valsinge Augustana College." God bless Augustana College.

[1] Dr. Nils Hasselmo is a graduate of Augustana College and was the President of the University of Minnesota. He is currently president of the Association of American Universities. He delivered the charge to President Bahls.

[2] The history of the college is found in two publications: Conrad Bergendoff, *Augustana...A Profession of Faith: A History of Augustana College*, 1860-1935 (Rock Island: Augustana Literary Publications, 1969) and Richard W. Solberg, *Lutheran Higher Education in North America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985)

[3] Ibid., p. 318

[4] John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of A University* (1852 reprinted by New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 76

[5] Ibid., p. 134

[6] Ibid., p. 125. Though Newman was writing about professional education within the context of a university, his views apply with equal force, I believe, to pre-professional education at a liberal arts college.

[7] Ibid., p. 126

[8] Ibid.

[9] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1992) p. 108.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Micah 6:8

[12] Mark 10:38

[13] Robert Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader* (Indianapolis: The Robert Greenleaf Center, 1970)

[14] Martin Luther King's sermon "Transformed Nonconformist" delivered in 1961 reproduced in Michael Warner, ed. *American Sermons* (New York: The Library of America, 1999) p. 841. The scriptural reference in his sermon is to Romans 12:2

[15] *Grutter v. Bollinger, United States Supreme Court*, Slip Opinion 02-241 (June 23, 2003)



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