What Unites and Divides This Community?
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“The soul ever yearns to be doing something.”
Cicero

“Every calling is great when greatly pursued.”
Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

Introduction

America is an US-THEM society, and Augustana is an US-THEM institution. Most of the divisions found at Augustana are self-created. Too often, students identify themselves by the groups they belong too rather than as individuals. I’ve heard students articulate the belief that if they belong to UTIC and FCA, then they are better Christian than someone who only attends chapel. Faculty members often pit their division or department against the institution as a whole. We think of faculty positions as departmental rather than institutional since a particular department’s needs are more important than the institution as a whole. Administrators and Support Staffers have their own “councils” because their perceived agendas are different. I would argue that the root of these divisions is lack of buy-in for what we are trying to accomplish. We have, it seems to me, forgotten that the purpose of Augustana is education, not simply surviving or serving various constituencies.

Right now, students do not believe that the courses they are taking are relevant to them—they are simply arbitrary requirements someone else created. Faculty members do not believe the Administration is focused on the right questions, and the Administration feels the faculty do not understand the fundamental constraints—both financial and geographic— that the College must operate under. Support staff find themselves caught between these other three constituencies, unappreciated and undervalued. These divisions are not, I think, unique to Augustana. They are, however, exacerbated at Augustana because of the many points of contact between these various constituencies. A question worth considering is what might allow these various constituencies to bridge their differences and allow them to converse in the same language?

Not surprisingly, at least to a historian, is that this question was asked long ago. Aristotle raised a similar question in the aftermath of the Greek’s defeat to the barbarian Macedonians. What could the Greeks and the Macedonians possibly have in common? Rather than focus on the differences between peoples, Aristotle’s Politics started from a different point of view. He asked an interesting question, why do any people live together? While Aristotle’s focus was really on the polis rather than the larger world, his question is worth asking for Augustana. Why do we come together at Augustana. What brings students, faculty, administrators, and support staff together? For Aristotle, the polis was “a partnership for living well.” Aristotle’s conclusion

My apologies to Dr. Jim Bies, Ms. AnneMarie Kowalcyzk, and Ms. Nancy Wright. I thought you would be submitting a written argument for this discussion too. I am sorry for the delay in getting these thoughts to you.
seems a succinct summary of what Augustana College ought to be about as well. It is what ultimately ought to unite our community.

The Argument

At very different levels and for very different reasons, the four elements that comprise Augustana—support staff, students, faculty, and administrators—exist to help each other live well. This ought to the foundation of unity at any educational institution. It is easy to recognize that what constitutes “living well” will differ for each constituency. Still, I think it is worth asking the question. What does living well in an academic setting mean? How does/could it manifest itself at Augustana? As a faculty member, my perspective is going to be different than the administrator, student, and staff member on this panel. Nevertheless, I will suggest that there is one thing that ought to unite all disparate segments of this campus—intellectual discovery.

At first glance the notion that the pursuit of intellectual discovery might unify the campus seems self-evident. I do not think so. Too many people, in all aspects of the campus, are unengaged in the process of intellectual discovery. Augustana ought to announce that only those interested in intellectual discovery are welcome. Faculty, do not come if you are uninterested in researching and stretching our students intellectually. Students, do not apply if you are not willing to work harder than you’ve ever worked in your life. Interviews for an administration appointment ought to ask how that person will work to enhance the academic enterprise, not just what skills they bring to a particular job. Support staff must also be engaged in this objective. Recognizing that all four constituencies are engaged toward the same end would allow the college to worry less about ‘brand identification,’ name recognition issues, and questions about who we ought to be recruiting as students.

What divides our community currently is the level of commitment to intellectual discovery. It is too easy to talk about faculty verse administrators, or students making the life of housekeeping miserable. What is more difficult to talk about is how each segment of the college has elements that limit our ability to honestly say we are pursuing intellectual discovery.

How many faculty members are recycling old lectures/discussions, not because they are still pertinent, but because it is easier than coming up with something new? Too many faculty members chose not to attend discipline specific conferences because they are unwilling to spend any of their own money and/or time in the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake. How often do faculty members fail to assign a writing assignment because they have too many students in their section? How many students decide, often before the course has even met, that a particular course is not worth their time? Why should a future first grade teacher have to know history? It is not a set part of the first grade curriculum. Why should a nursing major have to take French or German? Why should a history major take two science courses? What does physics or chemistry have to do with understanding Napoleon’s objectives in 1804? Too many students are focused on their degree rather than learning.

Administrators and support staff, who are usually not involved in the day-to-day pursuit of intellectual discovery, have an even tougher time maintaining the importance of intellectual discovery. Too often administrators make decisions for financial rather than intellectual reasons. Having served on a variety of committees and task-forces I know something about the limitations the College faces. Nevertheless, intellectual discovery ought to provide some opportunities for chance taking. It would also provide a consistent measure for justifying unpopular decisions among the college’s various constituencies.
Support staffers might not think about intellectual discovery as part of their job description. But it can be. The Social Science Division is fortunate to have two secretaries who see learning new types of software as an essential element of their job. They learn the nuances of the new Word or WordPerfect suites and then lead many of us through the transition. Their effort frees the faculty to continue to write, research, redo lectures, and meet with students. These secretaries create an environment that allows my pursuit of intellectual discovery to continue. The grounds crew comes in early and clears snow before I even arrive. I doubt they consider how their actions help sustain intellectual discovery. Wet and damp shoes make it difficult to think clearly and happily about almost any topic in the morning. Support staffers from custodians to cooks to maintenance workers make it possible for students and faculty to engage in what we ought to be doing—learning and discovering.

As a faculty member, I assume that learning is a students’ top priority. Honestly, I do not think that is true of many who are here. A surprising number of students come to Augustana to get a degree. They are more interested in their grade than what they learned. Augie is a stepping stone—to medical or PT school; Augie is a stepping stone between home and the “real world” of work, not a place to learn. School is an interruption of work, play, and self. Why do I have to read 4 books in each class? Doesn’t the professor know I have to work? Doesn’t the professor know that I really do not want my world shaken? Why do I need to know that the book of Genesis contains at least 3 different creation stories? Does the professor know I am a good Christian? He must be an atheist.

In a sense, the institution fosters this anti-intellectual climate by making off-campus “work” opportunities a part of the student recruitment package. Come to Sioux Falls, not Brookings, because you can find work more easily while a student. What happened to being a student first and foremost? In the past we gave credit to students who attended remedial workshops before the start of school. We may still offer the program, I do not know. I think the program weakens the notion of learning as important for its own sake. Why not say to them, we want you, we think you can make it here, but you must do this without academic reward because this what the rest of the students will already have before they come.

Being a student first might mean doing without certain material possessions or opportunities; it also means, gaining a fuller appreciation of who you are, where you came from, and, perhaps, where you are going. Too many students, feeling compelled to be more marketable, double major. They do so for their resume, not for their personal satisfaction. What is the result? My experience suggests that in too many cases it is disappointment and unhappiness with the College.

This past January, Richard Swanson led a UMAIE course to Hawaii. We had two students experience a type of intellectual discovery that would love to see every student experience, and every class produce. One student found himself forced to rethink his entire educational experience. He had spent his entire college career, including the choice of his major, focused on learning what it would take to make money upon graduation. During our January term this student found himself engaged in an internal debate: is making money more important than making a difference? In his own way, this student was internalizing John Steinbeck’s quote

Money’s easy to make if it’s money you want. But with few exceptions people don’t want money. They want luxury and they want love and they want admiration.
A second student, this one an Augustana student, experienced something similar. Where ever we had gone, he had spent time thinking about how to develop the area. How, he wondered, could it become accessible, resort-like, welcoming to tourists? One day we visited Kealakakua Bay. This is where the Hawaiians ultimately killed Captain James Cook, though not right away. As we discussed the readings about Cook’s death, and examined the geography of the region, this student found himself rethinking his assumption that hotels and development were always a positive good for a community. The discussion, followed by an opportunity of swimming where thousands of Hawaiians had swum out to meet Cook’s boat, gave him a new perspective of the issues surrounding Hawaiian history. Is it possible that no growth may in fact be more important, in this case for historical reasons, than growth for growth’s sake? This student had just encountered Francis Bacon’s maxim, “A man is but what he knowth?”

Why might these two students, have their epiphany while on a UMAIE trip? It is not because our Hawaii trip is unique. I think other UMAIE courses have a similar impact on their students. There is, I think, something unique about the UMAIE student, and it is not their finances. All the Augustana students I know who take UMAIE courses scrimp and save to afford the courses. They have made their UMAIE trip a priority. But there is something else at work. UMAIE students, even when they are playing at night, are students first. They are students engaged in the enterprise of learning and discovering. Learning and discovering not only about the subject, but about themselves. They are not worried about making it to work on time. They have time to reflect and focus on the course. For the first time, often since they were in high school, they do not have their time divided by work, volunteer obligations, or computer game tournaments.

Why is the articulation of intellectual discovery as a unifier of Augustana College so important? It is important because it suggests a way to unify the various segments found on this campus. Placing intellectual discovery as the overriding goal of our endeavor would allow us to prioritize what is important. It would also allow the institution to plan rather than react for the future. Faculty must strive to teach better and research more. Not because it is going to produce a pay raise, but for the intellectual discoveries we make when we strive to do these things. Students, must be willing students. Place school above work or playing. You will have more years than you care to admit to work. As for playing, I’m not suggesting you stop. I’m only suggesting you curtail it. Take a chance, open yourself up to change. Understand that what a professor says may make no sense today, but might later. Rigidity of thought is not something to be proud of (and this is good advice for faculty too). Learning is not about a grade. It is about the time you put into a course, the discoveries you make during that academic enquiry, and finally, it is about incorporating your discoveries into your understanding of the world. Students, feeling compelled to be more marketable, double major. They do so for their resume, not for their personal satisfaction or for intellectual discovery. Stop. Pick a major and take courses that compliment it or bring you personal satisfaction.

Administrators ought to ask if any meeting is going to help foster “intellectual discovery” before calling any meeting. I’ve sat in way too many meetings that were not only a waste of time, we met simply because we needed to gather so we could document the meeting for some outside entity. Support staff must understand that the work they do is essential for creating an environment where learning takes place. You might not get credit for it, but please understand it is appreciated.

Conclusion
When I began writing this short essay I started with the assumption that I would talk about divisions between the “liberal arts” and our “pre-professional programs.” I thought I would talk about the pros and cons of diversity in a place like Augustana. Perhaps I should have, but I think a theme such as ‘intellectual discovery’ allows one to suggest why divisions such as liberal arts and pre-professional programs are self-created and ultimately self-defeating. A recent study suggested the average teacher lasted in the classroom only 5 years. What will Augustana education majors do for the next thirty years of their working life? The average American worker will change job seven times. If all one knows is business then one is likely to not recognize potential opportunities for self-fulfillment and perhaps wealth. The average accountant will not remain an accountant during the course of his or her working life. Pursuing intellectual discovery now allows everyone to focus on what we ought to be about, nourishment of the mind.