

2016 Report to ELCA Synod Assemblies

Institutions of higher education often are at the forefront in leading cultural shifts and significant societal changes. Over the course of the past year, colleges and universities across the country have stepped up and spoken out against systemic injustices related to racism, the disappearing middle class, educational disparity and the criminal justice system. Much has been done in the name of equality, yet I fear we are focused more on equality than true equity within our society.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities has described the difference as follows: *Equality is about sameness; it focuses on making sure everyone gets the same thing. Equity is about fairness; it ensures that each person gets what [the person] needs. This distinction is especially important in education, where there are visible gaps in opportunities and outcomes for large numbers of students... To effectively educate today's students, higher education must focus on both equity and equality—to make the most empowering forms of college learning available to all students.*

At Augustana, we are proud that we treat students equally, with strong anti-discrimination policies in admissions and in our educational programs. But do we treat students equally or fairly? Augustana has certainly made progress. Yet the graduation rate of historically under-represented groups, while improving, still lags that of white students. And according to our research, historically under-represented students have less of a sense of belonging at Augustana than white students.

Many students need the helping hand others have taken for granted. First-generation students do not always have the benefit of someone who knows the ropes of college. International students, especially those whose second language is English, may need assistance to fully engage in college. Students with religious beliefs other than those of our Christian founders need to see concrete support of their spiritual journeys. Members of historically under-represented racial groups need role models, mentors and champions—as I had during my college years.

Micah 6:8 says, “And what does the Lord require of you but to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?”

The scripture addresses both justice and mercy, which are very different from each other. Justice is about what people deserve. Mercy is often about forbearance—protecting people from the harsh consequences of what they deserve. Justice is about equality—treating everyone equally. Mercy is about giving a helping hand to all, in order that all have similar quality outcomes.

So what is more important at Augustana—justice or mercy? Equality or equity? Each is important.

That's why I've urged for increasing diversity within the ranks of our faculty, administration and staff. That's why I have agreed with our board to devote the next four or five years to working to double our endowment, with the goal of making Augustana affordable to all.

At Augustana, as with many institutions of higher education, we must listen to our students to better understand the disparities they experience, and how we can become part of the solution.



Steven C. Bahls, President