

Associated Colleges of Illinois

Augustana College shines with unique programs for students, important contributions to Quad Cities' economy

President Steven Bahls says college benefits from local community, alumni and ACI program

[Steven Bahls](#) has enjoyed multiple and varied careers. He is a lawyer and CPA, with experience as a law school faculty member and dean, and now, a college president. Some amateur photography work, too. His journey to [Augustana College](#), Rock Island, began with a suggestion from a small college president, Sister Joel Read of Alverno College in Milwaukee. In the mid 1980s, Bahls was a successful attorney doing *pro bono* work for Alverno, when she suggested he consider a career in academia. His wife Jane, was a faculty member at the college at the time, teaching religious studies.

Augustana College

Bahls listened to that advice, and with some recommendations from Sister Read, left to join the law faculty at the University of Montana, later becoming associate law school dean. And while in Montana, Bahls practiced his passion for photography. Jane had become a successful freelance travel writer, and his photographs accompanied many of her stories about Montana

and Idaho, appearing in publications such as the *Chicago Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor* and *American West*.



Augustana College President Steven C. Bahls

In 1994, they left Montana. He became dean of the Capital University Law School, Columbus, Ohio, before joining Augustana nearly a decade later as its president in 2003. Bahls was educated at the University of Iowa, earning a Bachelor of Business Administration, and later, a *juris doctorate* at Northwestern University School of Law. He is a prolific writer of articles on topics such as agricultural law, business law and higher education, and authored a book on shared governance in higher education. All told, Bahls has enjoyed four careers.

"I enjoyed the practice of law a lot," Bahls said in an interview with *ACI Reporter*. "I enjoyed serving as a faculty member and a law professor. So, it was good advice from Sister Read, but I've enjoyed every aspect of my career. The beauty of these four careers I've had is that they're very people-oriented careers, and you meet great people."

Long history of Augustana College begins in 1860

From Ohio, Bahls joined Augustana College, founded in 1860 by Swedish settlers. The Rock Island campus borders the Mississippi River in Western Illinois. Today it has about 2,500 students, offering 90 majors, pre-professional programs and related areas of study. About 80 percent of its students are from Illinois, the rest from throughout the United States. A small percentage of students are from outside the U.S., such as Sweden and Vietnam, where the university has recruited with the help of some alumni from that region, Bahls said.

The college is one of 26 colleges and universities of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the country's largest Lutheran Church body. "Through our vocational reflection efforts, we're very serious about helping students ask who they are before they ask what they want to be," Bahls said. For example, the college has located one of its two campus co-chaplains in the career services office, the president explained. "Before students start on the job hunt, we ask them to work with our campus pastors in assessing their talents, skills and passions, and try connect those to something good in society. For most of our students, it's not a religious exercise these days as it is an intellectual and spiritual exercise," he said.

The college is known for strong pre-health professional programs and strong science programs.



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Bahls says the acceptance rate is high for Augustana students entering dental, medical and veterinary schools. About 40 percent of incoming students aspire to be science majors. In addition, Augustana has a highly regarded undergraduate speech pathology program, and it is known for programs in accounting, psychology and English. The college is also investing in the theater arts, Bahls says, with the completion of two new theaters and a third to be completed this summer.

College enjoys strong community relationships

Part of its academic success is due to a reinvigorated relationship with the Quad Cities region of Western Illinois and Eastern Iowa, which includes Moline and Rock Island in Illinois, plus



Old Main has been a landmark at Augustana College since 1883. The building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Bettendorf and Davenport in Iowa.

"When I came here 14 years ago, I heard from many in the Quad Cities that Augustana was in a bubble on a hill above the Mississippi, and did not relate much to the Quad Cities," he says. Bahls points to more students participating in area internships and more faculty members active in Quad Cities community boards or working with businesses and nonprofit organizations. Bahls and his family are active volunteers in the Quad Cities.

The Upper Mississippi River Center for Sustainable Development is a community service organization with many Augustana students participating. That organization contracts with cities along the Mississippi River and works with city governments to develop plans to revitalize those communities. "For example, we have 200 students involved with Scott County Iowa, across the river from Augustana, to work on strategies with respect to lead paint abatement," Bahls says.

Students can participate in "Augie Choice," a program suggested to Bahls about a decade ago by a business major, Tom Williams. "His point was that Augustana students pay their tuition, and there are other expenses such as international travel, research projects. He said, 'why not

roll everything into one? Have one comprehensive fee that provides a \$2,000 stipend for all students to pick a high-impact experience," Bahls recalls. Students get \$2,000 grants for qualifying experiences such as international study, research with faculty members, presenting paper at seminars, internships or volunteer work. Nearly all students take advantage of this opportunity. Results have been overwhelmingly positive, especially for students who can't afford such an experience on their own, Bahls says.

Career services office, CORE program focus on internships and jobs

Alongside Augie Choice is the college's CORE program: Career, Opportunities, Research and Experience. The college has focused greater attention on career services by increasing staff from four to 15 professionals, including one staff person in Chicago. The idea is to engage students in internships and connect the internships with jobs, Bahls says. "It is a traditional career services office on steroids," Bahls comments.

In its first year, the percentage of students employed at graduation increased 10 percent, and student satisfaction rates were up 10 percent. "The concept is very much focused on the fact that some parents are concerned that if they send their son or daughter to a liberal arts college, there won't be a job on the other end. So we set up the CORE center to ensure that students receive great jobs requiring a college degree, and then great graduate school placement rates," Bahls says.

CORE is reassuring to students and their parents. "They see that an English major *IS* a good major for getting a good job. Many parents think an English major will qualify you to be an English teacher or an English professor," Bahls says, "but, it also qualifies you to be president of John Deere. It qualifies you to go to law school. It qualifies you to go to medical school."

For the future, Augustana plans to improve its physical plant by adding an annex onto the science building beginning next year. The school is also planning to expand its communication science and disorders building in preparation for a master's degree program in speech language pathology, and it will renovate its music building to add performance spaces, labs and other facilities.

Bahls says the college maintains partnerships for engineering students with Northern Illinois University and Iowa State University. Students study three years at Augustana, and then complete two more years at the partner institution. The fast-growing nature of the engineering program has led Augustana to offer its own engineering courses. In addition, college leaders are talking with leaders of four other colleges in the region about forming a consortium of liberal arts colleges to share expenses. "We are actively exploring work with similarly situated colleges in the Illinois-Iowa area, within a radius of 60 miles to 100 miles, to see if we can share teaching resources and backroom operations," Bahls says.

Augustana joined ACI as a charter member in 1952. "We are proud members of ACI and have appreciated over the years not only financial support from ACI, but support aimed at students," Bahls says. The college's most important ACI connection is through the [Peer Mentoring Program](#), which supports first-generation, low-income and minority students, he says. More first-generation students attend Augustana, and ACI's program is important to their success, Bahls says. "We think it's a tremendous program. We're indebted to ACI for selecting Augustana as one of the schools participating in the program," he says.

Like many college presidents, Bahls spends considerable time on fundraising, alumni affairs and community affairs. Fundraising has been a bright spot at Augustana because "people believe in Augustana's mission, and alumni and friends want to cheer the future of this schools," Bahls says. Many alumni have stepped up to help, in ways other than giving money. For example, Augustana graduate Kenny Anderson, longtime quarterback of the Cincinnati Bengals, helped raise funds for a new \$10-million football stadium. Alumnus Phil McKinley, director of "Spider-man: Turn off the Dark" and other Broadway productions, helped redesign the college's theater and will manage its summer theater festival which starts this year. Fresh Films, led by Estlin Feigley, a 1993 graduate, and Kelli Feigley, moved its operation to Augustana in 2016. The company is known for making science-related feature-length films and an Emmy-nominated children's television show, "Moochie Kalala Detectives' Club." Feigley now teaches courses and helps provide student internships.

"These are three examples where individuals who have gone past monetary donations, and have found it part of their calling in life to connect with Augustana College in a much deeper and more meaningful way," Bahls added.