

ACI Fall Conference draws more than 140 people, liberal arts education highlighted

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Dr. Bridget Coughlin, Shedd Aquarium CEO and president, discussed her Knox College undergraduate education.

More than 140 people attended the ACI Fall Conference Nov. 3, a professional development opportunity for staff of ACI's 24 member colleges and universities. Keynote speaker was [Dr. Bridget C. Coughlin](#), president and chief executive officer of Chicago's [Shedd Aquarium](#), a marine conservation and research organization, and popular tourist destination for its exhibits of marine life. Coughlin, a biochemist, is a graduate of [Knox College](#), Galesburg, one of ACI's member colleges.

Coughlin explained that she chose Knox because it offered her a theatre scholarship, but she said she wasn't very good at theatre and learned it was not the major for her. At Knox, she discovered her real interest was in science and working in laboratories. Coughlin said Knox College allowed her to "tinker" and guided her to put together an independent major at the time, which was biochemistry, she said.

Thirty-two speakers addressed college and university staff. [/caption]

"Knox College allowed me to discover who I was," Coughlin said. "I learned how to speak and write and think at Knox. Failing comfortably – and it didn't feel comfortable at the time – but failing, and being challenged and maturing was really my 'secret sauce' in the value of my liberal arts education." Another important life lesson that has helped Coughlin in her current role was learning how "pivot" toward something else after failing at being a theatre major, she added.



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The ACI conference featured four professional development tracks for college and university staff working in advancement, finance, public relations and marketing, and student engagement, said Constance Willoughby, ACI director for scholarships and conferences. Thirty-two speakers addressed attendees in breakout sessions. Conference sponsor was [BKD, LLP](#), an accounting and advisory firm based in Oakbrook Terrace, Illinois.

This year's event was at the corporate office of [Morningstar](#), an investment research firm in downtown Chicago. Morningstar also is a member of the ACI Board of Trustees, represented by Leslie A. Peltason, a corporate trustee.