

**POSITION PAPERS**  
**Quality**

**Kathryn Swanson**  
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**The Meaning of "Quality" at Augsburg College**

**The Meaning of Quality will be discussed on  
October 24 at 3:30 in the Marshall Room.**



## **Quality - Yours, Mine, and Ours**

Position Paper on Quality - Fall 1996

Kathryn Heltne Swanson

Mention "quality" in almost any educational setting today and odd rumblings begin. Faculty scoff at intrusions of TQM (Total Quality Management) and what they think it would mean for their domains; administrators may start to see dollar signs - either multiplying or dwindling depending upon their extrapolations of "quality"; students ask if they'll be graded on a straight percentage or a class curve. Each group sees "quality" through its peculiar set of lenses and within each group, concerns are relative to imagined, perceived, and relative notions of what quality means and thus entails. This mention of relativity here reminds me of my surprise when I heard the president of Wellesley College, a school whose endowment of well over \$500 million makes it one of the three "richest" liberal arts colleges in the US, along with Swarthmore and Smith, worrying about whether or not the College could afford a new roof for one of the campus buildings or if it would be best to wait for "better times." Thus, wealth and quality alike must be considered within their particular contexts.

We at Augsburg seem particularly sensitive to, even defensive regarding, matters of quality. Too often, we fear, "quality" surely must be what, like money, everyone else has. I think we too readily accept a significant positive correlation between our low salaries and our worth, between the numbers of "underprepared" students we find in our classes and our self-concept as a quality institution. We too easily believe that because we aren't paid as well as colleagues at other places, we must not be as good. Because we don't have thirty merit finalists in this year's group of first year students, Augsburg must not have value. Although, heaven knows, it is imperative to raise salaries and it is necessary to recruit and retain excellent students, our quality - yours, mine, and ours - does not depend upon this. Further, it is because of the very ways we load and interpret the word "quality" to suit, simultaneously, different purposes and agendas that a consideration of quality and its various dimensions is essential to our determination of identity and, thus, vision.

Noting that quality encompasses all other topics of this series -- church connections, diversity, student-centered learning, and the urban setting/connections to the community (in fact, it is impossible to have quality without these dimensions), I will consider quality as yours (students'), mine (individual faculty member's) and ours (Augsburg College's). Underpinning these thoughts is a general definition of quality as borrowed from Corson and Pope, winners of the 1995 Minnesota Quality Award and three time finalists for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. They define quality broadly as "doing things right and doing the right thing." I maintain that all of us would be wise to stop apologizing for who we are, defining ourselves by poor salaries and what we too readily see as "underprepared students" and to, rather, recognize and promote who we are, strong and committed faculty who work with a wide range of students who come to Augsburg and enable them to achieve and to learn as they may not have done without us. This is quality.

To some members of our community, particularly faculty, quality refers primarily to the kind of students who sit in our classes, "your" quality. I suspect we have all, at one time or another, muttered a version of "they're not students like they used to be" (or " . . . like I was") to colleagues, spouses, anybody who would listen. We deplore the "lowering of standards," grade inflation, the concept - false or not - that any warm body, especially one who can pay full tuition, is welcomed at Augsburg. We wonder how we can teach these students and why things that worked in the past no longer seem to. Certainly, we sigh, it's these underprepared students who cause us grief. "Why," (and I hear this one often) "they can't even spell" (or "read" or "write" or "think"). Sometimes faculty nostalgia about quality gone missing becomes even more, quietly to be sure, politically incorrect. We blame pockets of non-native speakers, bad high school teachers, poor neighborhoods where our students grew up - and the list goes on.

The point here, of course, is that all too often considerations of quality, specifically blame regarding the perceived lack thereof, is put upon someone else. It is students' fault that our work is frustrating. Or, it is the tight budget, lack of endowment, etc etc. at Augsburg that forces us to

have liberal, if not open, enrollment policies. I contend that faculty must realize that quality is not merely "yours", but also "mine" and "ours". If we can stop blaming others for perceived lack of quality, recognize true quality among students and colleagues among us, we can more readily take responsibility to ensure that education at Augsburg is of the highest quality possible. This is not to say that we should stop actively seeking, recruiting, and welcoming high school honor students, students whose ACT scores are 30, students whose TOEFL scores are 600 -- and we do have all of these currently in our student body. It is simply to say that we would feel less frustration if we recognized that part of our identity is tied to students who are here, not those we wish were here, or those we remember from the past (perhaps, as is the case with childbirth, forgetting the negatives years after the experience) and proceeded to work to ensure that these students receive quality education. We need to learn to accept and to work with the students we enroll and realize that they allow us to achieve quality.

Certainly we have many students at Augsburg who come to us prepared to succeed. In fact, most of these students could (and do) learn without our efforts. They know the drill - they take notes throughout entire class sessions, smile at our feeble jokes, hand all work in on time, proofread, and raise the curve on exams. They do extra projects and make us feel as if we have succeeded when they do. Every year they represent Augsburg at the ACTC English Majors' Conference, deliver papers, and elicit comments from our colleagues at other ACTC schools, "Where DO you get these students?"

But not all wonderful English majors, not all of our success stories, come to us prepared and ready! A large percentage of our students are first generation, low income students, unaware of what attending college entails, and academically underprepared for college work. In recent statistics gathered for a grant application, Kathy Kuross found that 26 percent of full-time Day students in Fall 1995 were from low income families (as determined by family income levels established by the U. S. Bureau of the Census for determining poverty status) and 25 percent were first generation potential college graduates. These figures have remained

quite consistent over the past three years. For the same group of students, the average ACT score was 21.5; 11 percent were placed in Developmental Writing; 13 percent did not pass the Critical Thinking assessment; 16 percent tested at math placement levels of 1 or 2.

Yes, these numbers seem high. That our students come from a pool different from St. Olaf's or from a group reflective of backgrounds different from our own does not mean that quality must be compromised. Success stories abound. For example, there was the student who appeared in European literature, literally unable to read. Via work with the CLASS office and hours each evening with his parents reading and taped texts, he received, and fully deserved, a 3.5 in the course. I had certainly not lowered standards for that student; I had not changed my expectations of quality, but just changed the way his learning was assessed. There is also the story of the Hmong woman who defied her husband's family, none of whom spoke English and wondered why she couldn't just be happy having more than the two children she had - the first at 15. Sometimes she had to literally escape their home to get to Augsburg; always she had to fight to be able to study. She persisted and graduated, in four years, with honors, and now works with Hmong children. She is a student of quality, even though upon entrance, she needed ESL and Developmental Writing. We could all tell similar stories. Instead of grumbling, we need to realize that these are our students, they can learn, and it is our responsibility, privilege to teach them. We must do things right and do the right thing.

So, we might just have to alter ways in which we accomplish this teaching. This is where our quality enters the picture. We sell ourselves short here; quality abounds among us. Again, though, perhaps we need to free ourselves from the "yours" mode of identifying quality. There are many examples among us of innovative classroom practice. Our General Education curriculum has been carefully designed and refined. When a friend of mine from seminars at Wellesley, recently appointed Dean at Emmanuel College in Boston, was beginning to ask her faculty to design a new curriculum, she used ours as the model. We have a strong and challenging honors program, pedagogy which incorporates portfolios and other means of assessment of student learning, provision in several

courses for reflection of learning. Several faculty have been innovators in case writing, collaborative learning - jargon, connections between our own reading, research, and presentations and our classrooms. We have learned to teach well whomever appears in our classrooms. This is faculty quality, apparent everyday at Augsburg.

This past summer I attended a four day workshop in Washington, sponsored by the National Council of Educational Opportunity Associations. I realized anew, while there talking with other participants, what opportunities there are for students at Augsburg. As I described Augsburg to groups, I described our student population, using some of the figures mentioned earlier. People didn't believe that a school of our size had students who were first-generation, low income students. Nor did they believe me when I told them, yes, we had a program for learning disabled students (with more than one full-time person), an ESL program, a Tutor center, a writing lab, support programs for ethnic populations. I couldn't convince colleagues that we did all this for students. That is quality among us. Besides strong classroom teaching, we provide opportunities for learning that stretch students beyond classrooms. We know this; too seldom do we think about it as manifestation of our own quality.

So - discussions of quality must involve realistic acceptance of our student body, but then be extended to consider students' potential for success and eventual academic accomplishments and to include recognition of committed faculty who are innovative and inspiring teachers for all students at Augsburg. Certainly, we can find pride in our quality programs and curricula which enable students to break barriers of all kinds to become well-educated persons and leaders in the world beyond Augsburg College.





# The Meaning of "Quality" at Augsburg College

## *A Position Paper*

Sandra L. Olmsted, M.S., Ph. D.

Department of Chemistry

### Three Vignettes.

✧ *He slipped the new CD he had just bought into the player in the Lexus and merged onto the highway. It was a violin concerto performed by his favorite artist. As he listened to it with delight, he decided that even if it had cost twice what he'd paid, it would have been well worth it. He had expected value, and once again, the artist had delivered.*

✧ *She winced when she turned the CD box over and saw the price. It was more than she had expected, and she did a little mental arithmetic. On her limited income, it meant that she would have to give up a few things that month, but she decided to buy it anyway. Later, as she listened to it, her heart danced, and she knew that the sacrifice was going to be worth it. It was every bit as good as she had expected.*

✧ *Her Dad had wanted to surprise her with a special gift, something she could treasure. He had selected this item because the artist and the recording studio consistently had produced a fine product. His eyes sparkled with pleasure as she unwrapped the new CD. She recognized it at once as the one she had heard about, and she knew she would play it proudly and often for herself and her friends.*

Each of these fictional characters recognized the same thing about the CD: it had *quality*. It possessed quality because it had *value* for them, because when they owned it, they knew they really "had something" that was worth the price, and more. Not only did it have value, but had it had *value with consistency*, and delivered to them what it claimed. It *embodied excellence*. It was an outstanding example of music, musicianship, and technical recording skill. It produced a *response of the heart* as well: pleasure, delight, and satisfaction. And it was a *source of pride*. Possessing it was like owning a treasure of lasting value that they were pleased to be able to share with others.

*Quality.* We seem to know it when we see it.

*A quality education at Augsburg College* needs to be defined in similar terms:

We need to believe that what students consistently receive for the price of tuition has value, and that they can expect to receive something here that is distinctive and which they might not get elsewhere.

We need to believe that education here is excellent. Our efforts in teaching, facilitating, and learning must spring from and end with excellence.

Students need to believe that they have chosen well when they decide to learn here, finding pleasure and pride in the memory of their experience.

We need to believe that an Augsburg education is so valuable that others ought to be persuaded to share in it.

Finally, to the best of our abilities, we need to make Augsburg and the education that it provides, synonymous with *quality*.

### **An Examination of Augsburg College.**

Any discussion of quality implies measurement and comparisons. To what shall we compare Augsburg? To colleges of similar enrollment? To colleges of similar age and history? To colleges of similar level of endowment? To other colleges with religious affiliation? Or shall we compare Augsburg in the 1990's with Augsburg of the 1960's, or '40's or whichever era our memories return to? Depending on how we choose to measure ourselves, we can be anything from smug, to finding ourselves seriously wanting. *In either case, we may well have missed the point, which is to honestly assess who we are, whom we serve, what we already do well. We also must honestly assess in what ways we are deficient and whether these deficiencies affect our ability to function as a quality institution, an institution that consistently delivers what we claim.* It is in this context, and in this arena, that we must judge ourselves.

### **Our Campus**

Does our facility say to us and our students, "This is a quality institution."? Our physical plant will soon boast a new library that we expect to be appropriate for the 21st century. As a college of the ELCA, we finally have a chapel. We have a facility for music and theatre that befits our traditions and fine reputation in these areas. We have the new Anderson Hall, and in its lower level, a teaching facility for the new Physician Assistant program. We have a sports facility, Si Melby Hall, an ice arena, and an "air structure." Parents and prospective students tour our campus and see all of this. We can be proud. But while we tell them how much research is done by the Physics Department, they also see that the physics labs are crowded into tiny rooms in the basement. Can they believe us? Did they visit Macalester College and see their laboratories? Do they make a mental note that the tuition at Mac is a little higher (but not outrageously higher) and wonder about the commitment to

quality at Augsburg? Is it *easy* to see that we have something to offer that assures them that they *really get something* here that they might not get elsewhere?

When we are working at the primary business of this College, that is, providing a quality education for those we serve, and we are experiencing on a regular basis conditions that hinder our primary function, then we must address these physical plant or equipment deficiencies. They stand in the way of quality at this College. We cannot compete in a competitive world unless the tools of our respective disciplines are in good working order. We must decide for ourselves, department by department, what stands in our way, and say "We will not rest until..." we have solved these problems.

*We need to believe that what students consistently receive for the price of tuition has value, and that they can expect to receive something here that is distinctive, which they might not get elsewhere.*

### Our Faculty

And what of our faculty? Do we value high quality faculty? Quality has been described as the character of excellence. *Excellent* faculty have a high level of expertise in their areas. They are leaders in their field through writing and developing, and are *centered* in their field. Excellent faculty ought to be fairly compensated, not overburdened to the point that they have no time and energy for intellectual renewal, and supported as they pursue scholarly investigations. The Faculty Development office at Augsburg serves this ideal and we need to recognize how important this is to our ability to function as a quality institution.

And what of our teaching? Do we value high quality teaching? We believe that we do. Excellent faculty show a career-long interest in improvement of their teaching skills and techniques. Excellent faculty show a personal interest in their students, and challenge them to do things *well*. They are able to inspire their students. They have a commitment, loyalty, and identification with the ideals of the institution. They teach here because they are pleased to be a part of this place, and not simply because it is conveniently located in a large metro area. Are we excellent? Critical to this end are our *attitudes* as faculty.

Idealism is not reserved only for younger faculty. High quality teaching requires it. This is the spirit that shouts "I will not rest until..." We model this idealism for our students as we show them what it is to be captured in a lifelong pursuit of knowledge, with an intellect that remains sharp. As faculty, we show them what it is to attain an intellectual spirit that is genuine, generous, and giving. We must model for them this characteristic of integrity with lives that are focused and purposeful, and with values that reflect the values of Jesus Christ.

Quality education must be more than learning skills or gaining knowledge or developing physical prowess. There must be a spiritual dimension that enables a student to see beyond himself and his own interests, and that no matter what the subject or the course, the student is helped to discern that what he is learning can help the world to be a better place. Therefore along with introducing students to knowledge in their field, our faculty must lead the students into a sense of value-orientation that inclines the students to consider how they, in that area, can be of service. When Augsburg loses this spiritual dimension of its educational experience, it will lose its soul. Most students coming out of college have enhanced material, physical, and intellectual dimensions, but no spiritual dimension. It is in communicating this spiritual dimension that we become unique. This is perhaps the last opportunity that we will ever have to reach this segment of our population before they become our leaders.

*We need to believe that education here is excellent. Our efforts in teaching, facilitating, and learning must spring from and end with excellence.*

#### Our Student Body

And what about the students here? We have a strong reputation as a caring place, where students are valued as human beings. Hence, we also find a large percentage of our students from the "over thirty" crowd: those who are exploring a second career option, which takes courage from the student as well as encouragement from the school. We have a successful C.L.A.S.S. (adaptive learning) program for the same reasons. Can we be all things to all students, and still claim that we are a quality school?

In considering those we serve, we face a two-edged sword. We as a faculty and teaching community, are responsible to these students to do our utmost and highest to see that they have the highest quality courses we can provide. They expect that from us. But to obtain and maintain a reputation for quality, we need to fill our classrooms with intellectually excitable students who are captured by a sense of the academic. We serve many who come to us straight from high school, some of whom lack an internal motivation for learning even while they have demonstrated the potential for success. We can and do motivate them. However, in reviewing the range of standardized test scores and rank in class of each incoming class, we see that we are consistently not attracting the highest caliber student: good but not best. Can we claim to be interested in quality if we do not rigorously recruit, in all areas, the high caliber student? Our credibility as a College at which a quality education can be obtained is suspect when significant numbers of our students do not have the capacity to meet our intellectual challenges.

Year after year, we encounter classes with "bimodal" grade distributions, implying that some are ill-prepared or otherwise unable to do the work. While we do our best to be good teachers, there is much to say about how this affects the classroom atmosphere, and the effect this has on the prepared students, the *intellectually excitable students*, who are often being deprived of the stimulation that comes when sharp mind encounters sharp mind. Right now each of us can think of weaker students who labored in vain in the same class with bright students who were not challenged. No one should be able to spend four years at Augsburg and say that they "breezed through." No one! Yet in discussions of retention of students, it is not the vibrant ones that we agonize over, but those who are struggling because of marginal ability. Have we missed the point of higher education?

Our greatest challenge within the issue of *quality* may be to find a balance between caring for the disadvantaged, however we define that, and requiring the utmost from this community in process and experience, and *we must not rest* until our reputation affirms this.

*Students need to believe that they have chosen well when they decide to learn here, finding pleasure and pride in the memory of their experience.*

#### Our Past and Our Future

Our students will know a quality education when they see it. Our students will know when they have lived in an intellectually stimulating place that has prepared them well for a changing world. They will know that this place set them apart, in an atmosphere requiring rigorous thought but also rigorous moral honesty. We have also said to each generation of students, that Augsburg provides a quality, *Christian* education. How are we challenging our students to experience what it is to have a Christian college education? Why should students come here and not go to some other place? *Let us not rest* until they can all look back at their experience here and say "This was a place where I received a *quality education*, and I strongly encourage you to consider attending there, too."

*We need to believe that an Augsburg education is so valuable that others ought to be persuaded to share in it.*

