

NOTES FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Volume Twenty-Six, Number Six (August, 2025)

"What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how."
(W. Wordsworth, from "The Prelude")

NOTES FROM READERS

Greetings, friends, on this Labor Day weekend in the US. Perhaps like me, you are experiencing various alternative realities right now. On the one hand, our amazing students have arrived excited and nervous for the journey ahead, athletes are hard at work preparing for fresh seasons, faculty and staff are renewed for the new academic year, the campus has come alive after a summer of patient waiting. We are ready to commence again as a teaching and learning community living out our mission and equipping our students for lives of meaning and purpose.

And yet, it is hard work - harder than ever, we might conclude, because the forces that would deny our value and values are gaining ground. Government edicts, funding cuts, misinformation, challenges to our very existence - all of these and more are real and present threats to the abiding role of our colleges and universities as forces for good in our democracy.

And here in Minnesota, we continue to reel from the senseless shootings at Annunciation School, killing two youngsters and injuring scores more as they gathered to worship at the beginning of their school year. How long, O Lord, we lament, as pundits argue about thoughts and prayers. How long, indeed...

In this chilling context, we gather here again as a community of reflective practitioners, those who face the realities of our lives while also pointing to a horizon of hope - not naive, but chastened by resilience and courage and resourcefulness to believe that what we do matters, despite the many challenges. That our students matter because they are our reason for being. That we matter because we are called to this ever more important work of hope in action.

I send you power and courage for the days ahead!

Occasionally, I (or my colleagues) refer to items from previous issues of Notes. If you have not been a subscriber previously, and wish to review our conversations, past issues of Notes are available on-line at www.jgacounsel.com. I thank my friends at Johnson, Grossnickle & Associates for their many years of abiding support for our reflective practice.

REFLECT ON THIS

>>Budgets and the possibility of hope<<

I wrote the following opinion piece at the invitation of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (August 1, 2025). It has proven to be an important stake in the ground for how we will go forward as a university in these fraught times.

Sacrifices from all quarters

As we started our budget planning for the next academic year, I challenged faculty, staff, and board members to focus on headwinds. Not the normal headwinds like demographic cliffs and economic downturns, but new, potentially existential, threats to our mission imposed by the Trump administration.

Institutions like Augsburg University, where I serve as president, generally do not face targeted attacks like those directed at Harvard and Columbia Universities. Nor do we operate large-scale research programs that depend on millions of dollars in federal grants. The financial risks we face are connected to the students we serve.

Located in an immigrant neighborhood in the heart of Minneapolis, Augsburg's student body has come to reflect the diversity of our surrounding school districts. Years of intentional efforts to create college-access pipelines, build trust with local communities, understand the needs of low-income students, and reduce barriers have made Augsburg one of the most diverse private institutions in the country — a vibrant multicultural campus that equips students for life in a pluralistic democracy.

Today our student body is under threat, seemingly from a dozen directions at once, such as having their immigration status, political speech, and financial aid imperiled. These threats manifest in deeply personal ways that affect the ability of low-income, first-generation students to enroll in and graduate from college. But there is also a cumulative impact felt at the institutional level when barriers to education get higher.

Managing the budget of a small, enrollment-driven private university is a complex affair, even in the best of times. Prudent budget planning means sacrifices from all quarters to ensure that our students can be successful. On paper, this looks like a reduction in faculty stipends, longer vacancy periods for open positions, and operating budgets honed with surgical precision. It is also paramount that we remain in compliance with legal requirements to ensure the continued availability of Title IV funding for our students. Over the last six months, simply keeping on top of those requirements has been an enormous effort.

With more than 20 years of experience as a university president, I recognize the fear in this moment for our students, faculty, staff, board members, and the wider community that count on us. As I stand before them urging prudent budgets, I also offer a word of hope: The work we do

every day to educate students and usher them toward lives of meaning and purpose is the most effective way to resist the forces that seek to undermine our mission. And resist we will.

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PRACTICE THIS

>>Football and life<<

One of the responsibilities of a university president at any level is to support the role of student-athletes and an intercollegiate athletics program on our campus. I am a huge fan of NCAA Division III athletics and have come to see how the experience of our student-athletes in a place like Augsburg is a core aspect of our academic mission. Our new football coach asked me to address his team as they arrived on campus a few weeks back and I offered these remarks, relevant to the team and to the world.

“Good evening, team.

It’s a real privilege to be with you tonight as you stand on the threshold of a new season. Preseason is always a time of possibility. You’ve put in the hours in the weight room, in conditioning, in film study—and now you come together as a team with a fresh chance to write the story of this year. And that story will be shaped not just by what happens on the scoreboard, but by the culture you create, the way you embody teamwork, and the kind of leadership each of you chooses to practice.

Let me start with **culture**. Every successful program, every strong organization, every healthy community depends on culture. And culture doesn’t happen by accident. It is built intentionally, day by day, through habits, attitudes, and values. What kind of culture do you want for this team? A culture of accountability, where teammates push each other to be their best? A culture of respect, where everyone’s role—whether starter or scout team—is valued? A culture of resilience, where setbacks don’t define you but instead sharpen your resolve? You have the power to shape that culture, and it will influence everything you do—not only this season, but long after you leave this field behind.

Second, **teamwork**. Football is perhaps the ultimate team sport. Eleven players must move as one on every snap. Success depends not just on talent, but on trust—the trust that your teammate will do their job, and the trust that you will do yours. Think about what that means: each of you plays a role that no one else can play in exactly the same way. The lineman’s block, the receiver’s route, the linebacker’s pursuit—none of it works in isolation. Teamwork means recognizing your interdependence and honoring it. And it doesn’t end on the field. It shows up in how you support each other in the classroom, in how you encourage one another when life gets tough, and in how you represent this university with integrity.

And here at **Augsburg University**, we know something about teamwork. A few years ago, when our football program faced a season of challenges, it wasn’t a single player who turned

things around—it was the culture you created together. I remember sitting in the stands watching a game where the score didn't end in our favor, but I saw players helping each other off the ground, cheering for every good effort, refusing to let one play define the whole experience. That spirit—that refusal to give up on one another—told me more about Augsburg football than the scoreboard ever could. It was proof that what we value most here is not just individual achievement, but the strength of a community that lifts one another up.

Finally, **leadership**. Leadership is not reserved for the captains, or for seniors, or for the loudest voices in the locker room. Leadership is influence—and every single one of you has influence. You show leadership by your work ethic in practice, by your attitude on the sidelines, by your resilience when things don't go your way. The best teams are those where leadership is shared broadly, where players take responsibility not only for themselves but also for the well-being of the whole group. And remember: real leadership is service. It is putting the needs of your team above your own ego, and committing to something bigger than yourself.

Here's the truth: what you are building together this season will outlast wins and losses. Years from now, you may not remember the score of a particular game, but you will remember the feeling of belonging to something greater than yourself. You will remember the way your teammates had your back, the way your coaches challenged you, the way you grew in discipline, perseverance, and courage. Those lessons will stay with you in your families, your careers, and your communities.

So my challenge to you as you begin: Be intentional about your culture. Commit fully to your teamwork. Embrace your role as leaders. Compete with heart, play with integrity, and remember that you represent not only yourselves, but your teammates, your coaches, and this Augsburg community that is proud to call you our own.

We are proud of you. We believe in you. And we will be cheering for you every step of the way.

Go Auggies!"

>>Global education<<

Earlier this summer, I was honored to receive an International Citizen Award for Global Education from the Twin-Cities-based International Leadership Institute, founded and led by Augsburg alum, the Honorable LaJune Lange. As the organization states:

The Twin Cities International Citizens Awards honor individuals and corporations, whose work has contributed significantly to international understanding, cooperation, friendship and development. The Awards were first given in 1992, hosted by the Mayor of Minneapolis. In 1996, the Mayor of St. Paul joined and in 1997 the Commissioners of Hennepin and Ramsey Counties also became hosts. Since 2003, the International Leadership Institute has hosted this annual international recognition event for the Minneapolis St. Paul metropolitan region. The Awards recognize the depth and breadth of the Twin Cities' international connections, concerns and commitments - in business and trade, research and human rights, agriculture and

technology, the arts and medicine, education and journalism, and recognize immigrant achievement and humanitarian relief.

It is humbling to be honored, of course, but what I recognize is that my commitment to global education and cooperation has been shaped by Augsburg's long-standing institutional values around the importance of seeing ourselves as global citizens. A few years back, I wrote a short piece after visiting our study away site in Namibia that captures those values well.

"Off the main road

The sparkling lights of the city of Windhoek, Namibia were shining below as I looked out from my perch in an ultra-modern restaurant high above the city. All was well, it seemed, as I waited with my colleague, Orv Gingerich, head of Augsburg's international programs, for our dinner companions to arrive. We are in Windhoek visiting Augsburg's 16 year old Center for Global Education (CGE) site, where US students come for semester-long programs focused on Namibia's post-colonial experience.

But the view from our perch high above the city, nestled in an obviously affluent subdivision of the burgeoning city, belied our experiences earlier in the day. We had witnessed the remnants of an apartheid system. Formerly separate cemeteries for the whites, colored and blacks. Housing that was clearly demarcated by tribal class. Primary and secondary schools stratified by social class. A sprawling tin village – the so-called "informal settlements" – in which tens of thousands of Namibians lived in squalor, unable to find work after they arrived in the city and left to their own devices to survive without means. Health clinics with waiting rooms full of women seeking both pre-natal care and HIV tests. Non-governmental organizations struggling to serve the needs of indigenous people whose rights were neglected. The stark contrasts of our day were mind-bending.

Our dinner companions arrived – a labor activist and a teacher working to improve education for indigenous people – and as we described our day in Windhoek, one of them commented that he was grateful that we had witnessed these contrasts because too many outsiders came to Namibia and traveled only "the main road," from which all seemed well. We had left that main road and experienced the real Namibia.

And so we had – just as the students who come to our CGEE site do each semester as they participate in a variety of intense experiences that open their eyes to the mind-bending and life-transforming dynamics of life in a developing country. Through extended home stays in both urban and rural areas, internships with organizations doing important social and educational work, classes that feature speakers who have firsthand experience of the tensions in Namibia's life, and opportunities for significant interaction with Namibian people and culture, our students experience life off the main road in this remarkable country, just 22 years after its declared independence.

And when they return home to the US, we know that they carry with them knowledge and experience of this developing country and its good people that will shape the decisions they

make about their own lives and what they might be called to do in the world. Some may return here to Africa, perhaps as medical workers or teachers. But most will not and, for them, we trust and know that their experiences off the main road in Namibia will help them understand their own privilege in an increasingly complex world, privilege that must be named and then put to responsible use in the search for equity and justice, both in their personal lives and in the systems they inhabit.

Off the main road in Namibia, I'm only beginning to understand how critical our work as a college in this place is to transforming the lives of students and contributing to a different vision of our common future as global citizens."

PAY ATTENTION TO THIS

>>Resources for your reflective practice<<

I have been invited into a group of educators in Minnesota exploring the implications of a new book, *Hacking College: Why the Major Doesn't Matter - and What Really Does* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2025) by Ned S. Laff and Scott Carlson. The book addresses many aspects of the academic experience of our students, with a special emphasis on moving beyond "majors" to "fields of study" as a way to organize curricular programs, as well as pointing to the need to focus on the "hidden intellectualism" of our students and the "hidden job market" of our economy. More to come.

>>Forgetfulness<<

A bit of whimsy from Poet Billy Collins that I know I experience every year as our remarkably curious students show up with their open minds even as I can't quite put my finger on some simple fact or name. Thank heavens for students!

Forgetfulness

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The name of the author is the first to go
followed obediently by the title, the plot,
the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel
which suddenly becomes one you have never read,
never even heard of,

as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor
decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain,
to a little fishing village where there are no phones.

Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses goodbye
and watched the quadratic equation pack its bag,
and even now as you memorize the order of the planets,

something else is slipping away, a state flower perhaps,
the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay.

Whatever it is you are struggling to remember
it is not poised on the tip of your tongue,
not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.

It has floated away down a dark mythological river
whose name begins with an L as far as you can recall,
well on your own way to oblivion where you will join those
who have even forgotten how to swim and how to ride a bicycle.

No wonder you rise in the middle of the night
to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war.
No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted
out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.

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>>Topics for upcoming issues<<

- Trusting institutions - again
- Stories we tell to ourselves and each other

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