

# Accessibility at Augustana



# Table of Contents

**p3** - Remote learning allows for equity by Charlie Roiland

**p4 to 5** -Captions promote learning and accessibility by Lexi Woodcock

**p6** - Community calls for inclusive education by Rae Barry

**p7** - Straining for accommodations by Linh Tran and Molly Sweeney

**p8 to 9** - Test accommodations leave students hoping for more by Molly Sweeney

**p10** - From IDEA to action: Bridge the gap by Chloe Baxter

**p11** - Some disabilities are invisible by Jack Brandt

**p12 to 13** - The challenges of creating an accessible campus by Sylvia Hughes

**p14 to 15** - Accessibility awareness at Augie by Allie Rial

**p16** - Augustana approaches universal learning by Abbey Mondt

**p17** - Students struggle with navigating campus by Fatima Martinez Gallegos

**p18 to 19** - Student and staff work to reduce burnout by Morin Windle

*Front and back cover by Victoria Campbell / Observer Staff*

# Remote learning allows for equity

By *Charlie Roiland*

*Observer Staff*

*Opinion Column*

When people hear that someone is going to college, they often picture the person walking across campus, attending in-person lectures and likely even living in a dorm building. But for countless students across the country, this is not the case.

According to an article by Forbes Advisor, nearly 6% of all college students in the United States are enrolled in an online education program. This number does not include students enrolled in a traditional in-person college who may take some or all of their classes online.

At Augustana, this is not an option. All classes are offered in-person aside

While students with a diagnosed disability have the option to request accommodations through Augustana's office of disability services, those who are undiagnosed, uncomfortable requesting accommodations and those who are requesting accommodations that are outside of what may be deemed to be the ordinary may face challenges in getting what they need in order to be successful.

This could include students who need the option to attend classes online every so often, whether or not they have a documented disability.

Augustana prides itself on its inclusivity and willingness to accommodate all students regardless of need. The unfortunate reality of this statement is that there are strict rules in place,

learning style.

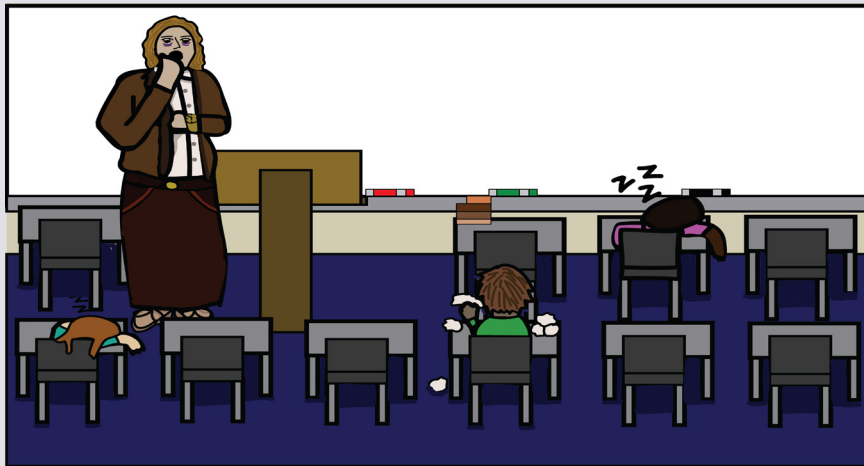
Maybe you were excited to go back to school, see your friends and get back to normal at the end of 2021. For many people, however, this normal has still yet to come, even a third of the way through 2024. Students with disabilities, particularly those that affect their immune system, may have been less able to go back to in-person activities. They may still be unable to participate in life as normal due to the unwillingness of others to take necessary precautions.

In addition to helping immunocompromised students who may be unable to safely attend in-person classes, offering a remote option would assist students who are physically unable to navigate Augustana's campus. We all know that this campus is not the most easily navigable between the countless hills and numerous flights of stairs. For students with physical disabilities, however, this may prevent them from being able to attend Augustana at all.

Whether a student is injured, on crutches, in a wheelchair or uses another type of mobility aid, getting to classes can be incredibly difficult. According to a survey done by the ADA national network, 34% of students with a documented disability who responded were enrolled in college online. While online courses come with their own variety of inaccessible resources, they allow for students to take classes from their own home and avoid needing to find a way to get to class.

Overall, more than 70% of students who participated in the ADA National network's survey said that they had attended at least one course online. Students reported encountering less stressful environments, having increased confidence in the classroom and being more able to control their learning speed.

If Augustana were to implement online learning options for all students regardless of documented disability, it would be beneficial to everyone. Augustana's commitment to providing an equitable education is admirable, but more work needs to be done to make it reality.



*Graphic by Elise Brenner / Observer Staff*

from the rare extenuating circumstance. Students are required to attend the large majority of all class sessions in a semester, sometimes getting up to three excused absences before facing academic penalty. In other classes, attendance at each individual class session counts as a percentage point of a student's overall grade.

Not only is this unfair to the average student who will likely come down with an illness at some point during the year, it is also unfair to students with disabilities who are then exposed to their sick classmates. Students who are immunocompromised, have a chronic illness or are otherwise disabled should not be required to attend an in-person class alongside students who are actively ill.

whether they be up to the college or the individual professors, that prevent many students from being appropriately accommodated. Especially in regards to alternative learning options, Augustana has a long way to go.

Most likely, we all participated in online learning during the first year or two of the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, a percentage of this year's seniors completed their freshman fall semester of college from their own homes, stepping foot on campus for the first time at the beginning of the spring semester. This could have been an overall positive or negative experience, depending on a student's needs and their specific

# Captioning Augustana College promotes student learning and accessibility

By Lexi Woodcock  
Observer Staff

For Stacie Hatfield, assistant professor of communication science and disorders (CSD) and director of the Barbara A. Roseman Center for Speech, Language and Hearing, captioning on videos played in the classroom is a “no-brainer.”

However, many other Augustana professors and faculty may not share Hatfield’s knowledge or training in the field of closed captioning, limiting overall student access to learning in the

classroom.

According to an article in the National Library of Medicine, studies have shown that captions are beneficial to everyone who watches videos, increasing overall memory, comprehension and attention to the video that is being played.

Hatfield uses an analogy of a wheelchair ramp to explain how both can benefit anyone, regardless of if they have a disability or not.

“Using live captioning is no different than wheelchair ramps,” Hatfield said. “You don’t have to use a wheelchair to utilize a wheelchair ramp. You don’t

have to have a mobility issue to benefit from there being a ramp versus stairs. You don’t have to have a hearing impairment to find closed captioning beneficial.”

Hatfield uses closed captioning to practice a multimodal learning approach in the classroom, incorporating both auditory and visual signals.

“If [a video is played and] at the same time being live captioned, then they can also read it,” Hatfield said. “So there’s also the visual component as well. And one of the things we know about learning is that using that multimodal approach is beneficial to anybody’s

learning.”

Assistant Professor of CSD and Coordinator of the Disability minor, Cathy Webb, incorporates live captioning into her classroom as well, utilizing platforms such as Google Slides and PowerPoint.

“Recently both PowerPoint and Google Slides have added features where you can just click a button to turn on the captions while you play your slideshow,” Webb said.

Webb has a practice to never play videos without closed captioning in her classroom. Webb said this ensures that all students have access to the material presented.

“We know through research that having access to captions or subtitles gives better access to people who are deaf or hard of hearing but also to people who have auditory processing disorders, as well as those for [whom] English is not their first language,” Webb said. “So when you consider all of these different populations, every classroom at Augustana is going to have a student who fits into at least one of those categories in the room.”

Cesar Castillo is a sophomore at Augustana and an international student from Venezuela. Castillo believes closed captioning can be particularly helpful for him in perspective or literature-based classes.

“Sometimes in the perspectives, it’s more like reading, lectures and stuff, and it’s harder for me in [class work] content with essays and readings,” Castillo said. “Unlike math, which is almost the same because it’s numbers. It’s easier to understand.”

Anouar Bouhaddou, an international student from Morocco and a sophomore at Augustana, said captioning would be particularly beneficial in classes that require a deeper understanding of topics with more complicated vocabulary.

“For some classes, like sociology, psychology and everything, you need some help with some words,” Bouhaddou said. “So I’m trying to follow [along]

with the professor, look at the slides and take notes, just to remind myself what the professor said. So, subtitles would be very, very helpful.”

Bouhaddou said that sometimes international students can feel ashamed and struggle in their level or understanding of English in the classroom setting. Bouhaddou said captions can help alleviate this issue.

“They [fellow international students] come to me for help, and they say, ‘I don’t understand that much in class. The professor is doing nothing for me,’” Bouhaddou said. “For them, it would be so helpful to have subtitles. Just to have some notes and try to learn things on their own.”

Ann Perreau, associate professor of CSD and audiology clinic coordinator of the Barbara A. Roseman Center for Speech, Language and Hearing, was a part of Augustana’s Accommodations Committee for Student Accessibility.

According to Perreau, Augustana’s Accommodations Committee for Student Accessibility surveyed 26 faculty members on accommodation resources and support in the fall of 2022. In a question on the survey titled, “What accommodations do you feel confident in AND have the ability to provide to students?” only 12% of faculty surveyed answered that they provide closed captioning.

Hatfield attributes this to the knowledge and training faculty may lack in the field of closed-captioning and auditory issues.

“I don’t know if, say, the math department is knowledgeable about those tools,” Hatfield said. “Because in their field, you don’t necessarily need to know about those things. So does faculty even know what is out there that would require very little effort on their part to incorporate?”

Perreau believes that although captioning videos in the classroom is a best practice, she can see how obstacles may arise throughout different classrooms and settings, and proposes an alternative transcript.

“I could imagine a lab situation where having closed captioning might be distracting because you need to do the work right in front of you,” Perreau said. “So again, I think the other alternative to closed captioning is providing things in writing. I do this often for people with hearing loss if I think about what I’m teaching and it’s a demonstration.”

Webb also highlights the problems videos without captioning or bad captioning can present for a classroom and professor.

She calls these “craptions.”

“Any content that we make ourselves is relatively easy to caption. But any content we get from somebody else?” Webb said. “That’s when it gets tricky. So if I’m going to bring in a video I found on YouTube, I don’t have the power to make them caption it.”

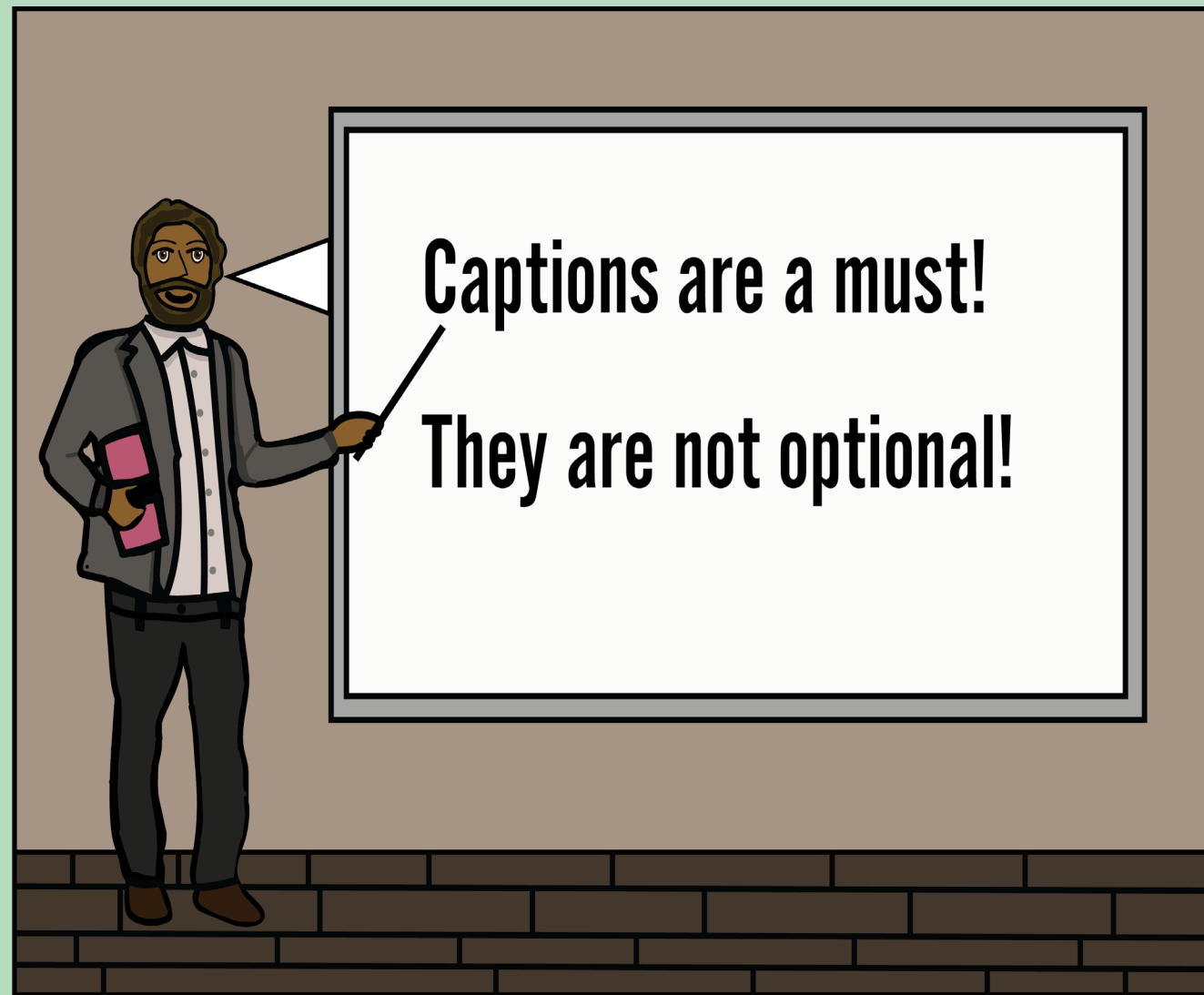
Webb said that although YouTube used to have community access on captions, allowing users to insert their own captions, it was removed due to users acting inappropriately.

“I absolutely think we should advise everybody to have captions, but I do also recognize that there are some real obstacles to doing that in a practical, everyday format. Because we aren’t in charge of everyone else’s content,” Webb said.

It is worth noting that auto-generated captions, sometimes an option on YouTube videos, are not always accurate but can be more beneficial than not having any captioning.

Webb encourages fellow Augustana professors and faculty to try captions out in the classroom, and that closed captioning isn’t as scary as it sounds. Webb says YouTube captioning is quite simple once you get the hang of it.

“I think it’s a matter of prioritizing as well as recognizing that this is a really useful thing for a lot of people,” Webb said. “It’s not just one or two people that you’re impacting by doing this, but a large majority of your class could benefit from having this, making it worth the time and effort that it takes to do it.”



Graphic by Elise Brenner / Observer Staff

# Community calls for inclusive education

By Rae Barry  
*Observer Staff*

In the midst of classes, exams and preparing for the transition to college, Delaney Walsh received her diagnosis of Stargardt's disease during her junior year of high school.

Stargardt's is a genetic eye disease causing vision loss. Although other family members were previously diagnosed with the same disease, Walsh had already been late in her teenage years without any symptoms. With no current cure, Walsh was pushed into the sudden change of going from having her full vision to blindness in the center of her eye.

Now a senior at Augustana, Walsh said that one of the largest hurdles coming into the college as a new student was having to seek out her own accommodations.

"One thing that the school pushed on students was to self advocate so you can do it in the real world, when in reality, there are so many steps put in place in the real world to help people who have a disability," Walsh said. "Going through Augustana truly blind was a tough process."

Walsh's accommodations give her a space to complete tests away from classmates, where she can use her digital magnifier more conveniently.

"Sometimes I click it on and off to save the battery life, and it also has a flashlight on it, which can both be a distraction to others," Walsh said. "But sometimes I'm also not comfortable using it. I'm thinking, 'Oh my gosh, are they looking at me? Are they thinking things?'"

The rest of her accommodations are harder to enforce or keep consistent.

Because Augustana tries to teach students how to search for their own accommodations, she must work out her own accommodation plans with each professor on an individual basis. While Walsh said this may have helped to grow her confidence, it has also been difficult to approach each new professor every semester and expect them to know how

to help her.

"A lot of my accommodations are ones where I just have to talk with my professor," Walsh said. "And nine out of 10 times, they are very accommodating and willing to work with me, regardless of my accommodation letter, but I can't say all. Most professors have kind of gone on their own path to helping me regardless of disability services."

Without homogenous accommodations implemented into each classroom, the support that Walsh has received throughout her four years at Augustana has varied.

Having to rely on professors instead of only Augustana's disability services, there is an added expectation on professors to accommodate students, despite a lack of training or education on how to effectively help students.

"I feel like professors are never given that opportunity to be educated on different disabilities, so their first line of education is the student," Walsh said. "It's a learning curve, whereas it should just be like an automatic 'Yes, I know what you need.'" The accommodation letters are still good because everyone has different needs and it gives proof that you have a disability. But just that baseline education is one of my first steps in changing things."

When it comes to the future of accommodations for Augustana's disability services, professor of communication sciences and disorders Catherine Webb suggests that schools start implementing "Universal Design for Learning (UDL)".

UDL is an educational framework based on learning sciences that focuses on designing a more accessible learning style for all students, regardless of disability or background.

"It comes from architectural theory, actually where they thought, maybe we should make things so that all people can access them. And they are thinking about buildings, which is also important," Webb said. "But we've kind of adapted it for education in a way that we could set up our classes in the first place in a way that the largest number of peo-

ple have access to so we don't have to make special accommodations because it's already a part of the way that we do things."

UDL focuses on providing multiple means of engagement, representation and action and expression. Through these three principals, students are provided more options to individualize their education to fit their personal learning styles.

By implementing UDL, Webb hopes that inclusivity can be automatically implemented into schools for those who are often overlooked. Webb said that in her own classroom, she works to incorporate the ideas of UDL into her own curriculum.

"For example, I try to make sure that everything I share for students to read is screen reader friendly. Many people who are blind or have visual impairments use a screen reader in order to read the text for them," Webb said. "But also people with ADHD, people with long commutes who don't have the time to sit and read or people who's first language is not English. The point of UDL is that there's a whole lot of people who benefit from that one thing."

Webb said that UDL would also implement a common expectation for classes across campus, giving professors a shared understanding of how to support students with different learning needs.

For students like Walsh, Webb said this could help strengthen the understanding between professors and students while taking some of the weight off of students to coordinate accommodations across each class.

Until a common foundation can be established across classrooms, Walsh said that educating faculty and students on disability awareness can help create a more accommodating campus.

"We need to take conversations about disability as a positive because 'disability' has always had such a negative connotation to it when in reality, many people we walk past have a disability or a hidden disability like mine," Walsh said.

# Students work overtime for accommodations

By Linh Tran and  
Molly Sweeney  
Observer Staff

In 2019, Augustana College welcomed its first Director of Disability Services, Kam Williams. Since then, Augustana has worked to offer academic accommodations, a person to advocate for students with disabilities and a bridge between faculty and students.

This year, Dimitrios Jason Stalides took on the role of Director of Disability Services. Stalides is also the director of TRIO Student Support Services.

Stalides said during his time in this position, he has met with students to discuss their accommodations, helped students who are requesting accommodations and worked to increase student's access to disability services.

Stalides said when a student asks for accommodations, he encourages them to revisit his office if they do not receive what they need, if "it's something that can be justified through documentation".

"I like to make [accommodations] an open-ended revisable thing. As they learn more about what's going to be helpful, it can be really hard to say, 'This is what's going to help me or even for me to say this is what's going to help' because every person has their own thing. And it's going to be a process of discovery," Stalides said.

But, for First-Year Keegan Russell, the reality is, that the process was not easy to revisit, and it was a tedious process to revise their accommodations.



"The office won't give you the accommodations you ask for, but will give you something they think are close," Russell said.

Russell has wrist mobility issues and asked to type hand-written tests, but the office gave accommodations to take notes electronically during class.

Russell says this may be be-

cause of the system office uses to match students with accommodations.

"The accommodations operate on a system of there being a preset amount of accommodations written in a specific way, [...] which usually works for minor things, but it allows a good amount of accommodations to slip through the cracks," Russell

Illustration by Linh Tran / Observer Staff

said.

This disconnect within the office bounces students back and forth between their daily lives and their disability. However, Russell said that once they requested a change in their accommodations explicitly, the office did make the necessary adjustments.

# Academic accommodations leave students hoping for more

By Molly Sweeney  
Observer Staff

A new testing accommodations office opened up this academic year, available for students who have accommodations to use for tests. At this time, quiz accommodations are still not available for students, and there is no specific date for when quiz accommodations might become available.

Dimitrios Jason Stalides has been the director of TRIO Student Support Services since 2021, and this year he also began as the director of the Office of Disability Services.

Stalides said that to begin the process for accommodations, students need to register with the Office of Disability Services, and then meet with him to discuss what they might need. After the accommodations have been approved, students should discuss with their professor when they need accommodations for each test.

According to Stalides, students need to notify their professors if they want to use their accommodations within five business days for each test. Then, the professor will fill out a form to request accommodations for their student, and the office will schedule and administer the test for the student.

This is a change from previous years when the responsibility was on the professor, and Stalides said this will help lighten the load on the professors' end.

"It's a very big burden for [the professors]. I think it's well overdue that we've had something more formal for them," Stalides said.

Stalides also hopes the testing office will lead to more students with academic accommodations using their extra time, or asking for a quiet place to take a test.

"It can be intimidating to go to someone and say, 'Hey, I want to use help,' and that's always a hard thing to do in itself. What my hope is is if there's a more neutral go between, it'll make the process easier, and something that will help [the students] to feel more



The Office of Disability Services provides students with accommodations a brand new testing office to take tests by themselves in the learning commons in Olin 320.

Photo by Giang Do / Observer Staff

comfortable to use when they need it."

However, some students with accommodations believe it is a simpler process to go through the professor, instead of utilizing the testing office.

Junior Neida Marquez said she has tak-

en tests in the office using her accommodation, but has also taken tests after setting it up herself with a professor.

"I don't think it really makes a big difference. The only difference I would say would be sometimes professors will just put you in whatever room they can find.

So it might not be as quiet as the Office of Disabilities because they specifically have a designated room," Marquez said.

Marquez said the testing office may offer a quieter space, but taking the test with a professor instead presents less hurdles.

"Finding the time is a little easier because I have a really packed schedule. I have back to back classes and then I have work, so working with my professor who just found the time that works [is easier]. The office, I don't know what time they would have available," Marquez said.

One department in particular has been very helpful with testing accommodations, according to Marquez.

"The psychology department also has been really easy, because they basically do it like the way that the Office of Disabilities does. I got an email from the Secretary of the psych department. It's just like 'you can either take it at this time or this time, depending on your schedule,' and then you just go in and [the secretary] gives you the exam," Marquez said.

Junior Ella DePasquale said she has chosen not to use the testing office because, like

Marquez, she believes taking the test with the professor may be easier.

"I have pretty good relationships with my teachers. I want them to be in the loop of what's going on with me," DePasquale said. "I think it just was easier

for [my professor] to be there, especially for clarification on the questions. I had asked her like two times, so if I was in the testing center, I would have just had to use my best judgment."

Marquez said that the accommodations have helped her focus better during tests, but improvements could be made to the office, to encourage more people who need accommodations.

One barrier for students who need accommodations may be receiving a diagnosis. Marquez reached out to Disability Services to find a resource to properly diagnose her, and the office told her they had no way of connecting her with a professional or clinic.

"I wish there was more access to the testing process. I didn't have accommodations my freshman year. I didn't get diagnosed with ADHD till I was a sophomore," Marquez said. "I wish someone would have said 'Here, you can go to this person,' even if they were like 'Call

this clinic,' because it took me a year to get someone to hear me."

DePasquale also feels that some barriers to students may be access to therapy to receive a diagnosis. And, without a diagnosis, students who may need accommodations to succeed in school are left without that help.

"Some people here definitely don't have [access to a therapist] or they have mental health problems and don't know it and then they're going undiagnosed," DePasquale said. "And so then it's like, how are they even going to get an accommodation if they don't have that proof? I feel like if there was some way that the campus could maybe have someone in the disabilities center that could help students that need a diagnosis, I think that would be really cool."

The office is still growing and working on improving, but Stalides said he hopes it can be a helpful resource for students to use in the future.

"An accommodation does not in any way mean that they have any type of deficit or [are] less than, but rather, these are your strengths, and this is how you're going to succeed. Just as anyone who succeeds will examine their strengths," Stalides said "That's what I would like them to see the office as: a place where we really help them to find those strengths."

For testing accommodations specifically, Stalides also said the office is available to help them succeed academically.

"It's meant to be a tool that they can use or not use as they see fit that can really help them to feel more relaxed while they're taking their tests in a situation that's stressful. And we're here to help them if they have any questions or are uncertain how to use it," Stalides said. "I know it's new and people may not know all the ins and outs right now, but I hope down the road it'll just become very rote and common."



TRIO Student Support Services at Augustana College also provide students with tables and chairs to complete their homework.

Photo by Giang Do / Observer Staff

# From IDEA to action: bridge the gap

By *Chloe Baxter*

*Observer Staff*

*Opinion Column*

In our nation's educational landscape, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) stands as a beacon of inclusivity, promising all children with disabilities access to a free appropriate public education according to FAPE.

Yet, as these students transition from high school to college, a troubling gap emerges: IDEA mandates comprehensive support in the K-12 system, but colleges are not bound by the same obligations.

By expanding IDEA's provisions into higher education, colleges can uphold their commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion while emphasizing the fundamental right to education for individuals with disabilities and the transformative impact of inclusive practices.

The IDEA act could work to enforce accessibility standards for digital content and platforms used in higher education, like Moodle or Canvas. It could require the implementation of digital training initiatives for staff and students to learn how to effectively utilize technology for learning and teaching purposes. Overall, improvements would be made in terms of Augustana's digital infrastructure to better accommodate all students.

Extending IDEA to colleges ensures equal educational opportunities for all students. The transition from high school to college is challenging, and for students with disabilities, the absence of mandated support can exacerbate these difficulties. Many students struggle to navigate academic coursework, hindering their ability to succeed.

Some argue that transitioning from high school to college is a natural progression towards greater independence, stating that students with disabilities should be encouraged to develop self-advocacy skills and utilize available resources rather than relying solely on mandated support.

However, emphasizing independence without adequate mandated support could inadvertently perpetuate existing systemic inequalities, hindering the ed-

ucational experience and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Upholding IDEA in college would foster a culture of inclusivity that benefits the entire campus community. By providing accommodations to students awaiting a diagnosis, or speeding up the process of providing accommodations, colleges demonstrate their commitment to supporting diverse learning needs.

The Office of Disability Services at Augustana College operates in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, affirming its commitment to a learning environment that facilitates full engagement, equal access and reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. This commitment aligns with the principles of IDEA and emphasizes the importance of creating an inclusive educational atmosphere.

Importantly, the accommodations process outlined by the Office of Disability Services involves students registering with the office and providing up-to-date documentation of their disability. This process ensures that accommodations are tailored to the needs of the student, aligning with the personalized approach mandated by IDEA in K-12 education.

So, the Office of Disability Services at Augustana College is a key player in implementing inclusive practices that align with IDEA in higher education.

By providing a comprehensive framework for accommodations, spanning academic, social and campus accessibility issues, the office contributes to the ongoing dialogue about the extension of IDEA principles to colleges. It demonstrates how support for students with disabilities can be integrated into the college experience without compromising the institution's core mission of higher education.

But, Augustana could further enhance the lives of students with disabilities.

The college could establish mentorship programs specifically for students with disabilities. While academic accommodations are crucial, mentorship can provide support in navigating college, including career guidance, social integration and personal development.

Aligning college practices with IDEA

prepares students for success beyond the classroom. By equipping students with disabilities with the necessary tools to excel in higher education, colleges play a vital role in cultivating a more inclusive society and workforce.

Furthermore, all colleges could actively promote disability awareness and education across their campuses. This initiative could involve organizing workshops, seminars or awareness campaigns to educate both faculty and students about various disabilities, the importance of inclusivity and the role each person plays in creating a welcoming environment. Increased awareness can lead to a more empathetic and understanding campus community.

Moreover, Augustana might consider conducting regular assessments and surveys to gather feedback from students with disabilities. This feedback can be instrumental in identifying specific areas for improvement and tailoring support services to meet evolving needs. By actively seeking input from the affected community, the college can ensure its services remain responsive and relevant.

Augustana could explore partnerships with organizations or experts in disability fields to enhance its support network. Collaboration can provide fresh perspectives, additional resources and a broader range of expertise, enriching support for students with disabilities.

The debate over extending IDEA to colleges reflects broader questions about equity, inclusion and the purpose of higher education. While proponents advocate for the continuation of IDEA's principles to ensure equal access and support for students with disabilities, there are valid concerns about the practicality and impact of such mandates.

However, it is still worthwhile for colleges and the government to try.

Ultimately, finding the right balance between support and independence is crucial in fostering an inclusive educational environment where all students can thrive. As we navigate this complex terrain, prioritizing dialogue, collaboration and the shared goal of creating a more equitable and inclusive society is essential.



# Some disabilities are invisible

By Jack Brandt  
Observer Staff

I wasn't exactly a normal kid. I learned to speak early, and from there it only intensified. On long road trips across the country, I would talk the entire time. I had unique interests. My parents brought me to Chinatown because I was obsessed with China. Every time we went to the store, I made them take me down the vacuum aisle. I was quiet around my cousins but had friends in school. They didn't think I was normal, but they liked that I was different.

By the end of high school, I had taken calculus as a sophomore, spent more hours than I could count on piano and folded multiple 90-piece origami icosahedrons. I spoke Slovak with my grandma and Lithuanian with my piano teacher. My success in some areas temporarily masked a grating problem in my life: autism.

Noises made me angry. I couldn't control the volume of my voice. I was quiet at weddings and embarrassed my family. I couldn't understand why people called me blunt. I struggled to stop talking once I started talking. I couldn't control the intensity of my thoughts, emotions or hunger. I got in trouble over and over.

For years I fought this reality. Piece by piece my world fell apart until I could no longer hide. Now I accept the problems I face, which has only made it easier to address them. I don't miss the denial, shame and confusion from before.

One Augustana student I talked to, who asked to remain anonymous, had the same experience: she was diagnosed at four but never told.

"I always knew there was something a little different about me," she said. "I realized first that I had a sensory processing disorder. When I was 17, I finally confronted my mom about it."

She learned her parents had known her diagnosis, but had kept it from her. Growing up, she was not able to understand why she was different. Her parents kept the diagnosis not only from her but also her school. They didn't

want her to be treated differently or to believe she was different.

"I was just stuck thinking I was broken," she said. "My friends can do this, why can't I? My family members can do this, why can't I? I didn't understand why I was only into one thing."

Her parents did not know how to bring the subject up.

"I disagree with a lot of the reasons my mom gave for not telling me, but I understand why she was afraid," she said. "I understand why she was scared of telling me and telling other people."

Finding out at 17 was a shock, but in the end the news paved the way to a better life.

"I try not to think about it too much just because I'm glad I now have the resources," she said. "I was able to look up a lot more helpful ideas for how to manage it in school and in social life and how to advocate for myself."

She said she has found ways to manage her disability.

"Setting a routine has been really helpful," she said. "Staying up late into the night has been another coping mechanism."

People with autism tend to like routines and they also tend to be productive at night, when they are alone. She said that while high school was difficult, it did show her how to handle problems. And with that knowledge, college has been much better.

"As a school, [Augustana] has been a fantastic experience for me," she said. "I [knew] I needed a small school. I needed the community that it provides."

Another student was diagnosed with ADHD and later autism. He too shared that it's possible to manage with the right habits.

"As you get older, you know more so how to deal with it," he said. "I wouldn't say it's a big drawback, but it does pose challenges."

People with autism tend to make less eye contact, and people with ADHD tend to struggle with that as well.

"[People] see your eyes drifting and they think you're not paying attention," he said.

ADHD makes it difficult to focus at

times, but at other times it can have the opposite effect. The student said he finds it easy to focus when painting or playing sports.

"It's all about finding a balance of things you know that make you happy and can alleviate stress," he said.

He was homeschooled for most of his life and said the structure of homeschooling is more like the structure of college, which ultimately gave him an advantage. Traditional high school, on the other hand, is more rigid.

"In terms of going to class back to back ... from eight to three, without the knowledge I have as an adult, it would have definitely posed issues," he said.

Bill Iavarone, director of counseling services, has worked with students who have autism and described how it shapes their experience at school.

"They probably have a lot of skills that make them look like they're going to be really successful in school," Iavarone said. "But school isn't just about scholarship."

Like the two students I spoke to, he said that over time, people learn to handle their challenges. "The symptoms don't go away, but they've learned to manage them," Iavarone said.

Autism as a diagnosis has changed over time. In 2013, Asperger's was recognized as a form of autism. Hans Asperger, a Nazi-era scientist, studied whether autism makes a person "inferior," which Edith Sheffer writes about in her book, "Asperger's Children." Scientists at that time went to great lengths to uncover what makes a person "pure." Over 200,000 people with disabilities were killed in the Holocaust. They were referred to as "life unworthy of life."

We have come a long way from that time, but things could still be better. People rarely talk about autism, which reflects our poor understanding.

Students at Augie could do at least one thing better, too. We should accept people for who they are, not laugh at them for being different.

I am happy I found out why I am the way I am.

Understanding my struggles has only made it easier to address them.

# Obama Bridge: The challenges of creating an accessible campus

By Sylvia Hughes  
Observer Staff

Students on Augustana's campus take the same paths and shortcuts every day. Whether they trek up the Olin Stairs or take Gerber's first-floor elevator to avoid the stairs, these mindless shortcuts make walks across campus easier. For most, paths like these are convenient; but for some, they are inaccessible.

One of these shortcuts is the Obama Bridge, connecting the lower campus to upper campus housing. Since its completion in 2009, the bridge has led to more accessibility on campus. At the top of the bridge, however, there is no accessible shortcut to enter one of the bridge user's main destinations: the Swanson Commons. Students have to go entirely around the building to reach the accessible entrance.

Like many others around campus, Jessica Waytenick '99 sees the need for an accessible entrance. Waytenick used a wheelchair during her four years at Augustana, and she said there were challenges, such as using different paths to navigate campus.

"When you're a student, whether you have to use a wheelchair or not, you always want to take the same path that the rest of the students do," Waytenick said.

Kai Swanson, special assistant to the president, said the history of the Swanson Commons and the Obama Bridge began when former President Steven Bahls and his board members came up with a strategic plan to develop high-quality residential areas for students during the mid-2000s. The team needed updated and accessible residential halls, especially on

upper campus.

"We started to think, 'we're going to need to build something new,'" Swanson said. "We're going to make sure that it's more accessible than anything we've got elsewhere on campus."

In 2006, Augustana completed the construction of the Swanson Commons. With nearly 250 beds to accommodate both sophomore and junior students, Swanson was one of the first residence centers to install an elevator. However, the only way to access the building from the lower campus was either through Andreen Residence Hall or a sidewalk right by 38th Street. Since neither of these options was wheelchair accessible, Swanson remained inaccessible.

According to Simplified Building, a ramp built to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has to have a minimum slope of 1:20 (for every inch it rises, there must be 20 inches in length). The maximum slope is 1:12. Since Andreen is inaccessible by ramp and 38th Street exceeds the maximum slope, the college needed a ramp that accommodated wheelchair accessibility.

In 2004, Illinois elected Barack Obama to the Senate where he earmarked

"When you're a student, whether you have to use a wheelchair or not, you always want to take the same path that the rest of the students do."

-Jessica  
Waytenick

funding for a project within his district. Augustana College partnered with the city of Rock Island and secured \$1.5 million to fix stormwater mitigation and, more notably, to build a bridge connecting the lower campus to Swanson and 11th Avenue.

Soon after, the Obama Bridge completed construction and met ADA compliance.

Bridges meeting ADA compliance must be at least 36 inches wide with one foot in elevation for every 12 feet. Since its completion, students living in Swanson, Parkander, 11th Avenue Flats and townhomes have convenient access to Augustana's lower campus.

While the Obama Bridge adheres to ADA compliance, a problem lies at the top of the ramp.

The closest entrance to Swanson has a staircase in front of it with no accessible ramp. Without a ramp, neither Swanson nor the parking lot between Swanson and Andreen are conveniently accessible from the top of the Obama Bridge. Swanson is only accessible through the entrance on the corner of 38th Street and 11th Avenue.

The most reasonable solution to this problem seems to be to install a ramp at the top of the Obama Bridge, making Swanson and the parking lot accessible. This would allow all students to use the same entrance to Swanson.

Despite a seemingly simple solution, Kai Swanson said the college is hesitant because of the implications of installing a ramp in that location.

First, adding a ramp meeting ADA compliance would remove parking spaces between Swanson and Andreen. Since parking is already an ongoing issue on Augustana's campus, taking out spaces here would require the college to find spaces elsewhere, creating a domino effect. Ultimately, this would increase the installation price, making the project financially challenging.

"Could you do it? Yeah, but then you start removing parking," Swanson said. "As much as we want to achieve all strategic games at the same time, parking



Augustana College students walk across the Obama Bridge to get to class.  
Photo by Giang Do / Observer Staff



The Obama Bridge leads to stairs to get to Swanson Commons.  
Photo by Giang Do / Observer Staff

is something we routinely hear from students that 'we don't have enough,' or 'don't take any away.'"

Additionally, installing a ramp at the edge of the parking lot would create a challenge during the winter months. In parking lots, snow plows might block the ramps, whereas accessible sidewalks are cleared.

Currently, while the Obama Bridge and the interior of Swanson Commons is accessible, the transition between the two is not.

Andreen Residence Hall is not accessible. In Waytenick's experience, Andreen was not an option for her, as the building has no elevator or an accessible entrance. Generally, students needing accessible rooms live in other residence halls, like Westerlin.

Between the financial challenges of adding a ramp and the resources already provided for accessibility, adding a ramp

at the top of the Obama Bridge will likely remain low on Augustana's project list. However, the college continuously works toward more accessibility within its residence halls.

"One of the things [Augustana has] done is invested a lot of money in Westerlin to put in elevators," Swanson said. "Now we're doing Erickson. That is, we'll make it reasonably accessible."

Generally, Augustana's campus would not be considered the most wheelchair-friendly campus due to its topography. Its terrain and old buildings make accessibility challenging. This is an important issue not just for students using wheelchairs, but also for students who have family members using wheelchairs. Despite this, Augustana needs to work towards accessibility, whether making big or small changes. All students deserve access to take the same paths regardless of ability.

# Accessibility awareness around and throughout Augie's campus

By *Allie Rial*  
*Observer Staff*

When thinking about Augustana, every student knows the effort it takes to face the classloads and surplus of stairs and hills. But, despite the daily challenges everyone has in common, not every student handles classes or traversing campus in the same way.

The Office of Disability Services is constantly working to help all students achieve their best in each aspect of the college experience. Jason Stalides, the director of the office as of last semester, has been working to make sure the office has options to serve all students as best as it can.

For students with disabilities, the office provides accommodations. There are a lot of different types of disabilities the office helps students get accommodations for, including some that may not immediately come to mind.

"There's physical disabilities, there's learning disabilities [and] there's developmental disabilities like ADHD or autism, but other things that would qualify for accommodations include medical issues, health issues [and] mental health issues as well," Stalides said.

Accommodations vary student by student, so there's a wide range of options available.

"The Office of Disability Services does a lot of different things. I would say the primary thing that we do is work with students who need accommodations, and it's not just students who have a disability," Stalides said. "There are several typical accommodations, and they tend to be things like extra time on tests, extra time on assignments and there's some classroom accommodations," Stalides said.

This list only includes a few of the possible accommodations offered for students to help them with their coursework.

Bringing awareness to these accessibility services has become increasingly important, especially with more students realizing that they could benefit from accommodations.

"There's a big increase in students

who didn't know they had a disability, not just here at Augustana, but just nationwide," Stalides said.

For students who came into college with an accommodation from high school, their accommodation is processed through the Office of Disability Services. But Stalides said that accommodations are still open to change.

"Once they have an accommodation letter, it's good the whole time they're here with the college," Stalides said. "This is something that's revisable, really at any time they could reach back out to me and we can talk again and see what we can or will or could change."

Accommodations help students be more successful depending on what they need and increase equity. In order to make sure that these resources are



Dimitrios Jason Stalides, Director of the Office of Disability Services, works in his office inside the Learning Commons in Olin 320 at Augustana College.  
*Photo by Giang Do / Observer Staff*

utilized, accessibility options need to be more advertised by the school.

Coordinating accommodations is only part of what can be done to help students. An increased focus on education can help professors understand the challenges that are faced and help students understand the steps that can be taken to address them.

"I think there needs to be a lot more awareness of accessibility and accommodation issues so students can have a better idea of how they can get accommodations and how they can use them

to be successful," Stalides said. "On the same side, I think there needs to be more training for professors on how to best provide accommodations in the classroom for their students."

With Stalides just starting his time as director, he hopes to further education on accessibility in order to help the office and professors better serve students in the future.

Beyond just providing education on accessibility, Stalides also has some thoughts on how to improve accommodations access for all students.

"I really want to turn the conversation around to ways that we can provide accommodations inherently in how instruction happens, typically referred to as a universal design, so that students don't always need accommodations,

it's just built into how classes happen," Stalides said.

Augustana housing is another part of the college experience where accommodations exist to help students succeed. Amanda Tumbarello, assistant director of Residential Life, said accommodations in an individual student's experience can help them feel at home.

Just as Stalides said learning accommodations are individualized, the housing accommodations are also specific to each student.

"The idea of accommodations is a

really individualized thing," Tumbarello said. "Everyone is going to need something different, and even two students or two individuals who need the same thing might interpret that need differently."

Housing accommodations serve students by allowing them to have a comfortable space on campus that helps them achieve their academic goals. These accommodations can also include emotional support animals (ESAs).

"[A housing accommodation is] making sure that [students] can live here and still continue to participate in the educational program," Tumbarello said.

When it comes to housing selection, some accommodations can include emotional support animals or air conditioning. Since air conditioning for First-Years is only a guarantee in Westerlin Residence Hall, communicating accommodation options becomes very important for incoming students. Especially with the limited air conditioning, it's important for everyone to keep in mind the need for those accommodations to be available.

"Accommodations, I think, sometimes get this stigma or this reputation of like, 'oh they're giving different advantages to people' and that's not really the case," Tumbarello said. "The idea behind accessibility and accommodations is to break down a barrier that might otherwise be present."

One of Augustana's inherent barriers are its geographical features.

"We have a very hilly campus and there's nothing that you or I can do to change that," Tumbarello said. "But I do think it impacts accessibility."

Communicating this information to prospective students is important to Tumbarello because it impacts what accommodations can be made.

"One thing that I always try to do is provide a lot of transparency for students, particularly incoming students, and make sure they're aware of that," Tumbarello said.

Communicating with students is a big part of providing the right accommodations for everyone. Because of the wide

variety of possible accommodations that are needed, and the number of students who request them, there's a lot of college staff who can help students get accommodations.

Jennie Hemingway, the Title IX Chief Coordinator, works to make sure students have the proper resources when it comes to providing accommodations.

"I am the appeal officer for students, [for] if they ask for a particular accommodation, and they don't get it and they want to appeal that," Hemingway said. "I also work with the Office of Disability with students who have short-term disabilities."

Short-term accommodations are an important part of the accessibility options on campus, because students face unexpected challenges throughout the year, such as an unforeseen injury. Even if they didn't need any before, having accommodation options for even a small amount of time allows all students to have the resources to succeed no matter what obstacles they encounter.

When interacting with students, Hemingway said she appreciates hearing their experiences so the college can gather a better understanding of what individuals need. Serving each student means a lot of accommodations are needed, so the more students who share, the better

the college can serve them.

"I always appreciate when a student comes to me and says, 'I'm not sure if you're aware of this,' and then tells me the issue that they're experiencing because it may be something one on one to intervene or it may be [that] I have to take that issue sort of up the chain, if you will, and talk about it in a larger, campus-wide context," Hemingway said.

Students advocating for themselves and others will improve Augustana's accessibility options. To bring awareness to challenges or new solutions, students need to voice their concerns.

After just starting this position, Stalides said he has been excited about the Office of Disability Services' efforts in helping students achieve their best. He wants to continue this trend and hopefully, with ideas such as including accommodations within classes, students can keep achieving their goals.

"I'd be very interested in being a part of... just putting this college on the map as a school that is a leader of helping students with any type of accessibility issues to be successful and not only successful as college students but successful [in] life and, you know, helping them to find their strengths and then bringing those strengths to the world," Stalides said.



The Office of Disability Services provides students with accommodation with two rooms in the new testing facility, equipped with a computer, camera and noise-proof headphones to take their tests by themselves inside the Learning Commons.  
*Photo by Giang Do / Observer Staff*



# Augie approaches universal learning

By *Abbey Mondi*  
*Observer Staff*  
*Opinion Column*

Augustana College offers several tutoring services for students but this does not include specialized tutoring sessions for students with learning disabilities. Instead of offering specialized tutors, Augustana College should focus on universal learning that allows all students to learn and grow despite any learning disability. This would accommodate every student with the same tutoring services. Focusing on universal learning in tutoring promotes inclusivity allowing for every student to use the same services.

Specialized tutors might also make students with disabilities feel alone and separated from the rest of their peers. Instead, universal learning would include proper training and accommodations to help tutors understand the struggles students with disabilities may face and how inclusive styles of learning can be incorporated within tutoring sessions. Lucas Street, director of the Reading Writing Center (RWC) works with training tutors on universal learning.

“We do train all of our tutors in some of the basics of accessibility and universal design for learning and how to work well with students who have learning differences or disabilities,” Street said.

At the RWC, students can receive extra help on essays and research. Students can also get help with breaking down and understanding readings for various classes in the center. At the RWC, tutors are also trained to understand learning disabilities and create a learning path that will help students succeed.

Once a tutor is hired, they go through a year-long training, including training courses to understand and accommodate all students. This training promotes universal learning and inclusivity. The way the center is set up allows for all students, including any learning differences, to get assistance with any reading and writing help they may need.

“We have several readings about working with students with disabilities and also just taking a more universal design approach. It’s like [asking], ‘Why don’t we have practices that work well for all students,’ rather than saying, ‘You have a disability, so I’m going to work with you this way’” Street said. “I think it’s better to just try to have accessible practices that could work for anyone, whether or not they have a documented disability.”

“If universal learning is or isn’t a helpful approach, it is imperative that Augustana takes students’ word and provides the necessary accommodations.”

-Abbey Mondi

Augustana offers several separate services to support students. These include Student Supports, which help students with any classes that might require extra assistance, as well as the Office of Advising and Disability Services which helps accommodate students with any kind of disability.

Sarah Persico is an Administrative Assistant at the Learning Commons. The Learning Commons oversees the RWC, Disability Services, academic coaching, advising and tutoring services. Through the Learning Commons, Student Supports offers tutors and academic coaches who have also undergone training to support students who have learning differences.

“We do have academic coaches who have been trained and are prepared to help all students. But specifically speak-

ing with students who have disabilities. Whether it’s things like focusing or ‘What’s a better reading strategy than what I’m currently using.’” Persico said.

Every student can set up appointments to meet with tutors at the RWC and with Student Supports through Starfish.

Senior Maddy Snyder, CSD major and disabilities minor, believes Augustana should advertise these services more to increase awareness.

“Sometimes Augustana has services, but they don’t advertise the services. Nobody knows about them,” Snyder said.

It’s important to listen to students with learning disabilities and understand what they need to succeed. If universal learning is or isn’t a helpful approach, it is imperative that Augustana takes students’ word and provides the necessary accommodations.

Snyder said she believes Augustana should have specialized tutors.

“I think that specialized tutors should be available for students with a variety of disabilities because, as we know, disabilities aren’t clear-cut. It’s not very black and white. It’s a lot of gray area,” Snyder said.

There is always room for improvement and new ways that Augustana can grow.

Providing training on learning disabilities is crucial when it comes to providing sufficient tutors.

Incorporating strategies that encourage universal learning is important to accommodate everyone. As always, Augustana must continue to grow and listen to students with disabilities to promote inclusivity.

“I have four children and three of them have disabilities, so this is very personally important to me as well,” Street said. “I would love to see Augustana as a whole become more inclusive of people with disabilities and create structures where anyone, any student, can succeed at Augustana because we have the right support in place.”

Graphic by *Addon Rodgers / Observer Staff*

# Students struggle with navigating campus

By *Fatima Martinez Gallegos*  
*Observer Staff*

Every fall, as the trees begin to accentuate the beauty of the Augustana campus with their gold, red and orange hues, many prospective students discover that this is the place that they will call home after high school. At first glance, the naturally wooded landscape is what gets the attention of many potential students, however, it only takes one injury and a pair of crutches under your arms to understand that the beauty of the campus can turn into a problem.

Sophomore Jack Ellis said everyone that he encountered while using crutches was helpful which allowed him to receive the help that he needed and also made it easier as a student.

“I was able to contact the dean’s office for a temporary handicapped parking permit, as well as having the ability to call an ACES,” Ellis said.

Being a college student is complicated and sometimes overwhelming, especially for injured students using crutches, who are often restrained from doing the things that they love. This makes maintaining their daily routine difficult.

Oussama El Habt, a First-Year student at Augustana, said that when he was injured he always gave himself some additional time so that he could arrive on time to his classes or other events. However, this rarely resulted in punctuality, and he often had to skip class or be late.

“This campus is big, so going from my dorm to classes was not easy. One of the main things that annoyed me were the slippery floors in the Gerber Center. I would always struggle when I was at that building,” El Habt said.

With elevators in almost every building, Augustana has been able to eliminate some of the risk that students on crutches often face due to the stairs. This has allowed injured students to have the possibility of navigating the buildings and also attending their classes. However, when elevators break down, injured students have another obstacle to face getting to class.

“The automatic doors in some of the buildings were also very helpful. However, some of the drawbacks are that the automatic doors tend to be open an hour or sometimes two after the main doors which often caused me further delays,” El Habt said.

August Haak, First-Year student, said it was very difficult to navigate through the buildings when he was injured. He was bothered that many doors were not always easy to open.

“There was a lack of accessibility in most of the buildings, the dorms specifically. I had significant troubles dealing with the bathrooms and the doors in the



Karli Brosch, junior, crutches around campus on April 23, 2024. Brosch was injured this year in a lacrosse game. “After the injury, I felt like I took living and walking for granted,” Brosch said. Photo by *Linh Tran / Observer Staff*

Westerlin dorm,” Haak said.

Life on crutches is difficult and it requires teamwork as well as good communication skills. A common challenge that many injured students face is the need for assistance which they commonly approach by having a friend by their side to support them.

“Try to find people to go around with you, trust me. I tried to do a ton myself and I definitely made it more difficult than it needed to be,” Haak said.

Having injuries that require crutches can cause students to feel isolated and helpless. This can be especially true for

First-Year students who are unaware of the resources that are available for them.

“The school was very helpful, offering me excused absences and tardiness from class and many of my teachers went out of their way to make the classrooms more easily traversable for me,” Haak said. “Staff in the cafeteria and library were always offering to take my dishes or to carry books for me and I was rarely short of people willing to help me.”

Whether you find yourself using crutches or have an interest in learning from other’s experiences, it is always useful to learn about accessible places and alternative routes to help others have a better crutching experience.

“Gerber Center was accessible. Having multiple elevators in multiple locations, along with some ramps in the building,” Ellis said. “Other buildings that were reasonably accessible because of a one elevator system were Olin, Old Main, Hanson, Swanson and PepsiCo, although the automatic door in the founder’s circle malfunctions.”

Being on crutches also makes eating on campus hard due to the long lines of students and the difficulty of carrying food without losing one’s balance. On crutches, students’ hands are occupied and their only option for carrying items is by placing them in a backpack.

“I would tell other people on crutches to avoid going to Gerber. For food, try going to [the snack shack] or the store in Westie,” El Habt said.

Some students also felt like walking through the quad was difficult if people they were walking near did not leave them room.

“Crutches take up a lot of room, and it would have been kinda nice if people were a bit more aware when walking. The amount of times people would walk shoulder to shoulder with their friends and I would get boxed into the dirt was pretty frustrating,” Haak said.

Haak recommends injured students do not let crutches discourage them from having a positive college experience.

“It’s a struggle at first, but it’ll get easier quickly, and eventually it’ll be done,” Haak said.

# New Reading Day will work to minimize fall semester burnout

By Morin Windle  
Observer Staff

Students of Augustana are constantly encouraged to create change in our communities. However, that is not always easy to do, and change requires a high level of commitment and dedication. In order to create the change you want to see, you have to look at every aspect that change will bring and every person affected by the change. Although change can be hard to accomplish, it is not unobtainable, as seen in the recent addition to the 2025 academic calendar: Reading Day.

Reading Day was originally brought up by senior Kayla Palliser in the fall semester of 2021, when she gave a speech in her public speaking class with Professor Donna Hare, professor of communication studies.

Her speech was in response to a prompt asking her to present on a problem around campus and research a possible solution. Palliser chose to focus on the issue of student burnout, specifically in the fall semester, and introduced the idea of implementing a longer Fall Break to ease the burden for students and staff. Later on, in the spring of 2022, Palliser was approached by Professor Hare to see if she had any interest in going further with her idea to make it a reality for Augustana.

Originally, Palliser's proposal was for a week-long Fall Break for students and staff by starting the semester earlier, arguing one day off was not enough. This would allow time for mental recovery and catching up on work in the middle of the semester. However, when reviewing the parameters for the earlier start and exploring the consequences of opening campus earlier, it became clear that changing the start date of the semester would disrupt the academic calendar too much, so a week break would also not be possible.

"We found out that there is a very specific seat time amount set, and Augustana is already very close to the amount

of time," Hare said. "So we wouldn't be able to do any extra breaks in the fall without moving our start or stop dates for the whole year."

In the spring of 2022, Professor Hare formed an Affinity Circle, a group with a common goal. Members included Palliser, Hare, Lena Hann from the Public Health department, Laurel Williams from the Communication Studies and Disorders (CSD) department and Ann Perreau from the CSD department.

The group focused on the issue of student and staff burnout in the fall and worked to formulate a plan that would be most beneficial for the Augustana community. They sent out surveys to staff to gauge concerns about expanding Fall Break, and they spoke to counseling services for input on patterns of student performance throughout the semester and when they noticed a lag in motivation. Affinity Circle members met with multiple committees to figure out how to incorporate Reading Day into the academic calendar while keeping in mind the many parts of campus that would be impacted. With the exception of faculty meetings, Palliser was involved in discussions at every stage of the process.

The Affinity Circle took into account a great number of variables that would be affected by starting the semester a week earlier to accommodate for a week break. This included issues with athletics, general costs, food insecurities and seat time requirements, which is the amount of class time required for a course. The seat time requirements specifically took a great deal of time to properly figure out as Augustana College has very strict regulations about seat time and even minor adjustments to the schedule can cause major issues.

After careful consideration and modifications to Palliser's original idea, along with advice from other staff such as Liesl Fowler, Greg Domski, Amanda Wilmsmeyer and then-president resident Steven Bahls, the group pitched the idea for a Reading Day at a faculty meeting. The Reading Day would be a day de-

signed for students and staff alike to be able to catch up on work and recover. Reading Days are fairly common at comparable schools, often held during finals to allow students the opportunity to prepare themselves before the semester's end.

"This has had a lot of different lives," Palliser said. "It's had a lot of different iterations, but it's always been aimed at what's the most amount of good we can do to address this issue, using the resources and under the constraints that we have."

Hare said other campuses have found Reading Days to be extremely beneficial for students and staff as it gives them a chance to catch up or even take a small break.

Even if only for a day, a small break proved helpful for communities to restore their energy and improve mental health for the rest of a semester.

"The purpose of Reading Day is to help with that burnout," Hare said. "Once you hit burnout, you can't do anything about it and that's definitely a mental health issue. And, unfortunately, our world doesn't seem to recognize it as much as it should be, so we're hoping this can be a positive step forward."

Bill Iavarone, Director of Counseling Services, supported the plan for implementing a Reading Day. He presented data to show the increased levels of stress in students after Fall Break, which lasts only a day, compared to the decreased levels of stress in students after Spring Break, which is a week long. This stress can be related to multiple factors including the change of weather, less sunlight, academic pressure and general issues students face.

"I think it's hard to ignore more and more how mental [health] impacts the academic side of students," Iavarone said. "I think that this false division between you're just going to come to class and be a student and not worry about other things on your mind is not viable. There's a lot of research to suggest that improving students' mental health improves their academics."

In addition to supporting the mental health of students, the Affinity Circle also wanted to support professors who also experience burnout as their work also tends to pile up around Fall Break.

In the end, Reading Day was agreed upon unanimously by a faculty vote in May of 2022 and the final catalog language for Reading Day was fully finalized by full faculty vote in April 2023.

The first-ever Reading Day is set in the 2025 academic calendar as an alternative day of learning, on Monday of week 8.

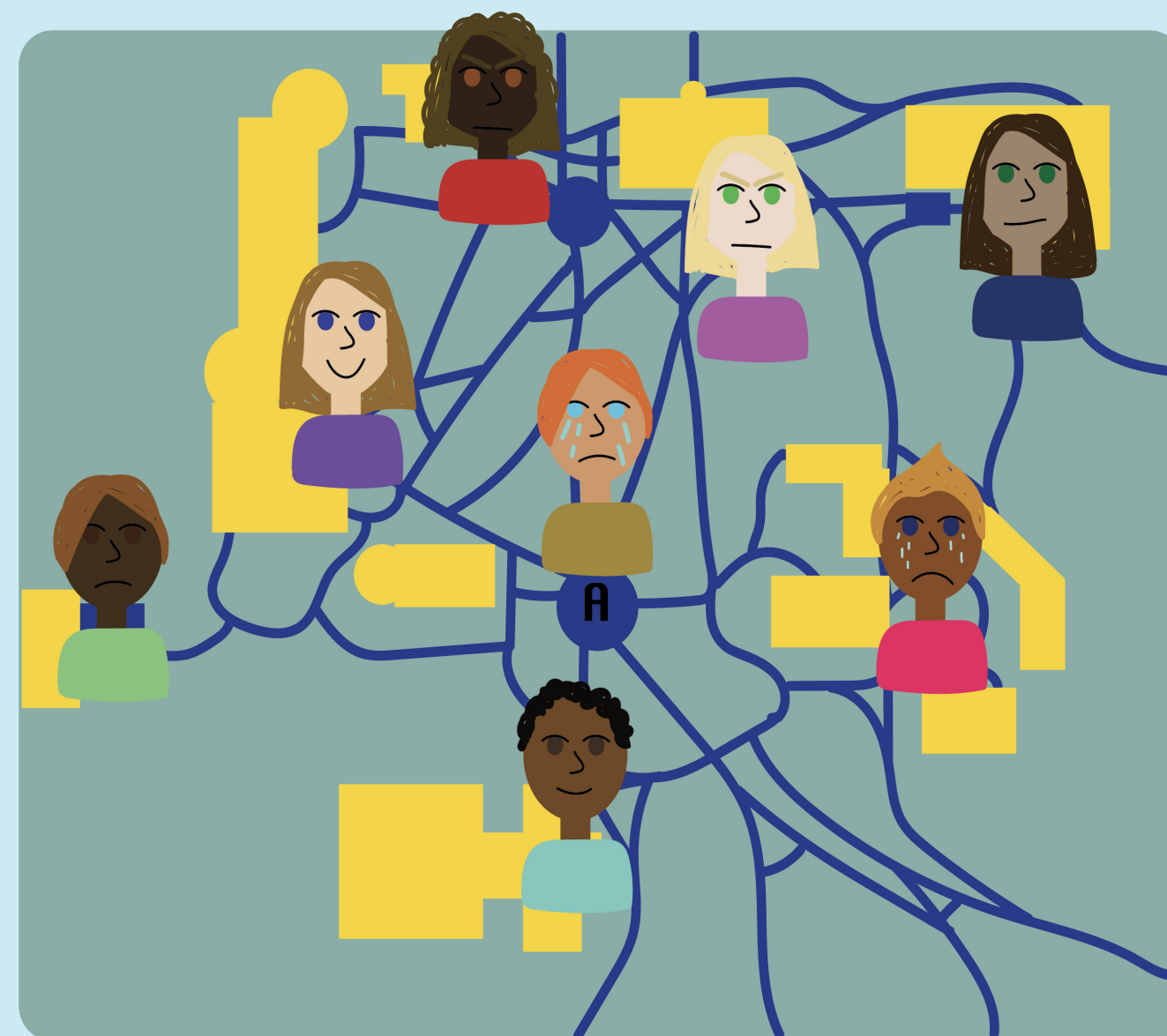
It is the hope that Reading Day will not only provide a day for the Augustana community to catch up with assignments, work or even sleep, but will also serve as an example for Augustana as a way that we can create solutions for our community to perform at our best throughout the year.

"I'll never get to experience Reading Day as a student," Palliser said. "But it's something I get to leave behind to future vikings as well as future and current professors. So I'm thankful to everyone

who helped make this day possible. I'm proud we've found a way to make campus better."

Reading Day is one step out of a hopefully long line of improvements made for the benefit of the Augustana community and is a starting point to create more accessible resources for the students and staff.

Kayla Palliser currently works for the Observer



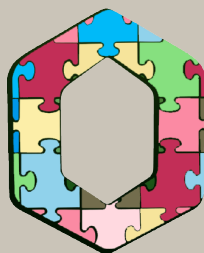
Graphic by Elise Brenner / Observer Staff

# The work continues on.

Accessibility on Augustana's campus requires action.  
Accessibility requires community.  
Accessibility requires listening.  
And we are not going to stop listening to you.

Thank you to our staff that worked to create this issue:

Billy Adams  
Rae Barry  
Chloe Baxter  
Jack Brandt  
Elise Brenner  
Giang Do  
Fatima Martinez Gallegos  
Sylvia Hughes  
Abbey Mond  
Kayla Palliser  
Allie Rial  
Addon Rodgers  
Charlie Roiland  
Molly Sweeney  
Linh Tran  
Morin Windle  
Lexi Woodcock



The Augustana Observer