

AUB Founders Day 2009

“Diversity for granted”

Zeina Koreitem

First Winner

Prior to my entry into AUB, my experience with diversity had been limited to the different nationalities and religions I was exposed to in my school in Kuwait. At that time, diversity was not a salient divider between my classmates: on the contrary, differences were taken as enriching characteristics that added to our personalities and interactions with each other. It was an example of a tolerant and diverse atmosphere.

When I came to AUB, what surprised me the most was the fact that for the first time, I felt aware that the differences between the people around me led them to interact in separate circles.

Students are separated into enclaves that prevent them from benefiting and learning from the diversity on campus. I am a strong believer in the beneficial effects of exposure to as many different cultural and social experiences as possible. It enriches a person, helps create a better awareness of the world, and encourages empathy for other people. It was from this starting point that I began my first semester as an observer, with an open and eager mind. I was able to mingle with students from each of the different groups on campus: I jammed with the “fiskies” and met with “frenchies”. However I quickly came to realize that each group existed in its own box: I expected that they would exchange ideas and points of view, but instead none of the different groups wanted anything to do with the other.

On campus, students seemed to naturally congregate into distinct groups, whether by their educational background, socio-economic conditions, religious beliefs, music taste, or political affiliations. Friendship patterns closely reflected the make-up of the student’s high schools and home atmospheres. These groups tended to cluster spatially and were often critical of one another, so that each group was aware of their own identity and guarded it. The labels identified with are taken to be mutually exclusive, separate identities which do not overlap.

It seemed that the diversity found in AUB was creating different kinds of intolerances instead of fostering inter-group exchanges, the most dangerous form of which was the sectarian bigotry which is the pinnacle of irrationality. As a Lebanese living abroad, I had never dealt with the issue of sectarianism before. It was a shock to me when I suddenly became identified with my

sect during the AUB student elections. I was offended that all of what I was boiled down to my sect, and that candidates approached me based on this criterion. It opened my eyes to a world of discrimination that I had not seen before. I should note that the University's policy of banning the presence of political parties on campus doesn't help in diffusing their effects. It instead allows the Lebanese culture of political sectarianism to seep into campus through club activities without being openly discussed.

Fostering social tolerance for diversity entails achieving the objectives of having students become individuals who are not just academically qualified, but better people who want to contribute to a better world. People who realize the strength of difference, their common aspirations, and who are aware that political choices and religious choices form only one part of their identity. At first glance it may seem that achieving these solutions requires raising awareness about historical backgrounds, beliefs, and cultural sensitivities, through workshops, debates, and lectures. However these things already happen at AUB: clubs and societies hold talks, invite guest speakers, and raise awareness. These bottom up approaches are practiced daily and while they should be fortified, another parallel approach should take place: structural changes should encourage different groups to mix. It is time to try institutional processes.

To this end, AUB has many assets that it can use to its advantage. The student distribution is diverse, there is no one dominating group on campus, and all students are structurally free to express themselves in many ways. AUB is in a position to become an institution which teaches students tolerance and acceptance of the other.

The term institutional change might bring up images of dictatorial practices, but it has also been used to implement racial reform and grant civil rights. There needs to be change which allows clubs to regain their place as outlets for student activism, by recognizing the crucial role of politics in the development of a full individual. Instead of ignoring the value of political dialogue, the university can acknowledge its essential role in society and help direct students on a constructive path. It could hence prevent students from acting in a manner that abuses the club activities' system and the student environment, which leads to the rise of hatred which comes from misunderstanding and ignorance. By giving room to political expression, the university would relieve the campus from the pressure exerted by unseen forces and channel politics into productive outlets. This would go a long way towards helping tolerance for diversity on campus.

The existence of different ideological groups and activities proves that the campus is diverse, but without tolerance this diversity will remain a barrier instead of a rich source of personal growth. When it comes down to the final assessment of tolerance of diversity in AUB, I would argue that more can be done. We cannot ignore the very important assets that AUB has, and the unique position of the university in bringing together people who would have never otherwise met. I myself have gained greater tolerance for diversity, and I have seen many of my friends come a long way from when they started. There is great potential in turning the tide so that AUB becomes an institution which creates positive change in Lebanon (and the world), instead of being a microcosm for the ailments of our time. What is needed is the fortitude to say that the problems exist, and the courage to prescribe the solution.