What You Know vs. How You Think: American Higher Education in Crisis?

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In gaining accreditation with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education in 2004, faculty of the American University of Beirut (AUB) engaged in a three-year self-study of the curriculum. In the subsequent report, the authors chose not to give in to student pressures to dismantle the liberal educational element of its curriculum. Then-president John Waterbury declared at the time, “Other universities use [the] same books as the ones we use but we are different in that we help students to challenge ideas: ‘it’s not what you know, it’s how you think.’” The current AUB mission statement says, “Graduates will be individuals committed to creative and critical thinking, life-long learning, personal integrity and civic responsibility, and leadership.” In the American liberal education system as it has evolved over the last 150 years, students succeed when they learn how to validate and produce knowledge on their own; as such, liberal education espouses methods for scholarly discovery, constructed in discussions of opposing viewpoints. AUB students have frequently protested to gain the right to determine the parameters of their educational experience - in the classroom and in the pathways of campus. This is a turbulent history but it is a fascinating case study of how the liberal education system is supposed to function.

However, the American higher education system is at a crossroads today as phrases like “it’s how you think” are drowned out by terms like “efficiency” and “metric outcomes.” Education is now supposed to be geared toward the “practical,” narrowly conceived, instrumental and utilitarian. Over the years, AUB’s faculty have adopted and adapted the American education system to fit the needs of their students in Beirut. I propose to discuss how this process took place at AUB and how new challenges are coming from America that are potentially changing the concepts underlying American higher education.