Academic Strategic Plan Meeting
Closing Remarks by AUB President Fadlo Khuri
August 24, 2016

I’ve been taking notes all day, I don’t want to bore you with all of them, but I am going to summarize a few take homes that I got, but first I’m going to go through the work of the groups. Before I do that since my notes seem to be in three different places, I want to start by saying a special thank you to Rania Hussein and Paula Chalhoub who really were terrific air traffic controllers all of this week.

So let’s talk about some of the things that emerged from each group, and some common themes from all the groups.

The first group, which looked at ways of enhancing research and teaching excellence in the natural and physical sciences, found that one of the most interesting findings was the concept not only of trade-offs, but of investing in people before property. And this is actually a common theme across all the ten groups, that AUB has, for some time, been under-invested in its people. We actually have a fairly small faculty, about 800 full time faculty and another 400 or so clinical faculty. It’s quite small for a university of this size. And one of the things that also emerged from that group is before we even invest in more faculty, let’s get the data and let’s make a smart, reasoned and data-driven series of decisions on timing and on investment, not just for the faculty, but for the students and staff as well.

From the second group, focusing on re-invigorating the humanities and the social sciences, there were some very interesting points including noting how difficult it is to assess real lasting success in this area, but also how badly under-appreciated the humanities and the social sciences are for their contributions. These contributions are important only for the University, but to the community, and how we, as AUB, have failed to make compelling cases for the humanities and for social sciences, not as a means to an end, but as a long-term career and to enrich our lives. They focused on how we can do better from the perspective of highlighting what these particular disciplines have meant to this University historically and in the future.

The core curriculum group focused on the general education curriculum, which was not necessarily my intention. My intention was to look at revitalization of the common curriculum. But they came up with some very interesting recommendations. One of the more striking observations of this group was how we have quite a way to go to establish a fundamental core curriculum, where people can move forward in a way where not only is there common ground, but where we are going to have to pull from a lot of different faculties to establish this core curriculum. I have to say I found it very attractive to ask the question after our athletic director said it, which is why don’t we have a Department of Physical Education? Why don’t we have Departments of Music and other things that we should be leaders in, and yet they’re not even on our radar screen? So a number of provocative questions asked there, for which I don’t think we yet have an answer.

The fourth group presented on strategic engagement via the digital revolution, and I saw a lot of low-hanging fruit in the presentation, but also some legal and technical challenges, not just with resources. How do we use this digital revolution to change how we teach without losing accreditation, for example? But also are there not some areas where we could be early winners, and I think Ira Allen had a suggestion there where we could take the lead in digital privacy and in other areas.
Group five was asked the question, what schools or units are next. I think some very, very important questions were asked in terms of the risks and rewards of making these decisions, and how we arrive at these decisions. Administrations often get universities into trouble by making sweeping decisions before the data are compelling. But you can have overwhelming data and still make the wrong decisions. I think from our perspective, there’s another risk, the risk of not making decisions, and I would argue that this University has been a little bit paralyzed by its history and afraid of making the sort of big decision, whether it’s right or wrong, about whether we need new schools and new facilities. The group did an excellent job establishing the parameters by which these decisions should be made.

I don’t think there is any argument on this campus, and certainly in this room, about the fact that we have to be much more environmentally sustainable, and part of the work, as Group 6 pointed out, has already been done. But I’m very concerned about our intellectual sustainability, and then, using the terrible important term with this group that only the OSB folks will be happy about, which is market relevance. I am worried about the number of low-end, poor quality, cheap purveyors of college diplomas in this space. If people are selling diplomas for a quarter of what we cost, and a family has no resources, we still have to remain competitive. We can’t ignore all our competitors. And yesterday for me was a very poignant day for me in that we went to the Grand Serail (Prime Minister’s quarters) to celebrate the top 28 kids in the Lebanese baccalaureate who are staying in Lebanon and 14 of whom are coming to AUB. And why was it poignant? It was poignant because we were by far the best-represented university. Now from a pride perspective, we can argue that we would like all 28 of those kids and the 29th who emigrated to come to AUB. That’s not healthy for us or for the country, but it does speak to our sustainability. But how sustainable are we if the competition isn’t better, if the students really are making decisions based on economic decisions? Ibrahim Khoury and I saw that at the Brummana High School graduation, where many of the top students are going to LAU for purely financial reasons. And that’s happening in the public and private schools, and it’s happening to a dangerous degree from the economic perspective. I remain very concerned that we at AUB become too economically elite, even though we’re doing a better job every year.

The Strategic Health Initiative I think was a very good mid-day presentation, because being very candid that’s a decision we’ve already made. We have made the decision to bring the faculties that deal with health-related issues closer together to enhance efficiency and also to expand impact and collaboration. And from my perspective, all six faculties and all seven schools do something that’s health-related, everything from business and engineering to medicine and nursing and agriculture. So health will be a driving feature of our University. It’s a cross-cutting strength, and we may as well capitalize on that, and it was gratifying to see how far the train has moved in a short time, again emphasizing the importance, not just of leadership, but of a series of leaders who are sublimating their egos for the greater good.

With regard to engaging and empowering our communities, I think we all have different examples of who our communities are. That’s very striking as we sit in the room; our communities are faculty, staff, alumni, board of trustees, but there’s also the community in Ras Beirut, the community of Lebanon and the Arab world, and the global community. So how do we empower those communities? I think one thing that came across very clearly from that presentation is that we struggle to define how we reach out to those communities. I think Talal Nezameddine made a very good point on behalf of the group about the importance of defining how we engage the communities, and those communities that we’re going to engage is just as important as what we do on campus. We need to understand just how much we’re seen in this part of the world as the big
brother, but how invisible we are becoming the further West we go. We also have to worry about becoming invisible in the Arab world, as institutions enter the space that will spend a far bigger percentage of their budget on marketing. You know, we have very slick competitors, and if you think that people only buy a car because it is good quality, go look at the number of people who buy expensive duds just because they look good, and they market themselves well. So you have to constantly remember how our various communities perceive us.

In terms of ascendency of research, I like the fact that we’re starting to consistently reproduce what we do well. I think we do many things OK, and I think we do some things extraordinarily well, but I don’t believe I should decide what we do well. We’re happy in the administration—myself, the EVP, the Provost, the COO, the VPs, the deans, the chairs—to opine on what we think we do well, but on behalf of all of us, it is always heartening to see data-driven decisions. Data doesn’t take the responsibility for the decision away, but it certainly helps make easy and smart and informed decisions. And looking at clusters of excellence, in not just research, but in teaching, makes that decision easier. I also like the consistency; this group agreed with the very first group and with the second group that what we need is support for research, resources for research, as opposed to new buildings. New buildings are not unimportant, and we will build new buildings. But I want to push back here a little bit and say it is a very complicated process from the perspective of what we’re going to have to do in the Capital Campaign. So, if EVP Sayegh and VP Baalbaki go to name something, in a specific area, we have to be able to highlight the faculty member credibly, but we also have to point out to the potential donors that we don’t live in a cave, OK? When potential donors come on campus, we need your energy, we need your enthusiasm, we need your data, but if they walk into some of our buildings as they currently are, we’re going to lose a lot of arguments that we should otherwise win. So, what do we need to win an argument before I get to the growth? We need every faculty member to believe they are an ambassador of the University. The University is more than just a job for them, they’re excited about the work they’re doing, they’re excited about research, and they have students who feel like they have a real opportunity. Think where our strategic planning is going to be, see what the students would like to see in 2030 when they come back as alumni. Let’s be honest, it needs an attractive physical space. We’re going to have to renovate even if we slow down on new buildings, but we have to have something presentable and functional; labs, and functional offices, and I think the point that was made about the miserable conditions of Fisk Hall are exactly what drove us to take the very unpopular decision among students to renovate Penrose now, and we’re also applying actually to renovate Fisk in the next year or two. So, one of the reasons we think it is important to us to come together is to understand that part of the making of decisions as we move forward as a university is to understand why certain decisions were made, understand that there is a sequence of decisions that have to be made popular, or unpopular, and we have to tie those to our direction, where we are going. That’s why we deliver pace of growth, and define for today’s discussion that growth as external growth, and I am sorry we didn’t clarify that at the end. I think we can’t wait to get our entire house in order.

My sense is, for the last 40 years, scared by the Off-Campus Program experience, and having only dipped our toes in the water for a serious expansion in 2007-2008 when there was serious discussion of a second campus in Dubai, this University has been much too conservative at saying let’s get everything, everything right before we attempt to grow. That’s one of the reasons we asked the last group to look at what external growth would look like, not just in the Gulf, but also in Lebanon, and potentially with regard to what we do in Syria, academically and from a growth perspective, from a humanitarian and a service perspective, not forgetting the first mission of the University. So, in summary, I also took on a lot of key points that cut across the different groups. I am going to go through those quickly and then I’d like to talk about next steps.
One of the most energizing things about the last 4-5 days is, I think, a virtually universal belief by this group that AUB can go beyond its physical and psychological borders in a number of areas, including, but not limited to, engaging the community, sustainability, and further empowering the ascendency for research. The other thing that was very exciting and reinforcing, is that I think we’re all ready, as a community, agreeable that the time is right for positive disruption. We’re ready; does anyone here want to continue for the next ten years with business as usual? If so, would you please raise your hand? So, I think we’re ready for positive disruption, but it has to be smart and consensual positive disruption. We can’t always avoid bad dramatic surprises, which happen, but we can lessen any blows through communicating, through engaging alumni, students, and the community, and potentially a lot of that should be through better digital engagement. So it is not just as simple as fixing our website or you getting a memo from me every other week as to what’s happening at the University—by the way, you will be getting a memo from me, every other week about what’s new and exciting at the University, but here we are really talking about a whole different type of digital communication. Personally, one of the first messes that I avoided was being challenged about what I thought about the dialogue on the faculty-only forum. I think it’s great, but I don’t think it’s leading to anything that resembles a discussion. I think we need a discussion that cuts across the entire community.

If anyone thinks that we are going to go away from putting research at the heart of our mission, my sense is that they haven’t been watching what’s happened, not just the last year, but over the last two decades. There has been a clear commitment, most recently by the board’s decision to restore tenure and all that means, to put research forth as a central part of our mission. How we evaluate that research and whether we evaluate it well given the diversity of research on this campus, can and will be costly. I want to say that loud and clear. So, if we invest in people, I think one of the things that we should do most clearly is help faculty members understand, and help to make clear to them, what are the rules for the advancement of their careers, and I am talking about everything from promotion to further resourcing them with financial and other resources such as space. Resources need to be clear. I do think we should be prepared for the flipside of tenure, which is that we’re going to have some fantastic faculty that we recruit and some fantastic faculty that we lose. So, the smarter we are about evaluating a study and how we assess research, in a not necessarily linear way, but in a consistent manner, is going to be important.

I also think we clearly do not fully understand all of our centers and clusters of excellence. I think we need to agree to set aside our agendas, and this came from the very first day together this week, when Iman Nuwayhid challenged that perhaps we weren’t pointing out all of our strengths and focusing on some of our challenges. I would push back and say, I’ve been here for a year, and there has been a lot of give and take. I certainly was more than an interested observer from a distance, and I had been intimately involved with the Medical School’s assessment of its trajectory for five years before I came here. But can we even get a consensus in this room as to what our current strengths are? I don’t know that we can today; but I am convinced that we could get there. I suggest that it’s really important that we start digging and getting there soon. Some of these strengths, in addition to Middle-Eastern Studies or Neuroscience, I think we can agree on fairly quickly.

There are two inter-related points that I’m going to touch on quickly; there is no question, there’s virtual unanimity that we need to emphasize quality versus quantity. But I heard some disagreement as to how we assess quality. What is quality? Is quality international recognition? Is it number of publications? Is it resources brought to the University in terms of grants or students? I think we need to dig down a little bit deeper, without getting too unconventional because when we look at quality in teaching, in service, and in research, some things are obvious. Someone wins a
Nobel Prize, in general, they do quality work. You know, the Center for Civic Engagement of this University wins a prize, a highly competitive award (the MacJannet Prize), that’s evidence of quality, not service. But I would argue that we need to emphasize quality, and learn how to evaluate it much better than we have, just based on my one-year experience at AUB looking at promotions and other files. I think we’re making progress, but we need to get there.

Speaking of quality, quality facilities are as important for students as they are for faculty. I think that’s something that didn’t get touched on enough, which is what is most important for the students. You know, the students are the heart of the University, as are the faculty, and I don’t think our quality of facilities is good enough, with a few exceptions. I was very disappointed in April of 2015 when I went to visit Nabil Dajani; I got lost in Nicely Hall, and I went to the room where I took Civilization Sequences in 1981, which, I tell Nadia El Cheikh was my favorite course at the time and remains my favorite course at AUB. The classroom was the same, except a little bit older. I think we should have more respect for our students than to think that they consider the quality of some of these facilities acceptable: Fisk, Nicely, Diana Tamari Sabbagh, until recently, Engineering looks pretty spiffed up, but the Architecture Buildings are a little bit disturbing, especially if you don’t have earplugs for the jack hammers. So, while I agree to go back to the first point that we should put people first, we definitely need some investment in our facilities, and if we don’t invest soon in the Power Plants, and make some serious investments in putting these underground so they make less noise, and buy state-of-the-art equipment, we’re going to regret it because these daily governamental electrical cuts are going to get more and more frequent. And I also believe we should start to invest in desalination; we should need to start looking at producing and maintaining our water supply.

I always try to keep in mind inclusiveness, but I see too many clusters of “sames” together on campus. Whether people of the same political orientation, or a group of engineers hanging out alone and the architects staying out separately, or a bunch of MDs who are separate from the PhDs, so on and so forth. I think we would all do better if we kept our eyes on these issues of inclusiveness because even when you try to make yourself inclusive, you have to remember or you’re going to screw up. And while I am very proud of the fact that this September 1, for the first time in the history of the University, we have three senior leaders, three senior women leaders in key faculty positions, and two women deans for the first time in AUB’s history, and a female associate provost, it’s not good enough, we can do better, but not just in issues of gender. I think we should be the champions of defending all orientations and all perspectives, political or otherwise, on this campus.

I was very impressed with this group. I think much as I get tired of hearing the sound of my voice, I enjoy hearing your voice. A lot of tough questions, a lot of people saying they were going to go negative, but I didn’t perceive anyone being negative, I thought they were asking tough questions that were not always politically correct. That’s important; the University needs it, but the country and the region need it even more than the University. We constrained ourselves with political correctness; so and so has an opinion, it’s right wing, banish them. So and so has an opinion, she’s left wing, banish her. This is garbage. We need not to be afraid to ask uncomfortable questions here, and not just political questions, but intellectual questions. I heard some cautionary notes about, “fine, we believe the time is right for growth and expansion, but be very careful about diluting the brand and reducing the quality”. That message was heard loud and clear, we don’t want to create AUB light or AUB lesser anywhere else, we want to create growth that is at our level of quality. That came across loud and clear, and I can promise you that we want to hear from you if you feel that we’re diluting the brand or lessening the standard. Even if you think that you are dead wrong, we want to hear from you because you might be right and we might be wrong.
And then, you know, at the end of the day, as I said at the beginning of this four-day marathon, it’s all about our relevance. Our relevance and our sustainability and our future growth and our strategic plan and our Campus Master Plan and Capital Campaign, all are about the three things that we started by talking about: the people we have, the people we are going to get, including our replacements - I’ll be replaced before most of you, good young group that you are - and the people we serve. If we can keep our eye on that, we will be fine. We have to be honest and say that the last 25 years, while we’ve done well as a university, we’ve done well, but have we done as much good as we could have done? I am not sure we have. And, this University was really in a naïve, but innocent, originally religiously motivated, way brought here because the folks who brought it here thought they were here to do good. I’ve been accused of writing odes to the foreign angels, that was one of the most interesting things I saw on the Internet. But I actually believe that a lot of good has come from this institution, a lot of good will comes from it. The harder thing about doing good these days is it has to be part of conscious planning. Why are we developing a strategic plan? Because I think it would be better if we thought through as a group, how we’re going to move forward, from the perspective of long-term strategy. So, I’ve talked much longer than I intended to; I do want to say we will reconvene clusters of this group with a more student focused orientation in the weeks to come. The next steps are as follows: please send us all of your notes, all of your ideas, and all of your presentations, I am going to say initially to Rania Hussein, but Yousif Asfour is also working on creating a website where we can deposit all of this. I think the next step in terms of the academic strategic plan is for me to sit down with the Provost and the Associate Provost and do a lot of work in terms of trying to bring things together, present it to the executive leadership team and the deans and then back to this group, just to make sure that we captured most of the important directions, and then use that product when working with Michael Dolance and his team, and with Dar and with Perkins+Will, and at least show some of that work to the next group, rather than start from scratch. My preference is to show the students the progress that’s been made so far, see their perspective because the great thing about AUB students is that they are very opinionated, they’re more than happy to tell you that you’re dead wrong. So that’s the next step, we want to get input from the students and staff, and then a lot of this has to move quickly because we need a very coherent series of presentations for our retreat with the senior leadership and the deans in mid-October. So, you’re going to be asked in the next few weeks to get pulled into this project, that project; we’re going to respect your teaching time; we will intrude into your life and your research time, but from my perspective and I think from anyone’s perspective, this is very important work in pulling the University forward in a thoughtful and transparent manner. So, I am going to end by thanking all of my colleagues who’ve done a tremendous amount of work to set things up, and I want to thank all of you for all the hard work, not that you’ve done, but the work that you’re going to do. Thank you very much.