Speech to IC graduating class of 2016  
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December 8, 2015

Dear young colleagues,

Greetings and salutations. 35 years ago, I was sitting in your shoes. I was pretty sure that I would become a physician and I was grateful that, thanks to several wonderful teachers at IC, they allowed me to explore some of my passions. My great history teacher in second intermediate, Ms. Nada Marmoura, had reinforced in me, in the midst of the first year of the Lebanese Civil War, my father's own love for history. I would never lose that passion, despite the far less gifted teachers who followed her, and I ended up taking multiple history courses at Yale.

William Smathers, perhaps the most personally impactful teacher I had at IC, taught me to write with my own voice, instead of writing the perfect essay. Nadi Nader, our magnificent mathematics teacher in our Final Baccalaureate Year, rebuilt my personal confidence and strengthened my love for algebraic interrogation.

Interestingly, even though I am a molecular biologist and became a biology major at AUB and Yale and have published over 300 papers in the field, I never took a biology course in my 10 years at IC. I matriculated in biology after studying on my own the summer before entering AUB and doing well on the standard biology entrance exam. What does that tell you?

What it told me is that the skill sets one needs to acquire in high school are very different than those you will acquire in college. Confidence and competence certainly matter, as do your social skills, but then I don't need to tell you that. You have already made and will continue to maintain, as I do and did, some of the most important and durable friendships of your life. Malek Wehbe and Wadi Nasrallah and Philip Ashkar and Elias Melhem and others have remained among my closest friendships, spanning 4-5 decades.

But what other skill sets will you take with you from IC, important and imperceptible?

To begin with, you will have confidence in yourself and in your voice. But that confidence should not be so absolute as to drown out the voices of others, or to declare that all absolute truths are known to you. One thing that bothered me at IC was the insistent need of folks to always seek the company of the popular kid, the rich kid, the influential kid. Social climbing is easy in upper middle class Beirut, and it is a lesson reinforced by a society that overly values money, power, wealth and appearance. Style over substance if you will. Look around you if you must. You know that what I am saying is true, reluctant as you may be to admit that.

But following the popular, the powerful and the wealthy has its cost. As does the path of listening only to your own powerful voice, to the exclusion of that of others. Yes, your own agency matters, but so does that of your peers. They matter too, and they teach you hints about life that complements those which you learn from your teachers, siblings and parents. Take time to hear those voices. You will learn and understand a great deal.

In my last two years in high school, I made an unusual friend. He would graduate at the top of our class, but he was shy and came from a family of limited financial means. I got to know him after we had an earnest discussion in class in which neither of us gave any quarter, but both came to understand and respect the other's point of view. Our friendship deepened and we spent time together during our
sophomore year at AUB, one of the happiest years of my life. After I left for Yale, I came back to discover that he has taken his own life. It was senseless and tragic. He was a great student, a great person and he had grown on confidence in our last few years together in high school and in our year at AUB. He had even made a companion, a nice young woman he introduced me to when I came back to visit my family over the previous Christmas Break.

When I visited his family to pay my condolences, I was still in pain and deeply troubled. Why had he ended his life and silenced such a powerful song? He had been depressed, I was told by his parents, although they felt he was doing better. I was troubled in many ways. I had seen the pain of depression in aspects of my extended family but had not glimpsed any evidence of it in my late friend. What had changed in the year I had been away?

I was never to find the answer to my question but it renewed my determination to be more open to hearing the voices of others. Maybe he had just needed someone to talk to? At any rate the lessons I learned from my friend and his noble spirit had touched me in a durable way. I still hear his voice in happy times, his understanding of the opportunity that IC had granted him and his determination to impact social service while maintaining stellar marks, his openness and mine to the less popular, less forceful voices in the class. I thought long and hard about the fact that I had learned from him and from others of my eclectic friends, that sometimes, the most powerful and meaningful voices are not the loudest ones in the room, but the softest and hardest to hear. That can be true also of the many interests one has acquired. Sometimes nurturing and maintaining some of your less conventional and less pragmatic interests can go a long way in defining who you are.

When I was your age, career choices were largely limited to medicine, engineering, business or agriculture. But college is far more than just the place you should focus those interests. That can come later, in professional and graduate school. College, you see, and AUB should always be an exemplar of that, is where you go to also pursue your other interests and passions, in addition to getting your degree in an area that puts you in position to lead a full and gainful life. College, my young friends, is where you can explore your passions, take smart risks, meet and befriend people you might not otherwise have encountered. College is where you can open your mind, and not only to the powerful or persuasive and empowering voices. College is where you will go, in 9 short months from now, after graduating from IC, where you will come to explore the softer voice in the background, the shy voice, the unconventional one. And it will change you for the better.

Thank you for listening and I am now happy to take questions.