Good Afternoon, I think we’re going to start! I am going to introduce Dr. Tarek Mitri who will be running the conference, former minister and head of the Issam Fares Institute, and really an individual who can get all sides engaged, get nice creative tension in the discussion but leave a role for everyone to express their opinions civilly but in an excited and I think exciting manner, so Dr. Tarek Mitri is chairing the session...

Thank you Dr. Mirati! Good afternoon, thank you for coming. I have the privilege of meeting with Mr. Shehab so I could focus the vision into 5 to 7 minutes... So I really wanted to talk about one topic specific to us at AUB and in higher education, which is really on creativity and how to best unleash it in our youth! And one of my favorite but arguably least enjoyable writers once said: “All great deeds and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning.” The author of course being Albert Camus who you don’t necessarily associate with happiness but you do associate with ideas! I think today in higher education, and not just in Lebanon, we live in an environment that seemed structured almost for purposely in a way to stifle creativity. The modern cocktail of overwhelming technological advances, pervasive social inequity, and trenchant nativism that Mr. Trump has really been an outstanding example of recently, really carries many risks for the young, but none of them is greater than the greatest risk of all which is choking the creative drive of young people right at the pipeline. That’s because these individuals generally harbor that greatest of talents, which is creativity; and from creativity, there is a fairly strong correlation with happiness. It’s true that adversity can often create the milieu or enhance the milieu for creativity, but in my very first talk to the AUB community I spoke about how that is really the less desirable way to stimulate creativity is to have such an environment of adversity as for example امرؤ القيس experienced that he had to be creative.

So how do we move forward to create an environment in the educational milieu of Lebanon that can be conducive to enhancing creativity, and what’s the role of the educational community in particular, in higher education? And you’ve heard about the partnership that we’re forging specifically with St. Joseph University to try to further this vital societal goal of enhancing creativity.

I think those of us in the great universities, in Lebanon and in the Arab World, have to be up to the task of nurturing and enhancing the rare talents that populate our universities. By that I am speaking of the faculty, staff, alumni, and especially the students. How do we do it? I think the first step is to be honest, and to really seriously examine our own pedagogy! Are we creating the environment for their success? Are we teaching in a way that fosters creativity, and emphasizes it! And I think looking across the spectrum of higher education – not just at AUB but all the way to Harvard, Yale, Oxford, and Cambridge; I would give us at best a C- or a D+! We don’t create the tool set that our students need to go out and be creative because we structure them within an environment of saying: This is what you need to learn! This is what you can write on! That’s the creative part; but at the end of the day, you need to know the basic language, there is nothing wrong with that!
But there is also probably a missed opportunity there; we should be adding an emphasis on creativity, on civic engagement, and on leadership, all of which will be part of what we’re working on in our own pedagogy. So that brings forth the question: Are we keeping up with the times and producing new opportunities? While hanging on to that aspect of our educational curriculum that’s most vital; it’s very important not to throw out the baby with the bath water! We don’t want to change just for the sake of change, we want to change to enhance, to accelerate, and to improve! So to do that, we have to take advantage of our strength and among our strengths at AUB really include the finest department of education in the Arab World. We really have a superb department that innovate in education, and what we need to do is work with them to look at our curriculum in Engineering and in Medicine, in other areas to look in this area of constant renewal. We have to do that in the following manner: not only look at what’s good and what’s creative but also look at what it is that produces positive stimuli that together when they acclimate and they coalesce can result in happiness. The importance of happiness, and the role it plays in creativity. I believe the two are synergistic; happiness and creativity are not generally exclusive but rather dynamic and intertwining forces and factors. Once we do that and once we review ourselves carefully and understand what we do well and what we do less well that can be improved, we need to do that in listening to our students and to our faculty and our staff in an open-minded way because criticism is good. We then need to go back and work with them to change our curriculums; because our students are not just empty vessels that we fill with our creative ideas, they have their own ideas. We don’t want to imprint them to the extent that they are passive learners.

So I have to say that in discussions with the faculty, the students, and the staff, I believe that we at AUB are genuinely committed to reviewing what we do and to empowering and enabling creativity in our student body and in the wider AUB community. One of the things we’re going to do is we’re going to launch an innovation park (i-Parc) this fall lead by Salim Chahine among others, that’s an element of enhancing creativity that will allow people to capitalize their ideas; and since I see many of the captains of industry in our front rows, that should definitely be of interest. But we’re also going to look at things that may not be economically capitalized quite so easily that may create a different form of creativity, one that’s deeply needed in Lebanon and the Arab World in looking at different solutions. That’s one of the things you saw our students do over the holiday break when they got together to come up with a new and fair proportional example of student elections; quite candidly I think this would be great for the country and for the Arab World at large to adopt, but it’s not for us to impose. Rather, it’s for us to provide solutions that people will think of.

These are some of the principal reasons that I personally returned to Lebanon and AUB about a year ago and why I find this time so exciting in Lebanon, at AUB, and in the Arab World. This is one of the periods post Arab Spring where we can see a sea-change; a sea-change in how young people are thinking about their futures, and in how different governments and in different aspects certainly of the private sector in Lebanon and even the government are starting to examine what they can do to provide a future. For example: I don’t believe that the future of our outstanding young people is to continue to export them as the best product of Lebanon and the Arab World; we have to create economic opportunities; we have to create educational and other opportunities; and we have to enhance participation.
So I am looking forward to hearing from my colleagues today and from the discussion that will ensue, I hope we will notarize what we’ve all said, such that we can all be held accountable because I like not to say things which then I don’t do, and I am sure everybody here feels the same way. Thank you very much!!