

President Waterbury's Opening Remarks

Opening Ceremony

October 3, 2005

AUB'S STRATEGY FOR THE FUTURE

AUB is an important national and regional actor in higher education. This institution is situated in an increasingly competitive market. In several respects we still hold an edge over our closest competitors. Our challenge is to devise strategies that will maintain or increase our advantage in the coming decades.

AUB is now engaged in such a process, and we owe it to our alumni and friends to keep them informed of how our thinking is evolving. It is not too much to say that the choices we make now will probably shape the

university for the next half century. These choices will determine if we are ready to meet not only the regional but the global challenges of the 21st century.

Arriving where we are now in strategic planning has been a cumulative process. It began with the intensive academic review of AUB in 1998/99 as the negative effects of the civil war gradually receded. We needed to take stock of how we had weathered those terrible years. The academic review was followed by the campus master plan to assure that our physical assets correspond to our academic priorities, and it led logically and momentously to the process that won us accreditation through the Middle States Association of the United States. It now culminates in an on-going process of institutional strategic planning. The process has been particularly intense in the past year and will continue in like fashion for the next twelve months at least. In the future, strategic planning will be on-going but more in the sense of challenging initial assumptions in the light of experience and of adjusting to changes in our environment that are as unpredictable as they are inevitable.

Strategic planning sets guidelines that should apply in changing circumstances. These guidelines will allow us to be flexible and adaptive rather than rigid and resistant to change. Success in the 21st century will require that we embrace change, but in so doing we must remain true to our historic educational mission. The guidelines we establish must give practical meaning to that mission and to our legacy.

The effort involves hundreds of AUBites from the faculty, staff, and students. Over thirty committees will be involved, and the process will be monitored by a Strategic Planning Steering Committee representing major university constituencies. The Board of Trustees has established a new strategic planning committee of its own that will act as liaison between the university administration and the Board. This is a dynamic process. It calls for wide ranging analysis and debate. Many of the issues before us do not command consensus at present. We need to examine all options with open minds. In my February 2004 State of the University address, I laid out strategic guidelines that reflect my own preferences and best judgment. Those guidelines did not arouse too much controversy, and they have been endorsed by the Trustees. It is important to note, however, that I am only one player in this process. I do not know how it will come out.

Of the twenty-two committees that will elaborate the different components of a final plan, five special committees have been meeting during the last year. These five are university-wide committees on enrolment management, information technology, general education, graduate education and research, and positioning. These committees are dealing with strategic choices that face the university as a whole. The recommendations they make will shape the way the functional units develop their own plans. I want today to give you some flavor of the issues before these committees.

Enrolment Management

AUB's educational mission is directly carried out by its faculty with support from the administration and the non-academic staff. The proof that we are fulfilling our mission, however, lies with our students. In very simplistic terms we know we are succeeding if we attract the kind of students we want and if we are able to give them the keys to meaningful employment after they graduate. The issue then becomes, what kind of students do we want? The enrolment management committee seeks to answer that question. The question comes in several parts.

If we want a student body defined by intelligence as measured by high school performance and SAT scores, we are likely to have a student body that reflects the best schools in Lebanon and which is heavily drawn from Beirut and Mt. Lebanon, and from middle and upper income brackets. If we seek a more diverse student body, as defined by nationality and socio-economic background, we may have to move away from admissions based on high school performance and scores.

We need to decide how much we value diversity. I advocate it myself because I believe that part of a university education is learning about others with whom one does not normally come into contact on a day-to-day basis. Ideally this means routine interaction with students of other nationalities, religious back grounds, or from less privileged socio-economic status.

It is also my conviction that higher education is, more than ever, the key to upward social mobility. By reaching out to the less privileged in this or any society, universities open doors to higher professional attainment and higher standards of living. They give hope to the less privileged that their children can rise high if not to the top.

But if we opt for greater diversity there are major costs. We would have to use a greater proportion of our financial aid budget to recruit the disadvantaged from Lebanon and the region. That would mean less financial aid for students of middle class background. If we recruit more students from outside Lebanon, that may mean that proportionally fewer Lebanese will go to AUB, and, unless we expand the student body, itself a strategic choice, the absolute number of Lebanese at AUB might go down.

A second cost would probably come in the form of a more extensive and multi-faceted program of remedial education to help students coming from schools that cannot rival the elite schools of Beirut and Mt. Lebanon, or their counterparts in the Gulf, to meet the standards in English and quantitative analysis that will allow them to compete at AUB.

In summary, AUB historically was one of the rare institutions in this region to attract students in significant numbers from outside its borders. In the 1960s and 1970s over half our students were non-Lebanese. The civil war ended that era. How big an effort are we prepared to make to reclaim our regional and international role? Are the gains worth the effort and the cost?

Information Technology

No ingredient in our increasingly interconnected world is more salient than information technology. It is critical to higher education in at least three ways. It helps, or should help us perform our administrative tasks more efficiently in terms of both time and money. From patient records to student registration and passing through budget, payroll and personnel, every facet of our business, including strategic planning itself, is subject to improvement through information technology.

Secondly, it is integral to our teaching. It is the subject of our teaching in computer sciences and electrical and computing engineering. It is a tool for improved teaching through course management software. It does not matter what one's discipline is as a professor. Available software enables any of us to deliver readings, class discussions, supporting material, assignments and grades on line. I am a beginner in this area, but I am teaching this semester and I am using our preferred software, WebCT, to organize my course.

Other software, such as Turn It In allows students and professors to check a vast archive for evidence of plagiarism in student- submitted work.

Information technology in teaching presents us with another set of choices. Should we enter into distance learning and if so for what purposes? If we believe that bringing people together on our campus is integral to our educational experience, should we offer options that allow people to avoid our campus? Should we be creating virtual campuses of AUB so that we can deliver our educational product elsewhere? If we were to do that, what would the implications be for our educational mission?

Thirdly, information technology is vital to faculty and student research. Nearly every field of study has become dependent to some extent on information technology. Extensive data bases are available to us on our computer screens. Complex engineering and architectural problems can be modeled using licensed software. Search engines allow us to scan archived information for relevant material. Many academic journals are available on line. As we move into inter disciplinary research in the life sciences, the use of IT becomes inescapable in genetic research and bio-informatics.

All of this is fairly obvious. The challenge is to stay at the cutting edge and not make mistakes in selecting information technologies that will be costly and counter productive. Yet we know how quickly this field evolves, how

rapidly a given technology becomes obsolete. Of all the university-wide strategic planning areas, it is in information technology that we will need the most continuous planning and adjustment process long after the current committee makes its report and recommendations.

We are asking ourselves another set of IT-related questions. Should we aspire to be regional leaders or merely keep up with the herd? After all we have faculty and non academic experts who not only understand IT but contribute to its development. The reality is, however, that IT products are expensive and others, such as the educational cities in Dubai and Qatar, have greater resources than do we. It is also the case that the national policies of other countries in the region, such as Egypt and Jordan, are more nurturing of the IT sector and of access to it than is Lebanon. We have to understand the policy environment in which we operate in order to devise an appropriate IT strategy. We have also to understand our financial limitations.

General Education

AUB has always claimed to offer a course of undergraduate study closely resembling best practice in the United States. Key components of that course

of study are choice in courses both within and outside the major, flexibility in the overall design of the major, and the requirement that the student must take a broad range of courses outside the major. The latter component is usually referred to as the liberal arts or general education requirement. For the last five years, across our entire curriculum, we have been trying to strengthen our general education offerings. For many parents and students faced with the high costs of an AUB education, the time taken away from the major may seem to be a costly luxury. Let me briefly explain why we think it is not.

The challenge to AUB and other universities today is profound, but it is not new. Certainly for nearly the last two centuries, Universities have sought to combine the broad education of the citizen with the equally important credentialing of the professional. General education and professional specialization have always been uneasy bed-mates, but nonetheless productive and creative ones. That has not changed. What has changed is the rate at which technical and specialized knowledge and skills are generated, matured and abandoned. The volume of information available to us is more than we can intelligently handle. The rate at which specialized knowledge

and techniques are brought forward, modified, or discarded makes professional life a constant race against obsolescence.

In this light, the importance of a liberal arts education is greater today than ever before. Its importance is two-fold. It is important in the traditional sense of developing the citizen who knows where she or he is coming from, culturally and ethically. It helps develop at a critical age a human being who can place her or his profession in a broad social and historical context and understand the moral and ethical codes that are, if not the practice, at least the ideals of the profession. It is important in the practical sense that it contributes to analytic and critical thinking across fields of knowledge, to the mental agility that is required to reach competency in several bodies of knowledge, to the ability to absorb and synthesize diverse and complex sources of information, in short, the ability to think creatively, to solve problems, and to articulate solutions clearly and compellingly.

Today's youth will routinely go back to school, for shorter or longer periods. It will constantly re-tool. Most young people will not only change jobs frequently, they will change professions and careers. Our duty, as a University, is to prepare our students for this process of continuous learning and retooling. We must emphasize as much *how* to think as we emphasize *what* to think about.

In the fall of 2001, we introduced at AUB for incoming students a set of distribution requirements that emphasize *modes of learning* --seminars, individual research, laboratories, and lectures--that cut across *fields of knowledge*--the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, economics, computer sciences, engineering, and so forth. At least a quarter of the undergraduate's course load is taken as part of these distribution requirements

The Committee on General Education is reviewing our experience to date and is making recommendations on how to move forward. We want all Faculties at AUB to be involved in the effort, not merely Arts and Sciences which has shouldered the major burden to date. We need to prepare our faculty members who teach courses that meet general education requirements to deal with students who have little background in the subject matter of the course. It is very important to emphasize that we are as concerned to expose students in the social sciences and humanities to fields of scientific enquiry as we are to expose engineering or business or food sciences majors to the humanities and social sciences.

In many ways we do not have a lot of choice in this area. In order for our undergraduate programs of professional education to be accredited in the US—for example in engineering or business—we must design the course of study so that a quarter or more of all course work falls within the general education category.

Graduate Education and Research

Our most challenging strategic initiatives may emerge under this heading. After all, since its inception, AUB has been predominantly focused on undergraduate education. Back in the 1950s Charles Malik noted this fact and argued that until we offered PhDs and fostered advanced research we had no right to call our institution a university. AUB did offer a limited number of PhDs for a time in the 1960s and 1970s, but the civil war forced us to put our PhD programs on the shelf. We are now fairly advanced in re-launching PhDs in six disciplines.

But just what is it to which we aspire? Some members of our faculty and of our Board of Trustees are convinced that we can and should be the major center for advanced research in the Arab world and that we should compete in doctoral training and research in the global arena. Can we do that? What will it take in terms of resources? Should we aspire to become a niche

player, focusing on areas of research that are mainly applied and where we have some comparative advantage? Under any scenario, how do we attract excellent PhD candidates if the truly excellent are able to go to the great universities of the world, usually with full financial support? Who will want to employ our PhDs? Here I think the picture is both clear and fairly bright. For PhD recipients who follow the conventional career path of entering academia, the explosion of institutions of higher learning throughout the region represents a robust market. The private sector, both regional and multi national, will, with time generate demand for PhDs in specific fields such as computer engineering or bio-medical research.

The puzzle we have to solve is the following: to attract top students we need top flight research faculty and excellent facilities in terms of libraries, laboratories, computing power, and internet access. To attract top flight faculty we need very good graduate students, a community of research scholars, and excellent facilities. All of this implies very large, perhaps unaffordable financial outlays. The best students will come only with substantial financial support. The research facilities are costly to set up, to run, and to staff. The research faculty will command large salaries. One can envisage a time when all these elements come together in a mutually reinforcing way. Good faculty with good students attract large flows of

research funding from outside the university which in turn go to finance more good students and to acquire better research facilities. The issue is how to get started. It may mean establishing a large start up fund within the university's endowment, but that in turn would mean that other activities and units within the university would see a drop in their level of funding. It is in the nature of strategic planning that one decides to some things and not others. The planning process must indicate the costs as well as the benefits of any particular choice, and nowhere is this more pertinent than in the domain of graduate education and research.

Positioning

The positioning committee in some ways can be considered the committee of committees. Its charge is to assess our competitive environment and identify the major challenges we will face in the coming years. It will seek to identify those institutions to which we lose students whom we would like to attract. It must take our mission statement and translate it into strategic alternatives. It must carry out an institutional SWOT analysis, identifying our major strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats. In terms that usually make academics feel uncomfortable, it must recommend how best to market the university and how best to establish our brand name. In that sense

it must synthesize the recommendations of the four other university-wide committees.

An obvious area of concern, or potential threat, comes from the proliferation of new private, and some public institutions of higher learning in Lebanon and the region. Indeed AUB has assisted in the birth of at least one of these institutions and is in the process of helping another. Many of our alumni and friends worry about the aggressive entry of Dubai and Qatar into higher education given the extraordinary resources these countries have at their disposal.

In our discussions over the last year, some have argued that we will be increasingly disadvantaged at the undergraduate level as the newer colleges and universities capture pieces of the regional market for students. These voices urge us to concentrate on graduate education in which they see our major comparative advantage and where we can most credibly reach out to the region beyond Lebanon.

On the other hand if AUB is one of the very few institutions in the region to offer a fine undergraduate education combined with a highly diverse student body drawn from all over the region, would not that give us a comparative advantage? It may well be the case that most students and their parents

would like to be close to home, but we also know that when Harvard, or Stanford, or McGill offer admission to students from this region, few refuse to go despite the distance. Even what might be regarded as second tier universities—like Georgetown, Boston University, or USC—have no problem attracting students from this region. So why not AUB?

A final note: if the US experience is any guide, the proliferation of great universities after the Second World War, in no way diminished the attraction of the older universities. Today the Ivy League universities, MIT, Stanford, Duke and many others receive unprecedented numbers of applications. In the Middle East, where the demand for higher education is growing prodigiously, we are in a very robust market that can accommodate many educational players. We have to be an active, purposeful, strategic player in that market.

Within two years we should have an integrated plan for the university, and a mechanism for monitoring the plan and measuring progress. Our strategic priorities and initiatives will drive our financial planning and budgetary process and guide our fund raising efforts.

Strategic planning involves prudent risk-taking. We will not get everything right, and we will have to adjust. We will set forth the kind of institution we want to be in the coming decades, and we will try to determine what are the

logical first steps to move us in that direction. If our ideas are any good, they will make sense to those who come after us.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention. I pray for a good year for Lebanon and a good year for AUB.