

Education at AUB: the Importance of Fallibility
Opening Ceremony
October 6, 2008
President Peter Dorman

Distinguished guests, honored colleagues, and ladies and gentlemen: welcome. In these Opening Day exercises, I have the pleasure of addressing you, for the first time, as president of AUB. I feel deeply grateful to stand on this stage in your presence and welcome you to another academic year at one of the greatest universities in the region.

Like many of you in this hall, I cherish a relationship with AUB that transcends generations. It is a relationship that I look forward to building on and expanding in the years ahead, together with your help and with the benefit of your wisdom. I believe AUB is poised on the brink of great opportunity, and our way ahead together will require the equal participation of all of our constituents: faculty, students, parents, staff, alumni, and friends who recognize the importance of our mission.

The beginning of an academic year always signals the presence of new students and faculty on campus, a different mix and ferment of people in our classrooms, and also the reassuring routines that have been with us for years. We look ahead to the expected cycle of classes, cooler fall weather, the storms of winter, the seasonal holidays, club meetings, sports, and, inevitably, final exams. Let us not think of a new academic year as routine, however, but as an invitation to probe new avenues of teaching and learning.

In these modern times, a university education is a basic credential for achievement in almost every field of endeavor. A college diploma is perceived, and rightly so, as the key to success and productivity in the career of one's choosing. It is not only prospective students who understand

this imperative, but their parents as well. And AUB, among all other universities in the eastern Mediterranean, has enjoyed remarkable success in placing its graduates in leadership positions in industries, universities, scientific firms, and governments. Our faculties enjoy fierce competition for their newly minted alumni. This is gratifying, but it does not reveal the full significance of AUB's influence or importance in Lebanon and beyond.

On the surface, the process of education appears to be the conveying of useful information and marketable skills in the artificially structured atmosphere of the classroom. This is usually the salient selling point of university "outcomes" that appeals directly to our students, and especially their parents, who are the ones paying the tuition bills.

What is it that we do best in terms of student experience? Why do students continue to come for their education at a university steeped historically in the liberal arts tradition? I have not yet had the chance to ask students why they come, but I've talked with many alumni who live in Beirut and some who still teach at AUB. And I've recently returned from a visit to Saudi Arabia, where I met many alumni from the Eastern Provinces and from Jeddah, who shared with me the generous hospitality of the Ramadan season, and their thoughts and reflections as well.

Their effusive praise and close identification with their alma mater are astonishing. They listed numerous reasons why they continue to regard AUB with such affection, and why they view their association with AUB with such pride. What were those reasons? Let me tell you first what they were not.

Although I was speaking with alumni who enjoyed supremely successful careers, who are influential in the fields of banking, engineering, and diplomacy, not a single one praised AUB for giving them the professional skills to excel in their jobs.

Instead, they spoke of how AUB had altered their perspectives, had given them a different outlook, had changed their lives. They spoke of their conviction that AUB represents hope for the future, a place where tolerance is actively fostered, where responsibility is encouraged, a place that has always played a leadership role in education and research, where the ideals of diversity are celebrated. They spoke of their concern that these things be carefully nurtured and preserved.

Nor are these views confined to alumni. Two weeks ago I attended an *iftar*, in the company of eight other individuals whom I had never met. After we introduced each ourselves, the businessman to my right, who had never attended AUB, remarked with great conviction: “AUB is the most important institution in this country.”

For an incoming president, these comments are enormously gratifying, and they bespeak the great expectations held in common not only by our faculty and alumni, but by the larger Lebanese community.

Equally noteworthy is the fact that what alumni say they prize most about their experience at AUB is certainly not what students have foremost in their minds when they enroll. They are coming here, above all, for a very practical reason: to earn the degree that will give them secure employment.

Moreover, students are necessarily working for the short term: they are concerned with meeting the next deadline, finishing the next paper, acing the next exam, measuring off the incremental—and I’m sure at times seemingly endless number—of steps toward graduation year by year. Often before they realize how fast time is passing, they have completed all requirements for their degree, their diploma is in hand, and their first employer is beckoning. At least, that is how I

remember my four years as an undergraduate. Where, in that fast-paced world of student life with cramped horizons, did AUB manage to instill a reverence for such qualities as hope, tolerance, diversity, democratic ideals, and public responsibility?

The alumni perspective is a useful one to attend to, as it reflects the experience of our graduates in the real world, far outside the campus walls, and often years after they graduate. The qualities of hope, tolerance, diversity, and public responsibility, so often mentioned by our alumni, are not listed in any course catalogue; they are not part of the required general education curriculum.

Many of you, I'm sure, are familiar with the oft-quoted passage written by Daniel Bliss, in which he states that the college will be open to members of all races and confessions, and in which he asserts his conviction that "they will not depart from this place without knowing what we believe to be the truth." As a Presbyterian missionary he was, at least in part, referring to that unassailable authority that resides in the Christian Bible: "... what we *believe* to be the truth."

Now Daniel Bliss was in no way confused about the distinction between practical education in the humanities and sciences on the one hand and divine revelation on the other. Yet certain humanistic ideals are nonetheless embedded in an AUB education.

Let me return, then, to the essential question we just posed: beyond the usual competency that an AUB degree certifies, how are we teaching our students these enduring ideals? Are there truths that we can recognize as truly absolute?

The absolutism of truth is surely not one that Daniel Bliss regarded as a fitting basis for a college education. Nor is it one that we, as members of this American university, ascribe to today in the exercise of our profession. Rather, we know full well that the apparent certainties of the past can be leavened, changed, and overturned by the experience and insights of today. The tempo of

debate is especially freewheeling in the humanities and social sciences, where often the very terms of debate are debated. Even the physical and biological sciences, which are securely grounded in the methods of quantitative measurement and repeatable observation, achieve their progress through the development and substantiation of what are resolutely called “theories,” even when these theories have become far from theoretical.

The difference between theory and truth may depend only on one’s point of view. As an example, let me mention one of the most contentious issues in recent American history: the teaching of Darwin’s theory of evolution in high-school science classes. This theory of the development of life on earth has received overwhelming confirmation in multiple related scientific fields, yet no scientist would dream of referring to it as “Darwin’s proof of evolution.” This professional reserve stems from a respect for how knowledge is validated in the sciences. Yet it has prompted certain groups in the United States to denigrate Darwin’s theory as unproved, on the grounds that, in common English parlance, “theory” signifies “conjecture.” This is, of course, a willful and unclever misreading of scientific method. My selection of Darwin as an example is not made at random: the original furor over the theory of evolution led to the first serious academic crisis at AUB in 1882; and, in those more doctrinaire times, it did not end happily for the advocates of evolution.

In the last 142 years, AUB has achieved a large degree of fame and respect, in the minds of its alumni and friends, by promoting qualities of hope, tolerance, diversity, and public service—as much as, or even more than, for the academic rigor of its courses. These qualities, these ideals we strive for, are an apparent by-product of an AUB curriculum. I can only surmise that they are communicated by the manner in which faculty at AUB pursue their pedagogical roles. And it this

special relationship, between our faculty members and our students, that I wish to touch on today.

In the past, the approach toward education was quite straightforward. “Spare the rod and spoil the child” has long summarized effective teaching in the 19th and 20th centuries in the United States. And it is attested at a very early date. One famous axiom, contained in an ancient Egyptian wisdom text dating to the late 2nd millennium BC, prescribes a good thrashing to ensure that students are listening. The axiom reads simply: “the ears of a student are on his back.”

I assume, however, that AUB’s public reputation does not lie in our collective ability to force students to listen, nor to apply a well deserved beating, nor in teaching “what we believe to be the truth.” I assume it must lie in the respect our faculty members show, above all, for their subject matter and, secondly, for their students.

First, we do not know what the truth is: we teach only the latest understanding of our field. Members of academia rightly shy away from absolutism. The gradual expansion of human knowledge, over decades and centuries, represents a complex history of hard work, painstaking experiment, magnificent leaps forward, misdirections, of theories propounded and then undone. No field of productive research looks like it did twenty years ago. In all honesty, we must teach our students the fallibility of human knowledge as we teach them the substance of it. Academia deals with knowledge that is assailable—indeed, it is intended to be assailable—and therefore always worth judging once again. We re-examine its content, we question its assumptions. We openly acknowledge the fallibility of human experience, rather than embracing a conviction in the certainty of truth. Ours is a search that is re-fashioned each generation; this is what informs our approach to teaching, research, and interactions among our colleagues. In this way the

exploration of uncharted avenues of thought and the discovery of new knowledge are always just around the corner.

Second, this is a university steeped in the idea that a broad liberal arts training forms the essence of responsible citizenship. Education is not a service we contract with our students, one that is of practical use to them only after they get their degree and then go on to greater accomplishment. Our accountability is greater than that. Rather, we teach our students how to learn; we lead them down the paths of different methodologies, of different problems of inquiry. We invite them to participate in a journey of self-discovery that can last for an entire lifetime.

This invitation requires, on the part of faculty, a degree of respect, responsibility, and the willingness to set an example of discernment, discourse, and the highest standards of excellence. On the part of students it requires a willingness to be exposed to ideas they may find uncomfortable, or which may challenge some of their deeply held convictions. We demand they master their materials. We also demand that they develop the ability to think clearly, to write clearly, to be accountable for own their words, and to acknowledge sound thinking and brilliance in others.

Education is a cooperative engagement of minds, both young and old, that stores its potential impact during the relatively few years AUB students spend under our mentorship. It is in the realm of the fallibility of human knowledge, rather than received wisdom, that we hold our most productive dialogues. I firmly believe that it is this model of engagement that gives our graduates the tools to succeed. The consequences of such an engagement may be realized only long after graduation, but if the words of our alumni are any guide, AUB is doing something right—and it

is something we must continue to do right. For in this fallible world, let us acknowledge that the challenges of life will test our graduates more seriously than we ever can in the classroom.

In the opening scene of *Love's Labors Lost*, Shakespeare's King Ferdinand ruminates on the nature of fame and honor, and how the efforts and deeds of individual human beings can ameliorate and avenge the finality of death, which must inevitably come to us all:

*Let fame, that all hunt after in their lives,
Live register'd upon our brazen tombs
And then grace us in the disgrace of death;
When, spite of cormorant devouring Time,
The endeavor of this present breath may buy
That honour which shall bate his scythe's keen edge
And make us heirs of all eternity.*

At AUB, then, let “the endeavor of this present breath”—let what we do here today, students and faculty together, be our continued dedication to questioning the sum of human knowledge with open and skeptical minds, fully aware of its fallibility, and even grateful for it, because of the challenge it offers us to explore uncharted avenues of thought and to discover new knowledge. Let us further hope that we never discover the whole and absolute Truth: then we will simply have to teach it, and academia will become a very dull place indeed.

Friends and colleagues, let me welcome you to another year at AUB.