

AUB's Opening Ceremony for the new academic year: Connectedness is key

Monday, October 4, 2010

"As another academic year opens, one goal we may attempt is to recognize and accept the necessary chaos of unfettered connectedness, to distinguish what is relevant and important, and to locate a center of grounding where connections truly matter."

AUB President Peter Dorman made these comments today, October 4, 2010 in Assembly Hall, during the Opening Ceremony which marked the beginning of the 2010-11 academic year. It was attended by a large audience of members of the AUB Board of Trustees, faculty, and students.



A total of 5689 students joined AUB this year, along with nearly 49 faculty members and 64 PhD students. Newcomers to the AUB teaching team this year are an eclectic mix. They include doctors, scientists, engineers, business professionals, and humanities experts coming from all over the globe, all with different research interests and lifestyles.

"If this institution can set the example for our students and try to connect in ways that matter most, we will have carried on a great historic tradition, for them as well as for ourselves," said Dorman.

The main theme of the president's address this year was "connecting the academy" which "AUB has uniquely succeeded to achieve during the past years." He added: "And by this I don't even refer to the basic, one-on-one connection that is most essential to the academic experience—the relationship between the professor and the student—the process of teaching, learning, mentoring, and socializing...the process that is especially foremost in our mind as we begin another year."

Dorman placed great importance as well on the necessity for AUB to connect on at least three other levels, having to do with internal systems, external disciplines, and the chaotic chatter of the world beyond. He cited some of the new achievements realized by the University in this regard including the establishment of a new cabinet-level post, Vice President for Information Technology, held by Rita Khayat-Toubia. "The work of her office will transform the integrative functions of our university, including the business and financial systems, the digitization of patient records, the introduction of operational modules for human resources and financial aid, and the management of critical inventories," said Dorman.

He argued that these initiatives are also very essential and they are required to connect students to the information they are most anxious to have because they allow on-line course registration, data-driven classroom schedules, computerized grade scores and access to on-line teaching evaluations among many other services.

However, Dorman also made sure to pinpoint the drawbacks of connectedness and urged students to use it in the best possible ways. "The world has become intricately connected in ways that touch our societies, our beliefs, and our patterns of behavior," he said. Moreover, he asked a question on how AUB can approach the pressing urgency of cultural co-existence.

To answer the question he cited the thoughts of Parker Palmer, a sociologist who has espoused the importance in universities of developing the habit of listening rather than speaking, of

keeping an open mind in order to feel at home in a diverse world, qualities that arise through a strong grounding in general education. "Palmer asserts that if our students are to continue to develop this habit we must restore our commitment to the liberal arts," said Dorman. Palmer also added that students must be taught how to seek out opposing viewpoints, to appreciate ambiguity, to explore contradictions without fear and to appreciate the truth of paradox, according to Dorman.

In closing, Dorman wished his audience a productive year, with all the paradoxes and contradictions it may bring.