The Role of Universities in Achieving Social Justice  
IFI Princeton Conference on Social Justice in the Arab World  
February 3, 2017  
Keynote Speech by AUB President Fadlo R. Khuri

I’m not going to speak about President Trump this morning. I’m sure that topic will be well covered. I do want to make a point that for some of you who have known me a very long time, I have always come to believe that the three major protectors of civil liberties are a free press, currently besieged in Lebanon, the universities, and the Supreme Court. Now the Supreme Court here does the best it can in a difficult situation. It was a little striking to me that we were the only free university here that spoke out in the last week.

So let’s talk about the role of universities in achieving social justice in that context. That goes back to the question of what they were really here for? Were universities created to serve society or to advance the individual? Is their role to create wealthier, more successful individuals or more successful, and therefore wealthier societies? And by wealth I’m not just talking about monetary wealth, but intellectual and other more meaningful means of wealth. Are they engines of social change or can they be philosophically neutral as to their impact on society? The American University of Beirut, AUB, was founded in 1866 unquestionably as a societal change agent amid the conditions in which it was set. Lebanon was a very different place in 1866 than it is today. And Beirut particularly, this area of Beirut particularly, was particularly different. It was not the vibrant, overcrowded metropolis of today.

“That they may have life and have it more abundantly.” These words were chosen as the motto of the Syrian Protestant College, our forerunner, to articulate a religious objective when the college came into being. This is a University that came to convert. But the words carved on Main Gate have remained conspicuous and relevant throughout our existence, as the idea of secular abundance took root in place of the religious kind, a different kind of spiritual abundance, a societal spiritual kind, from the one was originally conceived.

First let me be explicit in how I understand the phrase social justice. The International Forum for Social Development’s 2006 report on Social Justice in an Open World, exclaims that it “may be broadly understood as the fair and compassionate distribution of the fruits of economic growth,” but it goes on to stress that it “will only flourish if environmental preservation and sustainable development constitute an integral part of growth strategies now and in the future”. “Human beings are both guests and custodians of the planet earth.” I agree with these objectives and they have been part of our strategy in a series of tactics we have outline. There are four areas that I would like to explore today that relate to a University’s role in achieving social justice: making a safe space for student activism, it should encourage it, creating a more sustainable and equitable economy, modeling a better and fairer society on campus, and committing to engaged citizenship and outreach.
Student Activism: the creation of an aware citizen

One hundred and thirty-five years ago this college stood at a crossroads: the dilemma was whether it should push ahead with the mission of proselytization of the Protestant faith, of whom I am an example of the very few successfully converted, or follow instead the highest standards of scientific education. It must already have been clear by 1882 that conversions were not coming thick and fast, while SPC’s secular educational impact was transforming society. But that was the year when Chemistry Professor Edwin Lewis endorsed the theory of the evolution by natural selection. With the missionaries viewing Darwin, even though he was a devout Christian, as an affront to Christian teaching, a furor ensued—the first major academic crisis faced by this institution. Yes, our founder Daniel Bliss tried, as all of us know, to extinguish the dangerous new theory from the campus, but many professors stood firm, with students, demanding access to the most accurate and up-to-date knowledge grounded in science and in research. This would be seen in other very good examples of students and faculty standing together in the early 20th century, with the Young Turks movement for example. Among those supporting Lewis was Professor Cornelius Van Dyck who rejected the decision and threatened to teach evolution in his own house if necessary. He carried through with his promise after resigning and plunging the college into further crisis. The majority of this university’s Arab-speaking, Orientalist, in the best sense of the word, professors essentially withdraw from the University. We tend to think of this as a local phenomenon, but if you look at the study of education and activism, the Lewis affair is seen across the world as a vanguard moment for student empowerment and academic freedom. Students are expelled because they don't tow the line. It is not for nothing this institution holds its tradition of critical thinking so dear, and upholds the right to create and disseminate the most advanced knowledge, regardless of religious or social taboos or political consequences.

Since then, the students of this institution have shown an enthusiastic readiness to assert their position when they have not seen eye-to-eye with the administration. They have claimed their rights by dint of protests, occupations and direct action. I'm not endorsing these, I'm simply stating the facts. Please don't occupy Marquand House, you'll find that the plumbing is a little bit old! In the 1970s this hit its aegis. There were huge protests organized to demand the reversal of increases in tuition fees which the students felt unfairly targeted those less economically advantaged, and this was particularly acute for the children of Palestinian refugees. Remember AUB did not have significant financial aid; in fact we had rules where you could not enter on scholarship. Maroun Semaan who recently has made the largest gift in the history of the university was very clever, he finished first in the Baccalaureate and then he got a Gulbenkian scholarship which allowed him to enter, which allowed him to qualify for AUB, which allowed him in; if you needed financial aid for the first semester. The protests resulted in 103 students being imprisoned and expelled and some of those are really outstanding leaders in AUB and outside AUB today. Tuition fee protests in February 2014 saw some students declaring a #AUBSpring against the administration. This is student activism and for the most part, apart from the 1970s, it has been non-violent. I have no problem in endorsing our students’ right to protest peacefully and see it as a precious right that has been upheld and struggled for since the Lewis affair.
It is the most effective and obvious way to highlight bad decision-making; its absence is the surest way for any leadership, country or institution, to get mired in error and unaccountability. I’m not encouraging massive protests that lead to nothing, like what happened two years ago off campus. Social activism is important, and we have to agree it is a precious right denied so many of the aggrieved populations around the Arab World—doubtless accounting in part for the sad state we find ourselves in as an Arab nation.

It is the job of a university to produce leaders of tomorrow, who can strive for social justice and stand up for what they believe in, but who are clever and effective at protest. And by clever I don’t mean devious, but I mean effective, effectively advocating for the rights of society. Candidly speaking, if we do not do that, who is going to do that? The right to protest requires that we foster safe spaces where everyone feels they have the right to speak truth to power, which kindles free speech. Every conversation, whether between student and faculty, or junior and senior, should be conducted as an exchange between colleagues each with the right to hold their own opinions and express their own views unhindered. I have to pause here to remember something Kamal Badr said very touchingly at one of the services for my late father Raja Khuri; Kamal Badr described his treatment whether as chair of physiology or as dean of medicine of his students as exactly that, as junior colleagues not as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. All too often we take a very high pedagogical stool and we cannot reach our students.

Honest I think the best hope for a university and something we’ve been doing to the best of our ability, although I wouldn’t call it a success yet, is to foster such a dialogue between students and faculty. And the way to do that is to cultivate our students beyond just technical excellence. Whether they choose to become engineers, doctors, businesswomen or men, or any other profession that requires hard skills, soft skills should never be dismissed. The ability to exchange words and have a meaningful dialogue that is non-threatening. This is the intersection between culture and education, where universities have to play a major role in cultivating their students—ininculturation as I have called it elsewhere; the inculturation for AUB of a secular, democratic, liberal ethos just as our predecessors sought to inculturate a Protestant religious ethos. So AUB adopts a liberal arts program, which means, whatever a student chooses to major in, they have to take courses in the humanities and the social sciences in order to graduate. We make it sound like it's a requirement, you have to take economics, you have to take social studies, you have to take history. It's not—it's actually a tremendous advantage. We have to make sure in their university years, students learn about history, ethics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, the struggle for civil rights. Let them find a passion in social movements, whether they use it or not in their job, I assure you they will use it in their lives! Let them know about good and bad political systems! You have to have a frame of reference.

If you've never seen a fair political system, you are going to assume that all political systems are like the failed regimes we see in our part of the world, regimes that candidly, Dr. Mitri is one of the world’s experts on. Why people don’t create better regimes, to some degree, is because they don’t have a voice and they haven't seen a better alternative. Let them learn how this society came to be, warts and all, the emergence of women in the public space and
what still needs to be achieved to gain equity, what is liberal democracy and what forces are pitted against it! Let's not whitewash it; let's not have the American democracy as being the perfect ideal of all societies, for all societies. People need to see the facts.

I've long been against censorship. That's a challenge here. It exists in the Baccalaureate program I studied in. The last page of our curriculum ended with the last French soldier leaving and Lebanon and the Lebanese lived happily ever after in perfect unity. You think that this is just in history, but it's ominous, even in al-Benafsaja al-Tamuuh, Jibrān’s favorite poem, it ends in the Baccalaureate curriculum as Dr. Mitri knows with the violets chastising the violet that’s become a rose for being too ambitious. But the real poem tells a different story, which I encourage you to find out for yourselves. So how do we expect this generation to draw a difference between right and wrong, when we censor reality? That’s our role in this university. We have to provide them with the raw material to draw comparisons and extract their own conclusions. Let them know that their horizons are broad and without limit, and that they can be leaders in free thought in a part of the world where it is most likely to be suppressed. This is how we create aware citizens and leaders of tomorrow. People who know how to think—and how not to think; people who know right from wrong, who can listen to the facts and make the right decisions for themselves and their communities because they’ve seen difficult decisions before. Because it's not the first time someone has thrust a difficult decision on them.

Equitable and Sustainable Economic Solutions
One of the qualities of the engaged global citizens whom we seek to create is that they do not just want to make better lives for themselves, but also to make the world a better place around them. Volunteerism and social outreach and yes even micro-philanthropy, I will discuss shortly, but our citizen-leaders of the future will also be required not just to seek their own jobs, but to impact society ultimately by creating jobs for others. That way, our graduates will play a role in the economic sustainability of this region. It's not enough to remain stuck to this fossil fuel and services and banking industry. We need creativity in fostering solutions. According to the objective indicators we see today, our Arab world stands at a point where if we do not find urgent remedies, we have no way to gauge how bad things may get. As I said last Friday at the launch of our AUB4Refugees forum, we have to fix the problem before it fixes you. The wars that ravage this region are only part of it. Allow me to extract data from the Arab Human Development Report of 2016, published by the UNDP, which was launched at a conference in AUB last December, and to admit candidly that it reminds me of hearing in the 1970s as a young man when I heard Professor Samir Makdisi talking about the lack of diversity in our economic plan, not just here but for the Arab world and foretelling of the challenges that we would have which sadly are now clear.

Sixty percent of our region is under 30 years of age—that’s about 105 million individuals. They are potentially an amazing resource of energy and growth for this region, if greater effort is made to include them in solutions from the ground up. On the other hand if they’re not included in the solutions but the solutions are imposed on them, there is a good chances that our youth continue on course to become more alienated, less constructively engaged, and if this continues as in the report “a potent source of protracted social
instability threatening human security”, according to the UN. That’s a dire prediction for the youth of the Arab world. I am not reporting this study to scare us all into paralysis or what would be worse a hasty flight out of the Arab world.

I’m saying it to spur us on to redouble our efforts to reach this really underserved sector and give hope for the future, real hope, not false hope as has been offered for generation after generation by demagogues and great speakers. We have the highest youth unemployment rate in the world, 30%, and the UN report continues by frankly exposing the problem of the inequality hidden in these figures, where the sons and daughters of our most powerful citizens get all the advantages to enjoy successful lives, undermining the principle that merit and hard work are what you need to advance in life. A few other world-trailing, figures that the Arab world can boast, the lowest participation of youth in the workforce, 24%, especially among young women, where the figure is 18%. The lowest level of political participation by youth. The lowest level of civic engagement among youth. Only 9% of young people across Arab countries volunteer with a civic organization each month, compared with 14% in the next lowest region, sub-Saharan Africa. So as we bring the MasterCard Foundation students on board and they experience challenges bedding in, I think we have a lot to learn from them, because they’ve seen real progress where we’ve stalled.

Apart from our beleaguered youth, let us not forget that we have the lowest levels of women active in political institutions in the world. And it was particularly striking most recently when one woman was named to the Lebanese cabinet and a man, a fine man I might add, was named as the Minister of Women. It is only 22.5% around the world, so let’s not pretend the western democracies have done a great job at this either, although there was briefly the possibility that leaders of the United States, Germany and Great Britain would be women, it turned out otherwise. And so far the performance of the leader of Great Britain is nearing the performance of Mr. Trump. But I’m digressing here. It’s 22.5% around the world, which is shocking, but it is only 18.7% in our region. And although the Arab region is home to 5% of the world’s population, it sees 45% of the world’s terrorist attacks, produces almost 58% of the world’s refugees, and hosts 47% of its internally displaced peoples, and has 68.5% of global deaths related to armed conflict. Those are not things that any region should be proud to lead in. For every person directly killed through armed violence, ages three to 15, others are indirectly killed by medical complications, malnutrition and treatable diseases, according to Save the Children. Meanwhile, two out of every five school-age children in the Arab region are deprived of the right to an education because of armed conflict. Two out of five can’t study, can’t go to school because of armed conflict. Ladies and gentlemen, we in the Arab region are very far from achieving a knowledge society and from developing the very knowledge economy that we’ve been talking about since the early 1970s. So we need to turn our region around and set it on the path to sustainable growth.

According to that same report, by 2020, the region will need to create more than sixty million new jobs to absorb the number of workforce entrants and stabilize youth unemployment. Although our hopes of achieving this in three years are not that high, to say
the least, we must start somewhere. We cannot keep looking at statistics and whining. And in this respect every one of our graduates counts. That's my message to our university community. Every one of our graduates counts, every student whose confidence grows from when they start your class to when they leave your class, is a success story. Everyone whose confidence drops from when they start your class to when they leave your class is your/our failure. They must enter the world not only with a mission to find a job, but also with a willingness to create jobs for others. This means unlocking the world of entrepreneurship, especially entrepreneurship that underpins sustainable development, and teaching our students that innovation in all business spheres is within their grasp and holds the key to a better economic future for Lebanon and the region.

Eighteen days ago, we launched our most ambitious campaign yet, BOLDLY AUB: the Campaign to Lead, Innovate and serve. One of the five pillars for the campaign is fostering interdisciplinary innovation and entrepreneurship; another is sustainability. By that we mean in everything, in the humanities, in the hard sciences, in engineering, in the social sciences, in public health. We believe firmly that these qualities are central to furthering society and as important in the arts and humanities as they are in agriculture or architecture, or engineering, and business. Our goal is to work with our stellar faculty, and I don't use that word lightly, I believe we truly have a stellar faculty, to revamp our teaching methods across campus to put them at the core of our syllabus so that they really are cutting edge and student focused. And we will encourage our sister universities in Lebanon and across the region to do the same, if they are not already there. Where they are better than us at something we shall learn from them, and we will share everything that we will achieve.

I see already many of our graduates leaning towards entrepreneurship, stirred on by the visionary Circular 331 regulation initiated by the Banque Du Liban to encourage startups and promote investment in new ventures. My hope is that those who become fortunate will not forget those who are still less fortunate. We have this ugly phenomenon in Arab society called "crabbing". Do you know what that means. If you ever look at a bucket with crabs in it as you are about to select one in New England, you see the top crab is making it's way out, what do the other crabs do? They pull them down. We need to get rid of this phenomenon in our society. We should celebrate success and the top crabs should pulled the rest up as opposed to the other way. My hope is that we can lead that, and many of these individuals who go to change our way of doing things, our basic ethos, will be educated and based the humanities. It doesn't matter what they go on to do and that was demonstrably shown in our spectacular symposium on the Humanities on January 17th. Clearly we need people whose minds open to the possibility of doing greater things.

Campus life: role-modeling a fairer society
The student experience is not limited to sitting in a classroom or studying in the library. Every decision adopted by our administration or the faculty should deliver a loud and clear message to the students, every step we take can and should be scrutinized by them. So we had better make sure that we always model the correct AUB values that have made this place what it is. I'm going to disagree with a lot of you. In a non-ugly sense, I am a
disagreeable person or disagreeing person, I don't concede easily. But I think discussion, and disagreement is at the core of what we do. And the students should feel that they have the right to hold us accountable.

Let's start with an equity issue that has been on the agenda for decades if not centuries. I was the thirteen-year-old boy who won the student essay in high school in the US for writing about the superiority of women because my mother had ingrained me with that. I got quite a beating from the football team for winning that essay. But despite everything that has been done to demand gender equity in this society we see double standards everywhere, extending to our politicians, policy makers, business leaders, all of whom pay lip service but are clear in their failure to apply it in all areas. Who are our overwhelming male political class to set a quota of 30% to ensure the representation of women in the parliament, as some are arguing? Why is it not 50% or 55%? Who decided that is enough to promote gender equity? Why do we insist on quotas anyway for confessional allegiances, flawed and meaningless as they may be, but flout all logic when it comes to the 50% of the population who are women? It seems to be more important to pick a proportionate number of either sect from each region that it is to pick a proportionate number of women in politics here and elsewhere. It just doesn’t make sense to me. And look at the result—a raft of unfair and unjust laws affecting women. Think of the fact that marital rape is legal in the Arab world’s only real democracy. It's disgraceful. Think of how a rapist can get away from punishment if he marries his victim. Think about the hundreds and thousands of women not protected against domestic abuse in their own homes. Think of those other rights that women lack, such as conferring citizenship to their own children, and now think of the power that you can have by showing young women while they are here that that is just not right.

What do universities have to do with this you might think? While we cannot draft laws, it doesn’t mean we cannot influence them to a great extent. We should be doing everything we can to establish equity on campus and in the ranks of our faculty and staff. In fact we have offered our services as consultants, as experts, to the government and future governments, to serve as experts as a university, free of cost to help ensure better laws, that better laws are drafted, that better laws are approved and implemented, as our dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences Iman Nuwayhed has done in his laws to protect children and limit child labor. But to do that we have to establish equity on campus and in the ranks of our faculty and staff first. We don't want to be guilty of saying, "do as I say, not as I do". First we have to empower our women leaders. Second, we have to set great examples while hiring people on no gender basis. We have outstanding female professors. Female leaders in the administration, yes, but not enough. Female deans? yes.

I want each and every young woman attending AUB to look up to people like Nadia El Cheikh. A great scholar in her field with a magnificent sense of professionalism and humanity, who last year became the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, our oldest, largest and most challenged faculty in that they have to teach the most and in many ways they are rewarded the least of the six across campus. Why did Nadia take on that position? Why didn’t she just continue to be successful academically. She took on the position not just
because she is a woman, but because she is the best qualified and she wanted to make a difference. That’s the inspiring message that both our men and women need to learn. Let them go into the world knowing that when a person is qualified, of whichever gender, they can and should attain the position they deserve. And we don’t want to create something like the NFL has, where before you hire a head coach you have to interview minorities, but still the minorities for a league in which the vast majority of player are African American, are massively underrepresented in management. So I don’t believe in pretend searches in just pretend measures. If we are going to enact a measure we should live by it. So we know we have made progress, but we have not achieved everything we could in terms of gender equity. We have raised the banner of female empowerment at AUB in full recognition that there is still an imbalance, and we had the Task Force on the Lives and Careers of Women Faculty present to us, not only us, but they are presenting to the Board of Deans on February 16 and then we intend to implement their recommendations. Women are underrepresented in the most senior jobs and overrepresented in lower ranking ones, and we have to fix that.

But hand-in-hand with this recognition is that discrimination remains a major problem however hard we try to root it out. What we are doing is trying to foster a culture of mutual respect and tolerance in which anyone, and everyone, feels they are getting a fair shot, an equal share, in terms of education and future opportunities. Again, we cannot change the overall view of the society, but we can set an example of how our societies should be. At AUB, our students find the liberty to be whoever they want to be. According to our Non-Discrimination Policy, AUB prohibits discriminatory harassment on the basis of “race, color, religion, age, national or ethnic identity, gender or gender identity, marital status, disability, genetic predisposition or carrier status, alienage or citizenship status, political affiliation, or any other characteristic protected by law”. This is exactly what I meant when I sent the memo on Monday saying that our values and the values of AUB’s founding fathers are at odds with this memo. It is differentiating between people based on their country of national origin and perhaps their religion. It is not merely words or window dressing. We embrace differences and diversity. A quick look at our students’ clubs would tell you about the culture of AUB. We have a club for women’s rights, a club for gender and sexuality, and a club under the name of Empowerment through Integration (ETI) that strives to alter the sympathetic perception towards people with physical disabilities in society. Their mission statement reads "Inclusion of all is a value for all". I think those are admirable words. And these are the values we seek to plant in our students, and the kinds of values we so critically miss in our societies.

I think it is very important for students and staff to know that, when faced with discrimination, have the right to find a support and a suitable mechanism to make sure justice is served. Initiatives such as Title IX are very important to enhance the quality of the journey of any university’s community. Title IX of the US Education Amendments of 1972 is a gender equity law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex or gender in all U.S. federally-funded educational programs and activities. AUB is in receipt of U.S. government funding, for scholarships through USAID and MEPI-TL and other channels, and thus must follow this law and will do so. Title IX guidelines provide high standards and best practices to
follow in responding to sex/gender discrimination including harassment. These policies apply to all programs and activities of AUB and all its affiliates, on campus and off-campus, and online. If you have faced any type of harassment, or know someone who has, you have the right to report it to Trudi Hodges, our Title IX official and seek help and the University has the obligation to respond and we will respond.

Diversity on campus plays a major role in teaching tolerance and preparing the students for the real world. And we want to make universities a sample of the overall community, so we have to make sure it is accessible to the overall community. We cannot keep walling off AUB from the rest of the world. At AUB, we have a large group of international students attending the University and taking courses, be it as full time students or as visitors. I applaud the exchange programs we have available through our Office of International Programs. They facilitate the ways for international students to learn about us and for our students to learn about many different cultures. 21% of our students are international students. Universities should make policies to facilitate this exchange of culture, helping students meet people of different cultures and how difficult it is for people from different cultures to integrate here. But at a minimum these programs held the students understand the Other to make them better global citizens.

Diversity however is not only defined by the number of foreign nationalities we have on campus. Making the University accessible to the whole Lebanese community has been one of the biggest challenges we continue to face. And I want to thank Dana Abed, who has done a wonderful job, with Martin Asser, putting this speech together, making sure I am consistently saying the same thing if in slightly different words, because consistence is part of that success. Making the university accessible to the whole community has been a major economic problem. With the spiraling cost of higher education, not just here, was are starting to be economically intimidating for some of the people who should and do strive to come to AUB for their education. But through fundraising campaigns, such as the newly launched BOLDLY AUB, we are able to secure financial aid for most of our needy students and I want to applaud the prior administration of Peter Dorman and Ahmed Dallal, because they made this the focus of their administration to increase fund-raising. But the cost went up. We are fortunate to have institutional funding from the US government, as well as MasterCard Foundation and al-Ghurayr Foundation, ULYP and others, which enables hundreds of needy students to come to AUB with a full scholarship.

But we have a lot of students who are just above that poverty line, who don't qualify for a full scholarship, who desperately would benefit coming here and they would benefit our societies. Our prime concern is to make sure AUB does not become a University for the economically elite and not the intellectually elite. Maybe this is one of the greatest problems our society, in Lebanon – or even the region shall I say – faces at the moment. We see that people who don't get our type of education, and there are very few universities that offer AUB's open and really enlightening type of education, we see people discriminate against each other forgetting (or ignoring) the common roots that we all have. I find it a little bit alarming when some of our students show such great tolerance and acceptance of those from other countries, turn against one another because even though they come from
the same land, they come from different sects or socio-economic classes. We don't see much of that on AUB, but I occasionally see enough of it that it worries me. We can't tolerate this. We don't want to punish it but we want to teach people out of this kind of behavior. The light of this University has to be one that shines for all classes, sects, communities, genders and nations.

Let me talk about two things that I am particularly proud of. Two student activities that I think are extraordinary are our journal, our newspaper Outlook and out student elections. I'm very impressed by Outlook. I read it and the articles are as critical as anything I can read whether in Arabic or English in the press here. Lately with Nadim al-Ladki as editor-in-chief of the Daily Star it's started to reflect his edgy personality that I have known since age 10. But Outlook is edgy in a good way, it's positive, it's critical, but you don't have to have an interpreter of Arabic or philology to understand what they mean. The other thing I am very proud of is our student elections. The students find it a very tense period, the security forces are deployed in numbers at our gates, expecting confrontations that fortunately almost never happen, and many students take it really seriously. That's because they should take it seriously because there is an absence of real democratic systems in Lebanon and the Middle East so they take the time to prepare campaigns, and advertise their political agendas, and they developed a proportional electoral law. You can see the various Lebanese leaders bashing each other on the definition of proportionality but our students did it in six weeks over Christmas break, without ripping each through Outlook. Debates are organized between different groups; candidates have to demonstrate why they are deserving of their peers’ votes. This democratic scene is painfully absent outside of our campus. But we hope one day, our graduates, the leaders of the future, will be able to apply what they once learned and practiced during their journeys as students at AUB. It is only by that experience that they will be able to erase sectarianism and hopefully create a more tolerant, secular society.

Reaching out: impact of the University on societies
I would like to end by addressing how the initiatives which start on campus pierce our outer wall and find niches in a society that badly needs help and support in so many areas. They don't necessarily need lectures. They need help. The shocking figures of regional human displacement I read to you earlier are magnified enormously in Lebanon, which has the highest number of refugees per capita of population of anywhere in the world. We have just been through an exercise recently, showcased in our outstanding #AUB4Refugees forum last week, that was co-led by IFI's Nasser Yassin and Associate Provost Hala Muhtasib, in which we gathered data on all the programs and initiatives focusing both the challenges faced by refugees and host communities. The running total of dedicated initiatives has reached nearly 70 across our seven schools and faculties, and our interdisciplinary institutes. Everything from studying patterns of fertility and preterm labor enabling safer outcomes in pregnancy, helping Syrian women navigate the Lebanese healthcare system through community radio broadcasts, to school nutrition projects helping to counter food insecurity, to developing special latrines for temporary camps that protect our environment while finding useful applications for the waste, better uses for solid waste than so far our government has found for the rest of the nation! I also mentioned the pitiful rates of civic
engagement among Arab Youth. That’s not true on this campus, which in the past year has been recognized internationally for the qualities of citizenship and outreach.

I never get tired of singing the praises of the Light Up a Village project, fully student run, which last year brought renewable energy street-lighting to one of the most remote and deprived villages in Lebanon. They say charity begins at home; so does determination. Or of one of our longest running and most impactful initiatives, the TAMAM project, which is run from our outstanding Department of Education, creating a whole new language and methodology for reorganizing and reviving struggling secondary schools. You all remember the days when they said Lebanon is top three in science education, Lebanon is top five. Our secondary education is deteriorating at an alarming rate. And as I told the former minister of education, I'm not sure that cutting 40 school days out of 180 is really effective. The TAMAM journey is so effective because it is the teachers, principals, and parents themselves, who select their own improvement needs, set their own goals, design and plan their own interventions, and evaluate and document their own work. So they are stakeholders in the improvement of their schools.

TAMAM, and so many other AUB initiatives sit at the polar opposite of the top-down, rigid governmental influence that is so prevalent in our region, where what change that does occur sadly is often change for change’s sake. Our approach at the nexus between academia and societal impact can ensure our interventions more evidence-based, more participatory, and more genuinely self-sustaining and self-spreading. Every one of these dialogues between the AUB community, faculty, staff, students, alumni, with the outside world is a critical step towards a more cohesive, healthier, fitter, stronger and fairer society; and it works both ways, benefit the members of our communities and those whom they serve, because we are creating a better society for us to live in.

Let me in conclusion stress the importance of cohesion in society. I have always been a believer in non-violence. It is not a party political stance. As many of you know I do not belong to a political party in Lebanon, and the party I belong to in the United States just massively lost the election. This is for our survival as a people! Just as we are guests and custodians of the planet earth, if we permit or contribute to the destruction of our own environment, we will all go down. In the same way, we cannot continue the trend of wealth redistribution such that today the world’s eight richest multi-billionaires own the equivalent of the poorest 50% of citizens of the planet. This is not just an affront to social justice; it threatens our entire culture and civilization. Economics, fair economics are at the foundation of fair societies. What happens when those at the bottom get even more numerous and poorer? Without social order, will we be able to survive as a species? We sit back and write award-winning papers on this phenomenon or we do something. I think the latter. Universities play roles that are crucial; we need them to keep society healthy and alive.

Typically, higher education institutions focus on one of two very different strategic objectives. One is the need to build the leaders and citizens of tomorrow and the other is to build buildings. Administrations will say that we’re going to do this one now, and we’re
going to do the other one later. But as has become very evident in the last few months, we have to build citizen leaders for tomorrow and the buildings at the same time, under fairly daunting economic and political circumstances. It is not an either-or-process for AUB, it is a how-to process and how-to process now.

So, affordability, excellence, elimination of gender disparities, ensuring accessibility for all people, education for sustainable development, and embracing and enhancing diversity. That is what this university stands for and I am convinced that it is only through the perpetuation and propagation of these principles that we can build a truly fair and just society.

We recently elected a US president who to some people's surprise is doing everything he said he would on the campaign trail. I think that is the one thing we have in common with them, because we are going to do everything we say we're going to, because I don't think we can afford to do anything less.