Opening Day Remarks, September 8, 2014

President Peter Dorman

American Education in a Turbulent Middle East

Good morning, and welcome to another year at AUB. It's a pleasure to welcome faculty colleagues, students, staff, and of course our trustees who have returned for committee meetings on campus that coincide with Opening Day. The beginning of classes is a time of new energy and renewal, for the teaching, research, and many other activities that will fill the weeks and months to come.

In recent days, especially enjoyable for me was the reception held for our international students representing 51 countries, who had just emerged from a scavenger hunt to help familiarize them with campus. Last week AUB hosted the 4th biennial summit of the Mediterranean Poultry Science Association, the opening for which was highlighted by outstanding performances by our students, featuring Greek dance, Turkish music, Egyptian love songs, and of course a *debki*. At our Byblos Bank Gallery, the Fine Arts department has opened an exhibit on video arts from Central Asia. And in the last ten days Assembly Hall has witnessed concerts ranging from Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* to a night of guitar music. This mix of nationalities

coming together, academic engagement, and cultural events speaks to what the AUB experience is all about.

The Opening Day ceremonies have always given me an opportunity to reflect on the strengths of our university community: it's an exercise I have always enjoyed. In looking back at previous Opening Day speeches, I seem to have had a habit of quoting Irish poets: last year I quoted from the late Seamus Heany, and this year I will cite another Irishman. This tendency may be due to the Irish heritage of my great-grandfather, Gerald Fitzgerald Dale, who married the only daughter of Daniel Bliss, Mary, and died early in his life in the town of Zahle.

In past speeches I have talked about the subversive nature of the liberal arts, the importance of embracing knowledge that is non-utilitarian in nature, and the responsibility of universities to provide students a sense of discomfort in the classroom, challenging engrained assumptions. These themes come together in today's topic, "American Education in a Turbulent Middle East."

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Together with a sense of anticipation of the new academic year on the horizon, we must acknowledge we are living through unpredictable times, both financially and politically. The global financial crisis that began in 2008—the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s—is nowhere close to resolution.

The rebound in the United States has been fitful and slow; and in Europe economic recovery is actually faltering. For a long time our own Lebanese graduates have looked abroad for the best employment options. In such financial times, it is necessary for us to pose the urgent question: "How do we measure the value of higher education?"

One of the very new ranking systems of universities was put together this year by Money magazine. Its purpose is to assess the monetary return on the cost of a degree, calculated by giving a full two-thirds weight to (first) affordability of an institution and (second) the financial outcomes in a graduate's early and middle career. The results were a bit of a surprise in comparison to the better-known rankings, which focus more heavily on faculty and student quality. MIT came in at #3 (sorry, Mr. Chairman, but MIT gets to be #1 almost everywhere else); the number two spot is held by the Webb Institute of Glen Cove, NY; and "the best college for your money" is Babson College, in Babson Park, MA.

But before parents and students in this audience start filling out transfer requests to Babson, the Webb Institute, or MIT, let me reflect for a few minutes on the value of these formative years in the lives of young men and women, especially those who live in this region. Monetary reward in life is satisfying to a large extent and an important outcome of a college degree, but we can also agree with the Socratic saying that "It is not living that matters, but living rightly."

That piece of advice, from 2400 years ago in ancient Greece, would imply that there are other values embedded in a college education that add something essential, over and above the training for a career, precious to the formation of human character.

There are really two questions at issue:

1. Education as it answers the needs of society: marketable skills that are aligned with the needs of the nation
2. Education as it impacts the individual (Socrates and his directive to "live rightly")

The two are not mutually exclusive of course; but let me first proceed with the education as it answers the needs of society.

We are all aware that nations in the Middle East rich in oil and gas resources have identified knowledge and skills in areas critical to their future development. Their focus on higher education has been on professional degrees of the STEM group: science, technology, engineering, and medicine. This is understandable, since the rapidly growing populations in these countries require the basic amenities of housing, infrastructure, patient care, public health, and education. Moreover, long-term stability and wellbeing requires redirecting and expanding their economic bases to create self-sustaining industries. So the sudden expansion of higher education is largely state-driven, according to the strategic needs of the community.

And how to guarantee a flow of professionally skilled men and women into these fields? This would seem a perfect opportunity for European universities, whose programs accept applicants who enter already as pre-declared majors in specific fields. From the time they matriculate, around age 18, they spend their college years learning and honing their skills to outstanding result.

But the European model isn't being adopted on a broad scale. With some exceptions, it is American universities that have been invited to found four-year undergraduate programs in which professional skills are an equal adjunct to broader learning in the liberal arts—writing-intensive courses, foreign languages, and civilization studies.

Education City in Doha is a prime example of this trend, where six universities from the United States now operate branch campuses in the state of Qatar. Weill Cornell offers medical training over the course of six years, Northwestern trains students in journalism and communication; Georgetown has an extension of its School of Foreign Service; Virginia Commonwealth focuses on graphic and fashion design; Texas A&M teaches engineering; and Carnegie Mellon hands out undergraduate degrees in business and computer science. However, every one of these schools requires students to fulfill the liberal arts curriculum offered by their home campuses as well—a fundamental requirement of their mission.

With the agreement of the Emir of Abu Dhabi, New York University has likewise established a full campus duplicating in the UAE the essentials of its Manhattan headquarters: over four years, students must take courses from NYU's standard core curriculum in world literature, social studies, arts, and natural sciences.

In my view, the approving light in which American higher education is viewed in this region is especially ironic in view of the recent military misadventures of the United States in this region, most evident in the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and of Iraq in 2003.

Yet in spite of the dismal foreign policy record of the last decade, American higher education is *still* regarded as the gold standard in the Arab world. This is one unacknowledged American intervention in the Middle East that can be deemed a shining success, and in the United States it has gone largely unrecognized. So has its longevity and legacy, since the permanent presence of American college education in the region dates to 1866. We are sitting now where it all began.

Though some have described the influence of American education in this part of the world as "soft power," in reference to the spreading of American cultural brands and values, there can be no imputation that it is allied with foreign policy interests. Actually, there is nothing innately "American" in the perspectives that are developed through studying the liberal arts. We should

think of them rather as universal humanistic values that impact the formation of personal character.

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So I will come next to the second purpose of education: Education as it informs the individual (Socrates and his directive to "live rightly")

The expanding reach of the American academy overseas is one of the great recent phenomena of higher education. To be sure, universities over the world are founding professional programs and forming partnerships in the name of globalized education, but its presence in the Arab world is important for two reasons:

One has to do with the obvious competencies that degree credentials bring to nations badly in need of them. The second is more subtle. The humanistic values that lie at the heart of the American liberal arts tradition are often taken for granted in the United States, where democratic traditions date back to the founding of the nation. To see those values successfully taught and modeled at campuses of American universities in today's Middle East, more used to monarchies, autocracies, and tribally oriented states, is a compellingly different lesson. More importantly, they have the potential of altering societies.

These humanistic values, nurtured through broad reading and study, include not only the frequently mentioned personal benefits of literacy, life-long learning, and critical thinking. The "softer" sciences also elevate an understanding of the human creative spirit, the indelible links that the present shares with the past, the desires and aspirations shared by all humankind, the importance of respect for diverse beliefs, and the fundamental dignity owed to every individual.

It is this kind of an education that, we must hope and trust, prepares young men and women for the turbulent world through which we are passing.

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Let me come back momentarily to the beginning of this address. Our region of the world is badly in need of the expertise embedded in careers in science, technology, engineering, and medicine. And indeed graduates in these fields will find lucrative personal careers; we are especially proud that AUB has made a profound mark in every country of the region.

But in the rich cultural and ethnic tapestry of the Arab world, now riven by competing ideologies, something else is needed. Radicalism that privileges one group over another will never provide the foundation for lasting and legitimate nationhood. For countries long inexperienced with pluralistic institutions, that task is daunting and will take decades to achieve.

If we take a quick review of current events, it is clear that this part of the world is passing through an historical watershed—rather, a prolonged watershed tunnel thus far three years old—that is altering the face of the Middle East permanently.

The language of William Butler Yeats in his poem, *The Second Coming*, presages the uncertain outcome of the region around us.

> a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
>
> Troubles my sight: a waste of desert sand;
>
> A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
>
> A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
>
> Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
>
> Wind shadows of the indignant desert birds.

As we know, the early hopeful aspirations of the first civil revolts in the Arab region have spiraled down into something far more disturbing: Yeats's "widening gyre" where "things fall apart" and "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." The cruel civil war in Syria and the now-defunct Maliki government in Iraq have severely aggravated sectarian tensions across the heart of the region. Millions of civilians have been forced from their homes, and the extremist ISIS movement is bent on establishing a regressive Islamic

state within the Fertile Crescent. The cultural heritage of the region—ancient, medieval, and modern—is being systematically ravaged. Egypt, one of the early standard bearers of the Arab popular revolts, has cast off the heavy-handed rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in favor of a militaristic regime bent on repressive security controls. Libya is torn by seething rivalries, and American influence seems powerless to secure the future of Afghanistan or mediate the interminable Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We are in fact looking at the sundering of nations and social systems of the post-Ottoman world.

It is here that the two major goals of education intersect:
personal enlightenment paired with the needs of modern Arab societies.

The point is to open eyes and ears to the words and customs and beliefs of other peoples through time and all over the world, to universalize the infinite varieties of human experience. I've been fond of quoting, over the years, western authors and academics on the importance of the liberal arts. Yet the idea that education and erudition are essential to changing the world is not unique to the west.

Since we are speaking today of the region where we live, I will instead turn to an Arab poet of the 10th century, Al-Mutanabbi, born in Iraq and educated in Damascus, who of course knew nothing of the American liberal arts curriculum. Known for the panegyric tone of his poetry, much of which was

written in praise of kings, here he speaks of the persuasive power of his literary craft:

In a famous poem he speaks to the power of identity and the freedom that comes with knowing oneself.

أنا الذي نظر الأعمى إلى أدبي و أسمعت كلماتي من به صممُ
الخيل والليل والبيداء تعرفني والسيف والرمح والقرطاس والقلمُ

"I am the one whose writings can be seen by the blind, and whose words grant hearing to the deaf. The steed, the night, and the desert all know me, as do the sword, the spear, paper, and pen."

In this passage Al-Mutanabbi extols the power of literature, of erudition, of verse and rhetoric, that can induce others to alter their preconceptions and begin to understand worlds beyond their knowledge or senses. He speaks also of the nature of his identity, grounded in the equestrian Levantine culture in which he was raised, and devoted to the essential tools of his trade—all of which lend authority to what he writes. Perhaps he was too much of a poet: it was in fact due to the fatal eloquence of his pen that he was murdered.

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In conclusion, then, let us reconsider the question "how do you measure the value of higher education?"

If there are men and women to confront the "rough beast" of Yeats's *Second Coming*, to shift the ground of dialogue and understanding, to create inclusive nations out of the chaotic trends of the present, they will be following in the tradition of Al-Mutanabbi and others who have understood, and been inspired by, fundamental humanistic values.

Moreover, when pluralistic communities arise in "places where conflicts over nationalism, identity and citizenship are most pronounced," they cannot be imposed or implanted from the West. The West is delegitimized by a colonialist past and burdened by an innate paternalism. These new societies must be constructed by indigenous populations of the Arab world, and they will reflect their own profound cultural, historical, and religious heritage. Wherever they arise, these societies will have to be built on mutually agreed terms of statehood and a communal sense of national identity.

If we reflect on Al-Mutanabbi's words, this process will doubtless require more than blind eyes can now see, and more than deaf ears can now hear. It will require new vocabulary spoken by moderate voices that are, today, in very short supply.

As T. S. Eliot observed in his *Four Quartets*,

> For last year's words belong to last year's language
>
> And next year's words await another voice.

We need more courageous men and women in and of the Middle East who understand the enormous challenge of finding a common ground in the regulation of human affairs. Fortunately, this is more than a fond wish: for almost 150 years, liberal arts universities in the region have been producing them—and notably AUB.

I will take just a moment to conclude, by wishing you all an exciting and illuminating academic year, full of exploration, discovery, and conversation, in search of those ineffable values of education, and perhaps in search of those voices of the future.