The Essential Inutility of Higher Education
Opening Ceremony
October 12, 2009
President Peter Dorman

Distinguished guests, honored faculty colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, students, and staff of AUB: let me extend a warm welcome to all of you on the Opening Day exercises of this academic year. The beginning of classes is always a moment of greeting old colleagues and friends, welcoming new students and faculty, and anticipating the comforting routine of familiar rituals, such as the one we observe today.

No one year is like another, of course. You will see several obvious changes, notably the new home of the Suliman S. Olayan School of Business on the lower campus, which will be formally dedicated this week. There is also signage that announces the precautionary measures we are adopting to ward off cases of the H1N1 virus that has traveled so quickly around the world; and of course we regret the temporary closing of Ada Dodge Hall as we seek to improve food services across campus.

The last fifteen months in particular have constituted a period of severe economic distress around the world, unparalleled since the Great Depression. And while the downward spiral shows hopeful signs of turning around, all of us share concerns with financial equilibrium, even at AUB and in Lebanon, which has been far less affected than other nations. Nonetheless, the graduating classes of 2008 and 2009 have had to

face employment conditions far more uncertain than those of other years, and that trend may well continue for some time.

In the light of these events, students and their families are more concerned than ever with their prospects of having to look for gainful career opportunities after graduation. The cost of higher education continues to rise, and while AUB remains less expensive than most of its sister institutions in the United States--and even some here in Lebanon--we continue to search for ways in which our incoming students can afford these crucial years of education without taking on a burdensome load of debt or financial commitment.

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It is an appropriate time, then, to ask ourselves: what kind of an education are AUB students buying into?

From the time it was founded as the Syrian Protestant College, AUB has recognized the role a university plays in the creation of a professional cadre of leaders. The School of Medicine was established in 1867, only months after the College opened its doors, reflecting the conviction of the founders that men with professional skills were desperately needed in a province of the Ottoman empire; and of course other professional schools would follow in due time.

Politics and history have altered the face of this region. But the demand for talented and visionary men and women has remained unchanged—in fact, with the stunning growth of wealth and population in the Middle East, and with the expectations created by a globally integrated economy, the demand has only been exacerbated.

On the other hand, the founders of the Syrian Protestant College also recognized the importance of providing another integral facet of higher education: the formation of a critical intellect and moral character that comes from the mastery of multiple disciplines. President Daniel Bliss made this goal explicit in saying that "the value of each thing is measured by its power to develop and build up the latent possibilities of the moral and spiritual. This, then, is purpose of the college, to make noble men, manly men, perfect men." And—now--let us not forget to add: perfect women.

The well rounded graduate of the 19th century was schooled in the liberal arts, a term that does not denote a philosophically or culturally liberal attitude, but derives from a far more conservative origin: the upper classes, the freemen, of ancient Rome. In an article in the *Wilson Quarterly*, Michael Lind has noted that elite Roman citizens were trained in the classical languages of Greek and Latin, the skills of rhetoric and logic, and numeracy (including music and astronomy). He points out that, in the West, "a version of the Graeco-Roman gentleman's education, supplemented with liberal doses of Christian ethics and theology, provided the basis of higher education from the

Renaissance until the 19th century." This description neatly fits the general outlines of the undergraduate curriculum at the Syrian Protestant College at the time it was founded.

The history of the liberal arts in the last 200 years has traveled a rough road. With the growth of research universities based on the German model, exploring the outer boundaries of esoteric scientific fields, doubt was cast on the relevance of the centuries-old gentleman's classical education. Again, Professor Lind explains that two developments gave new life to the liberal arts. Almost one hundred years ago, President Charles Eliot Norton of Harvard made the undergraduate degree a prerequisite for any professional schools, a decision quickly adopted by other schools. Second, in the 1940s President Robert Maynard Hutchins of the University of Chicago introduced the "great books" program that permitted study of classical texts in translation. Thus the Roman command of rhetoric was reassigned to English composition; the study of logic, outside of debate clubs, was consigned to math classes; and the knowledge of Greek and Latin was supplanted, for the most part, by modern languages.

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But utilitarian forces are still giving impetus to the purpose of universities. In fact, critics of higher education (and these critics include presidents and deans at several institutions) argue that universities have the sole mandate to train young men and

women for an occupation, something that can be immediately applied in a gainful way to problems of substance.

There may be some truth to this argument. According to one survey, we still live in a world where only 59% of Americans are aware that humans and dinosaurs did not inhabit the earth at the same time. In another disheartening statistic, 53% of Americans do not know how much time it takes for the earth to complete one revolution around the sun.

If academia is to be considered as preparation for the world beyond campus walls, universities cannot ignore realities that lie beyond their ivy-covered precincts. Governments in particular view the arenas of science and mathematics as reflective of the ability of their citizens to thrive successfully in a modern world. And of course corporations seek to compete in a worldwide marketplace. After all, these entities must deal with issues of profit or public policy: what will work? What solutions are there to the pressing problems of the private and public domain?

It is not surprising, then, that the most generous amounts of research funding come from government endowments and corporations. As a consequence, national and economic priorities invidiously infuse the purpose of higher education itself in the minds of faculty and of the students they teach. At present only 3% of students in the

United States are now choosing a major in fields that can be lumped under the liberal arts, a number comparable to our own situation at AUB.

On the other hand, a number of scholars have criticized the value of informational learning per se. Alfred North Whitehead, in his essay on *The Aims of Education*, derided the accumulation of knowledge in what passed for education in his day, saying that "a merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God's earth." Rather, he urged that among the highest goals of training young minds are "the evocation of curiosity, of judgment, of the power of mastering a complicated tangle of circumstances, and the use of theory in giving foresight."

If knowledge and professional skills alone are not sufficient for our graduates, higher education must strive for something less easily quantifiable, and less easily attainable.

Three weeks ago I had the privilege of attending the opening of King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, a new graduate university on the shores of the Red Sea devoted to finding technological solutions to several urgent challenges: water resources, alternative sources of energy, sustainable food production, global warming and climate change. KAUST has explicitly set forth a regional and worldwide agenda, inviting an international community of scholars to collaborate in seeking solutions to problems that affect the entire globe. Over and above these technical challenges, KAUST has laudably adopted a commitment to fundamental sustainability, a

recognition that universities can serve as essential motivators of social change and social conscience. During the opening ceremonies, President Shih quoted a Chinese saying: "The world is not something we inherit from our parents. It is something we borrow from our children"—an assertion that coincides with our own conviction that educated men and women assume a responsibility and a voice in their societies that transcend their profession and the time in which they live.

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The greatest triumphs of the 20th century, however one wishes to define them—space flight, atomic power, the theory of relativity, the unprecedented rise in human population and the standard of living, the discovery of DNA and, through genetic engineering, the possibility that mankind may soon free itself from the physical process of evolution itself—these arguably belong to the scientific and technological spheres. To be sure, these advances have raised other challenges that defy easy solution. But it can be argued that the greatest failures—world wars, regional conflicts, genocide, persistent poverty, extremist ideological movements--may be defined as failures of a liberal education, failures that have fostered deep chasms of willful misunderstanding and closed minds, as well as prejudice based on the characterization of groups of people as the untouchable and unapproachable "other."

These festering problems, which are not new-born, but have a centuries-old pedigree, seem immune to scientific proofs, and require the painful relearning of old lessons by every generation. In this realm, where does our own responsibility lie in educating students at AUB? Exposure to other languages and cultures, to different ways of framing questions, to the rich history of our own many cultural heritages---provides deeper understanding of our current motivations, an awareness of the long, unbroken thread of human experience, and the possibility of common dialogue--- things that link together human beings who are otherwise unconnected to each other by where they live, what customs they follow, or what they individually pursue as a mere vocation.

Higher education is not utilizable in an economic sense alone. It seeks to provide an understanding of the ways in which the human mind has inquired—and continues to inquire-- into its own self-awareness. It raises the question of what makes us common participants in the social, spiritual, and intellectual sense.

So if we speak of training competent leaders for tomorrow, let us also speak of training leaders who are also thinkers, critics, and humanists. A corollary to this goal is that—in spite the standard degree requirements we demand, and the common learning outcomes we desire--we do not intend to produce a cadre or a generation of like-minded thinkers. William Deresiewksi, former professor of English at Yale, has said that "the life of the mind is lived one mind at a time: one solitary, skeptical, resistant

mind at a time." I am glad to say that in the course of the past year at AUB, I have met a good number of solitary, skeptical, and resistant minds.

Let us pose the same question we began with: what kind of an education are AUB students buying into? One that guarantees a degree of usefulness, to be sure. But the greatest contribution of higher education may lie in its mandate, and its freedom, to teach things of no direct utility in a practical sense, but which make us ponder the values that underlie the broad social contract.

In one of her more caustic moments, Jane Austen once wrote, "Men have had every advantage of telling us their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything." Austen was of course, speaking for a female sector of English society that in her day had little access to formal education. On the other hand, she devoted her life to writing books, and even after two centuries they show us a good deal about the foibles and nobility of human nature. Like the works of other literary figures, her novels "prove" nothing in themselves, but they illuminate general truths about the immutability of the human spirit—and its universality. As we instinctively recognize ourselves in her fictional characters of the early 19^{h} century, they compel us to ponder why we, who live in the early 21st century, are so much like them. That question, although of no utilitarian value, is one worth pondering.

As this year begins, then, I would urge my colleagues on the AUB faculty to teach at least one thing of no immediate practical value--something useless, if you will; to ask questions that have no correct answers—and perhaps cannot be answered at all; to pose quandaries or moral choices that engage the mind in impractical but otherwise crucial ways.

And to our students who are returning for another year at AUB, or who are arriving for the first time: let me urge you not to come to campus expecting answers, but come for questions that cannot be answered. Whether inside the classroom or outside it, your lives will be enriched—and so will ours.

I wish you all a productive and provocative year ahead.