American University of Beirut

Founders’ Day 2008 – Distinguished Guest Speech

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Living and Working Abundantly

By Professor Huda Zurayk
Thank you President Dorman for inviting me to give the Founder’s Day address for this academic year, celebrated 142 years after the Founding of this University. I have attended this august occasion over the years in the audience, and for the past decade on this platform as Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences. It is a privilege for me today to be sharing some reflections from my long experience with this great University.

My association with AUB, stretches back over the years, starting with my childhood as the daughter of two alumni, my mother Najla who was among the first women graduates from AUB, and my father Constantine who went on to become professor and leader in this University over his lifetime. As a young daughter, I remember that AUB was central in our family world and a beautiful campus for us to visit regularly. Later I became a student at AUB, a faculty member, a dean, and now I am back to being professor and enjoying a year of research leave. I will base my reflections on perspectives that I have gained from these varied and rich experiences, and will focus on the most salient in the limited time available today.

In his opening address this academic year, President Dorman emphasized that the greatest contribution of AUB is the education we give to our students. This was actually the “meaning of the establishment of this University” by our founding fathers. I would like to quote here from an address that my father delivered on Founder’s Day in 1960, almost 50 years ago. He said:

When Daniel Bliss and his collaborators made the decision, almost a hundred years ago, to establish a College on these shores, they were investing for the future. And they chose to invest not in land, or buildings or banks, or commercial or industrial enterprises, but in an institution of higher learning. By this decision they were expressing their conviction that the soundest investment that can be made for the future of any people is investment in human lives, in education. (end of quote).

As we continue to invest in education today, at the undergraduate level and very significantly also at the graduate level, we would like to think that we are preparing for a
better future for Lebanon, the Arab world and our larger region. We all recognize that the forces at play in determining our present and our future are much more powerful and much bigger than this University. Nevertheless, we have the mission and responsibility to prepare our students for a better future for themselves and for this region, no matter what the grave uncertainties and dangerous power politics that surround us. This requires us to always ask how we can develop while maintaining the essence of AUB which is rooted in “excellence, in human values and in hard work”. As responsibility moves to President Dorman and his team, a window opens for reflection on how to continue to orient for the future in order to maximize the potentials and the vitality of this University.

Within this process of reflection, I bring my thoughts of this day which focus on five of the many challenges that AUB faces in orienting for the future. But before doing so, I would like to state my two points of departure in selecting these challenges:
1) My first point of departure derives from my firm belief in the centrality of our mission “to serve the peoples of the Middle East”. AUB is universal, but we are at the same time specific, and it is here in this region that we have, we can and we should make a difference.
2) My second point of departure derives from my experience with public health as a field of learning here at AUB and elsewhere. Public health provides rich and valuable perspectives that I will draw on as a multidisciplinary field that seeks relevance together with excellence and connects naturally to the larger society around us.

From these two points of departure, I put five challenges on center stage today because I believe they are prominent and significant challenges to all fields of learning, and a necessary food for thought for us at AUB in the window of today.

Let me now move to my five reflections:
1. My first reflection queries the extent to which AUB is critically examining, as a whole University, the trajectory of growth forward in the fields of learning it encompasses. We find that the University today is growing in the professional fields of engineering and business, in economics, in computer science, and in the biological sciences and medicine,
with less investment in the humanities and the social sciences (with the exception of economics). Is this differential growth a result of the strong demand from students, and I suppose their parents, for these popular fields of learning and specialization reflecting what they see as market need for resources?

But to what extent should AUB be a market driven educational institution? Are we by prioritizing investment in these fields, reinforcing the notion that development comes primarily from technological, scientific and management advances,? Evidence is mounting for a contrasting view, that “specializations” in technological, scientific and management disciplines cannot on their own propel sustainable development. They need to be complemented by scholarship in history, political science, sociology among other disciplines, which provide a specialized understanding of historical context, political processes, and social structures that impact change in our region.

I illustrate from my own field of public health. A “new public health” is currently emerging around the world which underscores the social determinants of health, including poverty, structural factors, and beliefs and behaviors, as equally important causes of illness and poor health as biomedical factors. This holistic view of the production of health considers that health improvements can only be actualized through a complementary process of social change and medical interventions.

We need to build expertise in understanding our history and society. Where else than in strong humanities and social science departments can this be done? And how can we attract students to major in these disciplines? I believe there is explicit as well as dormant interest in these fields among our students that needs to be supported by AUB and allowed to emerge and to blossom. A good start, I believe, is offering scholarships for study in the humanities and social sciences- and may I also argue, in the more directly oriented development fields of education, agriculture, and public health. Such scholarships could entice interested and outstanding students to bring these fields into their radar screens and make independent decisions about their choice of major. They should preferably be merit scholarships for good students, scholarships that not only
provide financial support but also give recognition to these fields as worthy of merit. The flow of outstanding graduates in the humanities and social sciences would serve to attract other interested students.

I believe that through this and many other mechanisms, AUB can set in motion a process for more dynamic and balanced growth across all fields of learning in order to prepare students in the sciences, the arts and the professions for contributing to sustainable development in this region.

2. My second reflection builds on the first and queries the overwhelming focus we provide to disciplinary education at AUB, in an increasingly interdisciplinary world. We have all majored in a discipline or field of learning at University which has given us specialization and in depth knowledge of a field. Let us then reflect together on how much that specialization has stamped the way we look, interpret, create and transmit knowledge, and has also molded our way of thinking about our lives.

I received my education in statistics from this University and then in Biostatistics in my graduate studies abroad. That education not only gave me a specialization, but it also molded the way I think and respond to situations in my work and in my life, always classifying and organizing information and analyzing in a systematic manner. This molding happens to all of us and it serves us well in segregated work environments still prevalent today where engineers work largely with engineers; physicians work largely with physicians and other health professionals; philosophers, historians and social scientists work together; and in each case all speak the same “language”.

Looking to the future, I see increasing recognition that knowledge is interrelated and cannot be totally compartmentalized, and that interdisciplinary collaboration makes for better knowledge in any one field. I see also work environments moving to adopt systems thinking in addressing the complex issues they face. With such a systems approach comes increasing reliance on highly integrated multi-discipline and multi-professional teams of employees and consultants. For such teams to function effectively requires an education
that prepares for smooth knowledge exchange and for collaboration between disciplines. Are we preparing for that future?

Herein comes the second challenge for AUB in my view. Many of us at this University speak in favor of interdisciplinarity, but the fact remains that we are all educated in a disciplinary context which makes interaction with other ways of thinking difficult. Moreover, disciplinary specialization and productivity remain at the heart of our system for academic reward and advancement of faculty.

In this context, I believe that a strong effort is needed to bridge the disciplines at AUB. This effort has already started but it needs more conscious reflection and support. We recognize that AUB has introduced distributional requirements in undergraduate programs whereby every student is required to experience major fields of learning taking courses in the social sciences, in humanities, in the sciences, and in analytic thinking. We ask, however, to what extent do our students derive a sense of interdisciplinary perspective from these requirements? And to what extent does the introduction to other major fields of learning penetrate the tight mold of disciplinary specialization that creates the identity and establishes the boundaries on our mind and soul?

We need more innovative approaches to teaching, more student exposure to interdisciplinary research being undertaken at AUB, and more organized debates and topical discussions among different specializations. Of course the most effective contribution comes from developing joint and interdisciplinary degree programs, but I have seen only one successful interdisciplinary graduate program established in Environmental Sciences. Such programs are not easy to bring about, and they require a special mindset, as many issues arise particularly in terms of organization and governance. I believe that orienting to multidisciplinarity is a challenge worth taking up at AUB and it will add to AUB’s distinctiveness in adequately preparing students for the future we foresee.

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My next two reflections address the value given by AUB to research and service in strengthening AUB’s investment in educating for the future. Research and service are, with education, at the heart of the AUB mission as conceived by our founding fathers and by the leaders of this University who followed. These three functions are, I believe, interrelated and synergistic. I would like to raise the question here of whether AUB’s engagement with research and service is benefiting students and making a difference to development in this region?

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3. I will focus in my third reflection on research. No one questions the centrality of research and knowledge creation in defining AUB’s role. In fact, many of us believe that as with education, research is a “raison d’être” for AUB. What I would like to query today is the nature of the research process and outcome at AUB in mainly three questions. I would like to query, first, the extent to which research activities at AUB are addressing the crucial issues and problems currently facing our region. This is perhaps the case but do we actually know that?; I would like to query, second, the extent to which AUB researchers are engaging with colleagues and knowledgeable stakeholders outside this University in defining and researching these issues and problems; and, third, the extent to which the results of research are being disseminated outside academic publications and conferences, and are making a difference to our region.

We aim for excellence in research, and that has been and will remain the essence of AUB and the key for AUB’s great achievements in this region. What I would like to query, at this juncture, is the extent to which relevance plays a role in excellence in the way we conceive, we plan and we reward research at AUB? Relevance, to my mind, is a crucial dimension for creating useful and timely knowledge which is at the heart of the development quandary in this region. This has been very clearly pointed out by the UNDP Arab Human Development Report of 2003 entitled Building Knowledge Societies.

We all recognize, I believe, that relevance requires engaging in research that addresses key problems and development issues in this region. It is important to also recognize that
relevance requires engaging in research that seeks participation of knowledgeable scholars and practice professionals, as well as active participation of communities studied, in the research process. Relevance also requires dissemination of findings to reach audiences for whom our findings make a real difference: to policy makers, to program managers, to teachers, to practitioners. I have experienced all of these activities and I know first hand the time and effort required. But I also know how much value such engagement has added to the richness and relevance of the research endeavor.

I see concern for relevance in research taking root at AUB in programs such as IBSAR at the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences, in the Urban Health Program at the Center for Research on Population and Health of the Faculty of Health Sciences, and in the research program on the Democracy Gap in the Arab World at the Institute of Financial Economics of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, to name only a few. If we truly recognize relevance as part of excellence at AUB, as I believe we should, we must think of extending the way we judge the outcome of research which is now focused on publications in peer reviewed international journals. We must ask: what about publications in recognized peer reviewed regional journals and books? We must also ask: how can we recognize, along with publications, the participatory processes of research that bring relevance strongly into excellence and enhance our ability to make a difference to this region?

4. This leads me to my fourth reflection on service as part of the mission of this University. Service to the region is not clearly recognized in faculty work responsibilities and in the faculty reward system, in contrast to research and teaching. I would like to, therefore, raise the question of the extent to which AUB values service and to ask: should not this tremendous expertise that abides in the University be better engaged in providing consultations to the region? and does not such service also feed back relevance into teaching and research thus enhancing excellence which is of the essence of AUB?

I think that we would all agree that teaching can be more effective in most disciplines if faculty are engaged in, and can arrange for students to experience, real situations in their
natural settings. Learning in the classroom can also be better linked to the real world if faculty bring into the classroom examples from their engagement in service activities outside the University.

Engagement of faculty in service also brings them face to face with key issues to which to direct research. Linkage of research with service can lead to development of concepts and models that can better suit the analysis of our reality than concepts and models developed elsewhere. I would like to illustrate from the experience of our colleagues at the Institute of Community and Public Health of Birzeit University. Through their engagement in service linked to research on youth mental health, they have succeeded to introduce two concepts which are recognized internationally as significant contributions for understanding and addressing youth mental health problems in conflict situations. These two concepts are the concept of “humiliation”, and the concept of “chronic stress” as opposed to “post traumatic stress” that is so much in use in western literature.

We have learnt a lot from our colleagues at Birzeit University as they have learnt from us. AUB has developed over the years valuable and major links to academia in the western world. AUB can greatly benefit, I believe, from also encouraging stronger interaction with academic bodies and with professionals in this region.

AUB has gone some way in moving beyond its walls through the services of the Office of Regional and External Programs that build bridges for faculty members to the region. The University has also established two initiatives recently: first, the Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service which seeks to open opportunities for students for service and community based learning in outside communities; and second, the Neighborhood Initiative that attempts to forge better relations for AUB with its neighboring community. These are valuable institutional efforts. They are complemented by the innovative initiatives of some faculty members who believe in the centrality of outreach activities in their academic life. These faculty have taken their research and service activities to outside communities and regional networks, and students are crossing boundaries with them for more engaged learning.
I believe we must reflect on the academic project as we practice it at AUB in keeping with the University mission. Being a University in the middle of a developing country and region implies engagement, and educating for the future means exposing our students to the real world, with all its noise and complexities. I believe that AUB must consider how to support faculty’s engagement in service as a fundamental part of its mission, and how to recognize service in advancement of faculty, in order to achieve better relevance in teaching and research for making a difference to our region.

5. This brings me to the last challenge I would like to reflect on today, and that relates to the work responsibility of faculty, the greatest resource for any University. AUB currently faces many challenges in terms of faculty recruitment, ensuring a satisfactory and financially rewarding work environment, and defining faculty advancement particularly as related to tenure. While recognizing the significance of these challenges for the future of AUB, I would like to pose a less obvious challenge, but a very significant one in my view, relating to the expanding workload of faculty and its influence on their ability to work creatively.

AUB has sustained a clear mission of academic excellence and vitality throughout its history. AUB has, at the same time, not shied away from institutional change in response to developments and advances in higher education, and in response to challenges faced during different periods of its history. This natural process of change and regeneration has brought with it over the years a more complex workload for faculty and more pressures on faculty time. It is important to examine, at this juncture, to what extent this development threatens to encroach on the creative potential in this University.

Very clear in my mind is the contrasting picture of my father in his early years as University professor when I was still a child. (I say early years here because the picture I will describe now also changed for him in the later years of his active professional life). I remember as a child that my father’s use of time seemed very well-structured. His teaching was mostly in the morning, leaving home very early. He had lunch at home a
few minutes away from the University and sometimes even managed a short nap. He devoted his afternoon to reading and research, continuing into the evening or interrupted by professional activities and meetings, many of them outside the University. My father devoted the summer mostly to research and writing, up in our rented mountain house in Brummana, with only occasional visits to Beirut, also giving time for long walks, tennis, and gatherings with family and friends which rejuvenated the spirit as well as the mind.

How different is the working environment for faculty today, not only because of the penetration of the frustrating political situation into minds and lives, but also because of the changing circumstances, and the changing roles for faculty in this University.

Whereas my father lived very close to the University, many AUB faculty today are finding difficulty in locating affordable housing close to the University and are having to travel everyday long distances in unregulated traffic to reach AUB. Whereas my father seemed to have control over his time, and was very disciplined about it, faculty today are facing diversions that limit the time available for creative work. Among many things, I would like to mention first the invasion of email into our lives, which has, on the one hand, improved communication and transparency, but has, on the other hand, also added to the anxiety and pressure of competing work tasks. More importantly, as the University adopts the valuable and forward looking processes of accreditation and strategic planning, a whole new set of committee assignments and of self-assessment tasks, have taken over faculty lives. The engagement of some faculty in outreach research and service activities, which I just praised for the relevance such engagement brings to their work, also adds to faculty commitments. We must examine what is happening to creative thinking time at AUB, which is at the heart of maintaining the excellence and the distinctiveness of this University.

There is no alternative, to my mind, but for faculty to protect time for creative work, not only in the intensive way I am enjoying now through my research leave, but also in a continuous and sustained manner in their daily lives. Yet, the solution is not by
retrenching and withdrawing faculty back to the ivory tower to focus on teaching and research, for much would be lost in this isolation.

I believe that AUB must seriously consider the support it can give to faculty members when it asks them to give their time to academic development activities such as accreditation and strategic planning. I believe that AUB and its faculty must also think creatively about how to enlarge the faculty body by attracting soft funding to support special categories of “research” and “practice” faculty. In my view, the need is urgent to attract human and financial resources for more engagement in the valuable forward looking and outward reaching processes. For is it not better to do that, than to continue to draw on the valuable creative thinking time for faculty in this University?

This and other challenges I have posed today are, I believe, worth examining in the window of opportunity for reflection AUB has in this period of leadership transition. These challenges lead us to reflect on how abundantly we are living and working at AUB and whether we are maximizing our potential, in order that we all, meaning our students and the peoples of this region, may live life more abundantly.

Thank you