

Presidential Inauguration Speech

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The American University in Cairo

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Distinguished High Officers of the Government of
Egypt:

- His Excellency Dr. Ashraf El-Sheihy, Minister of
Higher Education and Scientific Research, as a
representative for His Excellency Prime Minister
Sherif Ismail

Esteemed Fellow Presidents and representatives of
universities of Egypt and Beyond,

Dear Members of the Global Community of our
University:

- Chairman Richard Bartlett, Vice Chairman Moataz Al Alfi, and our dedicated Board of Trustees and spouses;
- My esteemed colleagues, Dr. Amr Salama and Dr. Mohamed Neguib Abu Zeid,
- Inspirational predecessors: Interim President Tom Thomason, President Lisa Anderson, President David Arnold, and *twice* President Tom Bartlett;
- Our dedicated Faculty and Staff,
- Our loving alumni,
- Our visionary and generous donors;
- Our heroically sacrificing parents; and

- Our beloved, bright, ambitious students:

بالتوازي مع الامم المتحدة، الامم المتحدة، الامم المتحدة

يتمتعونكم - فهداة للنسبة العينية

What a very special privilege it is to stand with you today as the 12th President of the American University in Cairo. It is a thrill for Marie and me to return to *Umm ed-Dunya* – Cairo, the Great Mother of the World -- for another chapter of our lives in these exciting times.

Yes, we all recognize that these are also challenging, stressful, and even painful times for all humanity. But we have returned precisely because today, *El-Qahira* --

The City Victorious -- is the crucible also of such energy and promise, both for our truly unique University and for our truly wonderful host country.

The American University in Cairo beckoned us back to Egypt to join in its most noble and important of human endeavors: the education of our rising generation of scientists, artists, builders and creators; teachers, public servants -- and leaders in business and all fields.

Today, I would like to take up the conversation about how, together, we can best advance our high purpose.

To prepare to take up the University's mission of service, I have been consulting widely among our stakeholders. Besides the trustees, faculty, staff, parents and students, alumni and other generous patrons, I have spoken with each of my living predecessors. Thank you again, Presidents Anderson, Arnold, Bartlett, and interim President Thomason for honoring us with your presence here today. I will strive to build on your great advances for our beloved University.

From your diverse perspectives, I have drawn insights on both our solid assets, and our serious challenges. I see these falling into three areas of focus: Our University's *identity, continuity, and excellence*.

We can take great pride in each of these characteristics – but we can take none of them for granted.

** * * Our Identity: Egypt's Global University * * **

Our *identity* as “Egypt’s Global University” is our most distinguishing asset and greatest competitive edge.

For nearly a century, we have served as the premier portal to the world for Egyptians and others in her region for a world standard, inquiry-based, liberal arts education in English.

Thanks to rigorous American and Egyptian national certification processes, the validity of our degrees and professional certificates has stood beyond question in Egypt, the United States, and around the world.

But our global identity and our competitive distinction also have rested on the fact that The American University in Cairo has powerfully attracted *the world* to come to *Egypt*.

We have always been a two-way portal, facilitating the exchange both *to* and *from* Egypt of *people*, their knowledge, and ideas. We bring Americans and other nationalities, often including Egyptian-Americans, *back* to Egypt -- even as we enable our graduates to thrive

and to compete in any field, anywhere in the world.

Thus we have always been in the business of “Brain Gain” for Egypt and her region, standing against the global forces of “Brain Drain.”

But we must recognize painful realities: Since the political turmoil of this region broke out in 2011, Egypt has suffered sharp declines in foreign visitors for all purposes, from tourism to business to science and the arts. We in higher education have not been immune. Nonetheless, there are grounds for hope: I'm pleased to report that as stability and security have begun to return over the past several years, the numbers of our international students and staff have begun to revive.

To sustain our identity as *Egypt's Global University*, we must build this positive momentum: we must bring back to Egypt *at least* the levels of international faculty, staff, and students that we enjoyed before 2011. I ask our Egyptian alumni in particular to join our faculty, staff, parents and students in reaffirming to foreign counterparts Egypt's traditional warm welcome to join us at our beautiful University.

There can be no denying that global forces of hate, fear, bigotry, fanaticism, and other belligerent forms of ignorance do still pose disruptive threats to established societies operating under the rule of law.

Egyptians, no less than citizens of other peaceful and orderly societies, are demanding the highest modern standards of education as the most vitally necessary measure not merely to defeat terrorism, but also to sustain prosperous, dignified lives for all citizens.

I will return later to say more about our global identity. But let me cite two other priority objectives we must advance in order to live up to our mission of teaching, research, learning, and service.

* * * *Continuity: The Intergenerational Compact* * * *

The most famously characteristic element of Egypt's identity is her millennial durability – her *resilience* in the face of the vicissitudes of time. Few other civilizations have demonstrated such amazing intergenerational continuity of identity from the dawn of humankind through the present. The American University in Cairo likewise has proven resilient. We have sustained our service to Egypt, and stood with her for nearly a century, through the severest tests of foreign wars, domestic revolutions, and global economic crises.

We can take due encouragement from this history, but we can never remain complacent. Sustaining the “intergenerational compact” is the great challenge of all American not-for-profit institutions of higher learning. Our University certainly is healthy – but we are *not* wealthy.

Today’s students, faculty, and staff depend primarily on the sacrifices of the parents of our students. For the majority of our families, AUC’s tuition and fees represent a heavy burden. But we also depend on the generosity and vision of past and present donors from around the world.

Around our beautiful campus you will see on our buildings the names of just a few of these patrons.

Stop and chat with our students and faculty, and you will encounter some who proudly acknowledge their named scholarship awards or professorship chairs.

Whether as individuals or as institutions, Egyptian or international – Egypt's severe economic stresses, especially inflation, impact us all, without exception.

The foreign exchange crunch not only adds further to our costs of operations; but also, if unresolved, it threatens our long-term continuity and quality.

Such external economic pressures on all in Egypt lie beyond our remedy. But for our own sustainability – to uphold our obligations to the coming generations of students – we must strengthen our community’s culture of service and giving; and we must demonstrate the most prudent stewardship of all our current resources, human and fiscal.

* * * * * *Excellence -- in all we do* * * * * *

A third strategic focus runs strongly among us:

Excellence – in all we undertake. The AUC diploma and professional certificates must continue to stand above all for excellence.

They must continue to certify the highest achievement on multiple levels:

- *For our prospective students, faculty, and staff:* the highest global standards in our research, teaching, and daily experiences.
- *For our parents and donors:* the assurance that your investments in our rising generation are well worth your financial sacrifices.
- *For our alumni:* durable, unquestionable documentation of the highest levels of personal discipline, dedication, integrity, and all-round academic and personal achievement in a challenging inquiry-based, liberal arts education.

- *For society, including future employers:* the assurance that our graduates bring with them the highest capabilities in the skills necessary for life-long learning in a dynamic world – for professions, services, and industries that do not yet even exist -- indeed, future industries that our graduates will help to imagine.

Excellence is by definition rare: it means standing above and beyond the norm. Excellence is not elitism or snobbery, but it requires exceptional people making truly exceptional effort, backed by unusually supportive families, institutions, and visionary sponsors.

Excellence is costly by any measure – and not only in dollars and pounds, but also in hours of study, and rigorous commitment to the highest values of integrity and discipline. It requires the sacrifice of distracting pleasures of the moment, in favor of sustained focus on long-term goals. There can be no “caps” on excellence, nor on the inevitable fiscal and personal sacrifices of those individuals, families, and institutions who are dedicated to achieving it.

** *Identity, Excellence – and the Problems We Wish to Solve * **

In the United States, the best companies and not-for-profit public service institutions like ours define themselves through our purposes -- that is, the human needs we seek to meet, and the means we use to pursue them. So, we ask our prospective students not “what do you want to be?” but rather, “what problems do you want to solve? How do you wish to serve your country and your fellow man and woman?”

Their answers shape their courses of study and the co-curricular experiences intended to *unleash* them on the most compelling problems of our times, besides the problems of their own livelihoods and lifestyles.

Whatever their individual or larger purposes, we aim to help passionate, ambitious students find the excellent, inquiry-based tools for life-long learning which they need to succeed in approaching any problem, now and in future.

The overarching problem which we at The American University in Cairo are striving to solve is the case of higher education itself. In the United States, as in Egypt, our industry is under disruptive stress. In the face of escalating costs, parents, students, and their prospective employers are questioning the value of the traditional four-year “coming-of-age” experience in the liberal arts. Such valid questioning is driving innovation, rather than defensive reaction, at the best universities.

Hence, we are experimenting with new methods of delivering the different learning experiences required by students at different stages in their lives.

We and our peer universities in the US are re-focusing our teaching methodologies and curricula on the student rather than on the teacher, and on measuring the acquisition of “competencies” rather than on measuring time present in the classroom.

And, we are reaching out to our community to better align our educational services to constantly evolving real-world needs – including business and public service needs. We aim to send our graduates into the world fully equipped for a lifetime of learning and impactful service – many of them in professional capacities that do not yet exist.

That is the real value of our liberal arts approach: that is, training for the broader intellectual skillsets of the

“Four C’s” :

- **Critical thinking** – the secret sauce of scientific advancement and rigorous and free **inquiry-based** education;
- **Communication** – in the world language of English;
- **Collaboration** – within diverse, multi-disciplinary teams; and
- **Creativity** – the indispensable ingredient for **Innovation.**

I invite our visitors to campus to speak with any of our students, faculty and staff, and ask us which problem each of us is most dedicated to solving. Let me note just some of the impressive problems we are tackling together through research and teaching of life-long learning skills. In all of this, we are increasing our collaboration with our host nation university colleagues, officials, and private sector, and we depend on the support of so many of our community members present with us today:

- From development of advanced diagnostics for Hepatitis C, to genetics-based targeting of chemotherapy against cancer, to applications of nanotechnology and toxicology, our School of Science and Technology is advancing our University as a great center to *solve the problems of global public health.*
- We are honored to join the Government of Egypt in addressing the *problems of education* from primary school upwards. I ask my fellow presidents of Egyptian universities for the privilege of visiting you soon, so that together we may advance our collaboration in the great mission we share.

Thank you again, Minister el-Sheihy and Minister El-Araby, for hosting the recent launch of the Egyptian Knowledge Bank project, led by President El-Sisi's Chairman of the Council of Educational Advisors and our own former Dean, Dr. Tarek Shawky. Our Graduate School of Education and Schools of Continuing Education and of Science and Technology are directly contributing to this exemplary public-private partnership.

- Our School of Global Affairs and Public Policy seeks to solve *the problems of modern governance and public policy development* in a region undergoing violent conflict and stressful change – a region whose states are struggling to compete in a global marketplace not only of commerce but also of ideas.
- Our School of the Humanities and Social Sciences seeks to solve the *problems of sustaining human dignity, communication, and the creation of beauty* in a world region particularly afflicted by violent conflict, oppression, and brutality. Our arts and music programs are opening up to enrich the quality of life of all in New Cairo.

- Our schools and such cross-disciplinary initiatives as our Research Institute for a Sustainable Environment partner with industry to solve the most critical *problems of the sustainability* of a rapidly urbanizing humankind. Our “Neighborhood Initiative” is only one such portal through which our University collaborates with, serves, and learns from our vibrant, gigantic host city.

- Our School of Business and others partner with industry to equip our students with the skills to innovate, promote entrepreneurship, and to grow our economy, *to solve the problems of poverty and inadequate economic opportunity* for all in a fiercely competitive and dynamic world where change is inevitable – but progress is NOT.

We also take great pride and benefit from our characteristic whole-of-community approach to problem-solving.

Let me recognize for example the dedication of our Parents Association to solving truly vital health and safety problems of our whole community, by initiating campaigns against smoking and for traffic safety.

Also less often seen and appreciated are the enthusiasm and selflessness that our students demonstrate through their service clubs – over a dozen of them – dedicated to the service of the poor, the elderly, street children, and others in need. Students of so many different academic majors have told me that of all their experiences at our University, their community service has had the most transformative impact on their own characters and learning.

** * A Culture of Excellence, in Giving and Service * **

Let me thank again the high officials of our host Government of Egypt, and my distinguished brother and sister university presidents, for honoring our global community of the American University in Cairo, which Marie and I feel so privileged and thrilled to have joined formally today. Our diverse community constituencies form a venerable global institution, fully “at home” in Egypt.

Together, we are committed to passing The American University in Cairo on to future generations even stronger than we have found it, revitalizing its strong legacy and culture of giving, of service, and of excellence.

Thank you to all our community for your strong support and very warm welcome on our return to Egypt.

السادة الكرام, شرفتنا بحضوركم اليوم

شكرا جزيلا

