

For Immediate Release



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AUB's 155th Founders Day ceremony:

“Celebrating hope and equal opportunity”

In celebration of the 155th anniversary of the founding of the American University of Beirut (AUB) on December 3, 1866, the annual Founders Day ceremony was held on Monday, December 6, 2021 at Assembly Hall. The event was also livestreamed on the AUB YouTube channel.

This year, AUB is also celebrating 100 years of coeducation. The university first welcomed women students to its campus in 1905. These earliest pioneers were students at the School of Nursing. It was in 1921, however, that AUB opened its doors to women in every field.

In his welcome remarks, Dr. Fadlo Khuri, AUB president said, “Although our founders imagined only male students and faculty, the principles upon which the university was founded pointed towards inclusion.” He added, “It took the Ivy League and other great Western universities almost half a century to follow our lead, by which time AUB had already graduated female diplomats, educators, nurses, physicians, writers, and other trailblazers.”

He pointed out that the first few generations of AUB alumnae included the influential advocate for women's rights Anbara Salam, founders of the transformative Al-Ahliyah School, Wadad and Salma Makdisi, and Angela Jurdak, who became Lebanon's first woman diplomat. A few decades later, Ghada Samman would become one of the boldest writers in the Arab world and Zaha Hadid would later become the first woman to ever claim architecture's prestigious Pritzker Prize.

“A strong thread links these remarkable women with newer generations,” said Dr. Khuri. He mentioned that in modern times, AUB has nurtured great female biological scientists as diverse as the world-renowned neuro-geneticist Huda Zoghbi and the great bone metabolism researcher Ghada Hajj Fuleihan. He added that the exceptionally accomplished chemist Najat Saliba and

epidemiologist Abla Mehio Sibai were both remarkably named laureates of the prestigious Loréal UNESCO For Women in Science Awards in consecutive years.

“While acknowledging the long road traveled, we must acknowledge the equally arduous path ahead before true gender equality at AUB can be achieved and celebrated,” he added.

Dr. Khuri continued that toward that end, six years ago, the first presidential task force on the lives and careers of women faculty was launched. “Their exhaustive report found that much progress had been made, but inequities remain and their recommendations are now being followed up on by a standing committee.”

The student essay contest

Every year on this occasion, students are invited to participate in the Founders Day Student Essay Contest. This year, the assignment was to reflect on the historical milestone of AUB’s coed centennial, to discuss the the biggest challenges women still face today, and to present ideas of what AUB can do to address those challenges and work towards more inclusive and just societies.

During the event, the three winners of the Founders Day student essay contest were announced by the president of the university, and received their awards. Rita-Maria Ibrahim, a junior at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS), majoring in English literature, with a minor in both gender studies and creative writing, received the first prize and read her essay at the event.

The second prize was awarded to Yalda Negah, who joined AUB from Afghanistan as one of the university’s outstanding scholars in the transformative Education for Leadership in Crisis scholarship program. She is now in her third semester in FAS, with a view to majoring in political studies.

As for the third prize, it was awarded to Hussein Mousa, a senior at FAS majoring in economics and minoring in Arabic literature. He is the Arabic senior editor of AUB’s student publication Outlook and ranked first in the Lebanese Baccalaureate exams of 2019, in the economics and social sciences section.

The keynote address

The event’s keynote address on commemorating excellence and celebrating hope and equal opportunity was given by Sheikha Altaf Al Sabah, researcher, author, and lecturer on the material culture and traditional textile arts of Kuwait. She is a pioneering AUB alumna with both a bachelor’s and master’s degree in anthropology (BA ’71, MA ’75).

“It is especially poignant to have Sheikha Al Sabah, an accomplished scholar, cultural champion, distinguished author, and advocate as our keynote speaker for this Founders Day, as we celebrate our coed centennial and 100 years of empowering women,” said Dr. Khuri as he introduced her during the event.

Sheikha Al Sabah is a member of AUB’s International Advisory Council. She is also honorary president of Sadu House, a cultural center and museum in the heart of Kuwait City.

In her speech, she shared some of her own life experiences and efforts that were meaningful to her journey of knowledge and learning. She also spoke about some of the achievements accomplished by women at AUB and in Kuwait.

“Despite the many challenges that still face the Arab world, and women in particular, I see the potential for reform, to be through education and academic scholarship. In many Arab and Gulf countries, women studies have become a part of the state building agenda, where education continues to contribute to building just and inclusive societies,” she said.

“I truly believe that teaching women studies is one of the major drivers for social change in any society,” she said, explaining why she supported in 2017 the establishment of the Altaf S. Al Sabah Visiting Chair in Women and Societal Development Studies at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at AUB. She added that this is where the high scholarly context, diverse and enlightened dialogue, can foster further change and development.

She ended with a message to all the young men and women students at AUB, “you are in one of the most distinguished educational institutions in the Arab world and beyond, take advantage of this great opportunity, maximize your human values and capabilities, realize your intellectual potential, aspire to be inspired, and in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, be the change you wish to see in the world.”

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 900 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 9,500 students. AUB currently offers more than 140 programs leading to bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full-service 365-bed hospital.

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