

**"A Shared Vision, A Unique Opportunity"**

**Commencement Address by Steven Knapp  
President, The George Washington University**

Al Akhawayn University

Ifrane, Morocco  
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President Ouaouicha; Excellencies; Fellow Trustees;  
Distinguished Colleagues; and, above all, members of the Al Akhawayn  
University Class of 2010:

*Assalamu Alaykum. Peace be upon you.* I was deeply honored and humbled by the invitation to address you on this very solemn but also exceedingly joyous occasion. For this young, vibrant, and boldly innovative University, today marks the achievement of another significant milestone: not only the University's 13<sup>th</sup> commencement but also the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its service to its students, to the Kingdom of Morocco, and to humanity as a whole.

It is a special pleasure to greet those who have done so much to support today's graduates, shaping their values, providing their resources, and now joining them as they celebrate this important moment in their lives. President Ouaouicha, I wonder if I might take the liberty of introducing something that has become a tradition at my home institution. May I ask that the parents, the families, and the friends of the Class of 2010 please rise to receive our recognition and our thanks?

I come to you from a distant university that is in many ways very different from yours. It is quite a bit older, has more students, and lies at the heart of a sprawling metropolis, far from any mountains that might compare with the beauty of yours! But our two institutions have much in common — certainly more than might be obvious from a quick glance at the facts I just mentioned. To begin with, each was created with a purpose in mind, reflecting a very clear vision of what a university might be and what role it might play in the life of an emerging nation. That is not true of many of the world’s universities, including many of the most famous. Many universities evolved over time from very different kinds of institutions, designed, for instance, primarily for training clergy to serve the mosques and churches of their day. In that regard, I was deeply struck when I read Al Akhawayn’s Founding Statement, reflecting the vision behind the Royal Dahir by which His Late Majesty Hassan II created the University in 1993. I was impressed in particular by the following sentence, which says so much about the unique combination of heritage and opportunity that informs the university’s mission, structure, and curriculum:

Rooted in the noble Arab and Mediterranean humanist tradition, and dynamically adapted to modern times, AUI aims to provide graduates with high academic qualifications, a permanent quest for knowledge and culture, an awareness of their social obligations, and the values of human solidarity and tolerance.

Note the precision with which the University's position has been defined in this sentence: its location at the fertile intersection of deep tradition and present relevance; its commitment right from the start to the most urgently needed values in the world today, the "values of human solidarity and tolerance," but also the values of ongoing intellectual and cultural curiosity. And the next sentence makes explicit the connection of those values to the University's mission of service to others, both within Morocco and beyond:

AUI contributes to the attainment of Morocco's educational, cultural, and economic objectives, and serves the international community through the advancement of science and technology; the training of graduates with strong academic and professional qualifications; and the implementation of research programs in all areas of national or international interest.

I will return to the subject of AUI's founding vision in a few moments, but let me first pause to say a few words about the vision that inspired the creation of my own University. In his last will and testament, my country's founding president, George Washington, called explicitly for the establishment of a university to be located in the heart of the new nation's capital. He had a very specific purpose in mind, and he spelled it out in very explicit terms. He knew that the first challenge facing the nation he did so much to bring into existence was to overcome the regional differences that had separated the thirteen former British colonies, now the original members of the United States. He knew that each colony had developed its own traditions, its own local government, its own way of perceiving the world. The new university he envisioned would provide instruction in "all the branches of polite literature in the arts and sciences," and in "the principles of politics and good government." But even more important — in fact, Washington wrote that this was, in his judgment, "a matter of *infinite* importance" — the university would bring together the sons of all the different former colonies, enabling them to live and learn together, to form lasting friendships, and thereby "be enabled to

free themselves from the local prejudices and habitual jealousies” that would otherwise prevent the various states from coming together as one. In short, the students he envisioned would together forge a national identity and become the citizen-leaders of the newly founded United States.

Now it turns out that George Washington, in addition to being a great general and statesman, was also quite an entrepreneur, although some of his ventures were less successful than others. To pay for the university, he left in his will a certain amount of stock in a company that was building a canal that he hoped would make money but that, unfortunately, never did! So our university had a rougher start than he intended, and in fact it took more than twenty years after Washington’s death in 1799 for funds to be collected and for the U.S. Congress to answer his call by chartering what eventually became the George Washington University.

Much has changed since then. We now educate the daughters as well as the sons of the nation’s no longer 13, but now 50 states. We also draw students from 130 countries, and we no longer train citizens

of our country alone but citizens of the world; in fact, the truly global nature of our vision is one of the most important features our two universities share. Another is our shared commitment to service: service to the community, the nation, and, once again, the world as a whole.

When it comes to service, this was a particularly exciting year for my University. Last September, First Lady Michelle Obama issued a challenge to our entire university community: if our students, faculty, and staff would succeed in performing 100,000 hours of public and community service by the first of May, she would join us on the national mall as our Commencement speaker. So we fanned out across the city, across the region, and even to locations elsewhere in the world. We cleaned parks, painted schools, tutored children, built houses, not only in Washington but in places as far away as Haiti, Peru, and South Africa. In the end, we logged a total not of 100,000 hours but of 163,980 (but who's counting?), and the First Lady graced us with a truly inspiring address. It may interest you that a central theme of that address was the urgent need to look beyond the boundaries of one's own country. Addressing our graduates, she said

something that could just as easily have been said to the graduates of Al Akhawayn University: "You understand," she told them,

That we are no longer isolated from what happens on the other side of the world. That it's in our best interest to look beyond our immediate self-interest, and look out for one another globally. That so many of today's challenges are borderless, from the economy to terrorism to climate change, and that solving those problems demands cooperation with others. And more than any other generation, yours is fully convinced that you're uniquely equipped to solve those challenges. You believe that you can change your communities and change the world.

Again, it's almost as if Mrs. Obama had read your university's Founding Statement, with its emphasis on "human solidarity and tolerance" and service both to the nation and to the international community.

Behind those shared values and the visions they inform, our universities are linked by an even broader heritage. Here I have in mind the values we all possess as heirs of the three "religions of the

book.” Indeed, the divinity of knowledge and the blessedness of peace are shared messages of all three religions, nowhere stated more powerfully than in the words of the Holy Qur’an, and nowhere developed more fully than in Muslim halls of learning.

But I am also thinking of something that President Barack Obama emphasized in his Cairo University speech almost exactly a year ago. He acknowledged something that is too seldom mentioned in the West: the extent to which civilization itself was preserved and nurtured under the shelter of Islam until it was ready to be bequeathed to the modern world. “It was Islam,” President Obama said,

that carried the first light of learning through so many centuries, paving the way for Europe’s Renaissance and Enlightenment. It was innovation in Muslim communities that developed the order of algebra; our magnetic compass and tools of navigation; our mastery of pens and printing; our understanding of how disease spreads and how it can be healed. Islamic culture has given us majestic arches and soaring spires; timeless poetry and cherished music; elegant calligraphy and places of peaceful contemplation. And throughout history, Islam has demonstrated

through words and deeds the possibilities of religious tolerance and racial equality.

We share a debt, then, to the great civilization of Islam, to which we at George Washington were indirectly linked at our founding through the culture of modern Europe, while you at Al Akhawayn have the privilege of being direct and immediate heirs.

With all these values in common, it was very appropriate that our two universities entered into a formal partnership in 1999, sealing that partnership with the creation of a shared endowment. As someone who came to George Washington some years after that event, I have been delighted to learn about the fruit our partnership has already borne. We have exchanged a number of students who have pursued a variety of disciplines on each of our campuses, and additional George Washington students have benefitted greatly from their participation in AUI's summer intensive Arabic program. The development of your library was aided by our University Librarian. Professors in our Engineering and Law Schools are working with AUI colleagues on a program to provide cyber security training for Moroccan management

executives, technical specialists, and legal experts. We are collaborating on a major international conference on cyber security that will take place in Morocco in the near future.

As for future partnerships: in preparing for this visit, I was intrigued to learn that Al Akhawayn's academic programs include the Hillary Rodham Clinton Women's Empowerment Center, launched in 1999, the same year as the creation of our partnership. This is one of the areas in which you have forged a path that we are eager to follow. Just this spring, a University-wide Task Force on Global Women's Issues recommended the creation of a George Washington Global Women's Institute. I look forward to exploring with President Ouachina and his colleagues ways in which we might work together in this vitally important area of global affairs.

Despite all that we now share, and all that we will increasingly share as our still-young partnership grows, I do not want to lose sight of what is truly special about this occasion on this day, here in the beautiful city of Ifrane. I do not want to lose sight of what sets this

University apart: of the unique and exciting opportunity that you face as its newest graduates.

As I mentioned earlier, my University is rather older than yours; still young when compared with the ancient universities in Fez or Bologna, or in Cairo or Oxford, but nevertheless nearly two centuries old. Like you graduates yourselves, your university is blessed with all the promise and vitality of youth. It is just now emerging, as you yourselves are emerging.

And it is emerging at a uniquely exciting time and place. As a uniquely bold and modern university in the ancient Kingdom of Morocco, it stands, and you stand, at a remarkable crossroads. Morocco itself is a nation occupying, if I may quote one last time from your Founding Statement, "a privileged geostrategic position, belonging to Islamic civilization, and open to Europe, America, and Asia." Your nation as a whole is uniquely positioned to play an increasingly vital role in global affairs, as a model of diversity, openness, and tolerance. And you are uniquely positioned within that nation, thanks to an education intentionally designed to combine the

best lessons of these intersecting civilizations, and to prepare you for positions of leadership in the vast and complex global economy.

In a way, you have enjoyed, in this unique setting, something very close to what George Washington wanted for the students he envisioned almost 200 years ago. Together, you have developed a shared body of knowledge and a common set of skills, thanks in part to the University Common Core curriculum. You have had the privilege of learning in small classes, where it really was possible to know your professors and engage directly with the thoughts of your fellow students. You have had the rich linguistic experience of studying in an institution where the language of instruction is English but where the Arabic and French languages are also cherished and taught. And you have been given the more specialized professional skills that make you capable of contributing immediately to the betterment of Morocco and of the world.

I trust that, as you go forward from this day, you will carry with you — indeed, you will embody — the values you have acquired here; that you will cherish the friendships you have formed with your fellow students, especially those whose backgrounds and life experiences and

beliefs differ from your own; that you will never lose that commitment to serving others that is the common heritage of both our universities, as it is of all three great religions of the book.

*Shokran, Haddun Sayeed, wa-Assalaumu Alaykum. Thank you, good luck, and peace be upon you.*