

## **Brandeis/Al-Quds Partnership Effective Teaching Exchange**

**Report: Brandeis University visit to Al-Quds, September 30 – October 7, 2007**

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### **Executive Summary**

In October 2007, four Brandeis faculty members and administrators traveled to Al-Quds University to lead a workshop on pedagogy, curriculum design and assessment for new faculty members, and to work with Al-Quds faculty and administrators to strengthen teaching and learning structures at Al-Quds.

The workshop was well attended, with approximately 70 professors attending the morning session, and approximately 40 professors attending the afternoon session. These professors were mostly new and junior faculty members from the colleges of science, art, health and business. Several senior faculty and college deans attended as well.

During the days before the workshop, members of the Brandeis team met with numerous colleagues in their respective fields. Sue Lanser explored areas of collaboration with the English Department, gave a workshop on curriculum transformation for the Insan Center for Gender and Women's Studies, and visited several classes. Robert Lange met with science faculty members to develop science education exchange proposals. Faculty members also met with Al-Quds students who had participated in the Brandeis-Al-Quds undergraduate Summer Institute in Istanbul, Turkey. The four members of the delegation also met with Khuloud Khayyat Dajani and other Al-Quds faculty and administrators to confirm plans for the workshop.

### **Workshop on Effective Teaching**

The workshop for faculty, held on October 4, 2007 at the Best Eastern Hotel in Ramallah, was very well attended. Although it was scheduled during Ramadan and on a day when faculty are normally free of university responsibilities, 70 veteran and beginning faculty took part.

The day-long workshop was divided into two sections: a morning session devoted to general teaching and course design strategies, and an afternoon session that included three break-out groups (sciences, professional education, and humanities/social sciences), as well as a final plenary gathering. A packet with sample Brandeis course syllabi, assessment examples, and resources for further exploration was given to all participants.

**Morning Session: Course Design, Student Participation and Assessment**

Marya Levenson began the morning session by asking the audience, “Who was a good teacher to you?” Responses included characteristics of the kind familiar to U.S. faculty: confidence-building, good personality, respect for time, organization, understanding of students’ needs, culturally sensitive, empathetic, honest, accessible, and actively engaged in the research (has a stake in the subject). Marya noted that when we think of good teaching, it is helpful to have these model teachers in mind.

The morning session continued with three interactive segments focused respectively on course design, effective lecturing and ways of fostering student participation, and models for assessing student learning. The discussion of course design, led by Sue Lanser and Marya Levenson, stressed the importance of fostering “enduring understanding” rather than surface skills and knowledge, and demonstrated the value of working backwards from central goals to construct a whole course. The leaders emphasized the different ways of getting the students through this path, the value of the syllabus as a road-map teaching tool, and the components of a strong syllabus. Particularly because Al-Quds faculty have heavy teaching loads and often enter their positions without prior training, participants were offered numerous examples of effective syllabi.

Bob Lange and Sue Lanser’s presentation on classroom pedagogy emphasized both the advantages and disadvantages of lecturing, discussed the elements of effective lectures, and explored ways in which classes in which lecturing predominates can encourage active learning and student participation through a variety of techniques. Other tools discussed at the session included role playing, group projects, and break-out group discussions. This segment of the workshop focused particularly on methods applicable to large classes and a culture in which lecturing is normative, since both of these circumstances characterize the teaching situation at Al-Quds.

The final segment of the morning session was devoted to the assessment of learning. Marya Levenson and Bob Lange discussed the value of assessing achievement through assignments that foster, rather than simply measure, student learning. In this way, assessments can serve as “teachable moments,” not just as report cards. The presentation also emphasized the importance of relating assessment to course objectives so that assessment is integral to course design. Different forms of assessment are especially interesting and challenging for Al-Quds faculty, because it is standard practice in undergraduate and graduate classes that 80% of the students’ grades are based on two mid-term exams and a final.

**Afternoon Session: Break-out Groups**

In the afternoon session, participants broke up into three groups:

- Sciences: led by Robert Lange (Brandeis), Musa Abu Teir (Al-Quds) and Ghassan Sarhan (Al-Quds)
- Professional Education: led by Marya Levenson (Brandeis), Elaine Wong (Brandeis), Rasmi Abu Hilo (Al-Quds), and Varsen Aghabekian (Al-Quds)

- Humanities and Social Sciences: led by Susan Lanser (Brandeis), Taisir Abdullah (Al-Quds) and Omar Abu Humos (Al-Quds)

These groups discussed challenges to effective teaching in these particular areas. In professional education, for instance, challenges at Al-Quds often focus on motivation and the professional environment; overworked faculty; policies that are sometimes unclear; and a lack of jobs for many graduates. Participants agreed that it would be helpful to strengthen peer-to-peer mentorship and a culture of professional support. Faculty in the humanities and social sciences were especially interested in changing modes of assessment to emphasize student writing and in finding effective classroom strategies despite large courses and heavy faculty loads. This group was also concerned about the need for university infrastructure that better supports both students and faculty.

### **Plenary Session: Recommendations**

Elaine Wong led the final session when the break-out groups reconvened to report back on their findings. Below are some of the issues and findings raised by each group:

1. Faculty must overcome challenges within the university, regarding student expectations about assignments and work load, facilities and equipment, economic obstacles, large lecture classes, library needs, heavy teaching loads, etc.
2. There is a great desire to improve teaching methods and syllabi. Faculty suggested establishing a committee for the support of teaching, offering regular teaching workshops, and creating opportunities for experienced faculty to mentor new teachers
3. Different ways of evaluating students and faculty might be introduced. Flexibility in evaluating students is especially needed. Feedback from post-graduate employers might also be utilized.
4. Change can begin with individual teachers and move up the ladder.
5. More courses might utilize the internet.

Said Zeedani thanked everyone and responded to a few of the recommendations. We all agreed that several important challenges were identified, and next steps were considered. The participants were very gracious in their thanks for the workshop.

### **Follow-up**

On Saturday, October 6, the Brandeis group had several follow-up meetings with Al-Quds representatives, including with the quality assurance committee and the partnership steering committee. Throughout the meetings, there was much interest in pursuing these ideas:

- *Create a mentoring program for new faculty members.* (30% of the AQU faculty do not have a PhD.) Because someone needs to design the meeting and workshops for the mentors/mentees, we recommend that funds be allocated to either release from a course or pay a stipend to a faculty member to create and implement a mentoring program. This person might be located in the office of the VP for Academic Affairs.

- *Create a Committee for the Support of Teaching (CST)*. Again, we recommend that grant funds be used to release from a course or pay a stipend to a faculty member to create a CST and initiate more workshops by Al-Quds and other faculty. Consider having workshops (similar to this one) at the beginning of the year for each college.
- *Focus on exchanges with English faculty and graduate students* to strengthen the English language and literature program at Al-Quds
- *Strengthen the science programs*. One possible approach would be to create a joint PhD program between Al-Quds and Brandeis. (Possible models for this idea are appended to this report).
- Additional recommendations to improve the *structure of academic planning, course loads and orientation* were drawn up by the Al-Quds Workshop Committee (Varsen Aghabekian, Ghassan Sirhan, Saker Darwish), and their report is appended.

The Brandeis group was very impressed with the seriousness and the commitment of faculty members and the Al-Quds administration to implement some of the recommendations arising from the workshop. We were also very appreciative of the tremendous hospitality that welcomed us throughout the visit.