THE ORIGIN STORY:
AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE FOUNDING OF NYU ABU DHABI
2005-2010

قصة المنشأ:
التاريخ الشفوي لتأسيس جامعة نيويورك أبوظبي
من 2005 إلى 2010

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FOREWORD: THE ORIGINS OF THE NYU ABU DHABI ORAL HISTORY DIANE C. YU

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A BOLD IDEA فكرة جريئة

A PARTNERSHIP OF EQUALS شراكة متساوية

PIONEERING STUDENTS طلابنا المتميزون

TRAILBLAZING FACULTY كادر تعليمي ريادي

FROM DOWNTOWN TO SAADIYAT الانقلاب من المدينة إلى السعديات

THE STUDENTS SPEAK: FIRST GRADUATING CLASS من منظور الطلاب: الدفعة الأولى

COLLABORATING ON THE GROUND التعاون على أرض الواقع

LIVING UP TO EXPECTATIONS الارتداء إلى مستوى التوقعات

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The founding of New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) is a great story, and one not fully known of the NYUAD Oral History Project. It is a tale of two leaders, the late John Sexton, then President of New York University, and His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces – the two leaders real-ized that the unprecedented alliance between the United Arab Emirates and the New York University could create a world-class institution.

When I was John’s chief of staff from 2012 to 2015; Zayed Scholars Director of the NYUAD Institute, and Deputy to the Executive Director for the Origins Project, I had the privilege of working with some of the most exceptional leaders and visionaries of our time. They were the founders of a new university that would go on to become one of the world’s top research institutions.

This book is a collection of interviews with those who were there at the inception of the university, from the early days of planning to the establishment of the campus. I wish to thank a number of people who made this endeavor possible, including John Sexton, Khaldoon Al Mubarak, and especially His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, for their support and guidance.

Perhaps future historians will do so. But the main opportunity to gather the recollections of many of the others who had been there at the inception. I also wish to thank a number of people who made this project possible. In particular, my deep appreciation goes out to John Sexton, Khaldoon Al Mubarak, Rima Al Mokarrab, Al Bloom, Mariët Westermann, Angela Meaglia and Wolfi Bieringer, among others who were the visionaries and leaders – as well as the educators, consultants, managers, and architects of what has ultimately emerged as NYUAD. I acknowledge that it is not possible to do justice to all people and events related to NYUAD’s beginnings. Perhaps future historians will do so. But the main purpose of this oral history is to convey the essence and spirit of the NYUAD origin story.

In writing this book, I have leaned on the extraordinary act of faith and a subject of much gratitude for their eagerness to undertake this project. Many of my colleagues and friends have contributed their time and expertise to ensure that this book would be a fitting tribute to the founding of NYUAD.

I hope that you will find this book as intriguing as I did, and that it will give you a glimpse into the remarkable story of NYUAD’s founding.
Introduction

Mariët Westermann

In a Short 10 Years,

NYU Abu Dhabi has become a unique and distinctive institution of higher education, grounded in three overlapping and connected spheres. It is a university in and of Abu Dhabi, in and of New York University – a global institution whose 15 sites stretch across six continents – and in and of the world. Jointly conceived by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, and John Sexton, then the president of New York University, NYUAD is a resolutely international institution. Its mission is to develop a great Emirati talent, as well as students magnified to Abu Dhabi from around the world, to attract outstanding and creative scientists and scholars who conduct innovative research and make major contributions to knowledge.

Our approximately 300 faculty are an extraordinarily vibrant community of scholars, scientists, artists, inventors, writers, and entrepreneurs. They are at the top of their fields, having published more than 4,000 peer-reviewed articles and books, filed more than 120 patents, and created more than 250 artistic productions. They also love to tackle hard problems they can solve with their colleagues in other disciplines. Those extraordinarily productive researchers have won major awards from the social sciences to the arts, built innovative labs in genomics, environmental sustainability, cybersecurity, and public health, and even created a groundbreaking Library of Arabic Literature. And they continue not only to build their research portfolios in state-of-the-art facilities buoyed by resources at critical moments, Clark thought there was something that made these three colleges especially mission-driven and distinctive. Ultimately, he concluded, central to the making of the distinctive college is “the phenomenon of the organizational saga.” While we may be used to thinking of “saga” as a general term for a great story, Clark had a more specific idea in mind.

A university with a strong organizational saga typically has a unique founding vision, pursued with great alacrity and drive by energetic leaders, and carried through in innovative curricula, research programs, and forms of campus life that are embraced and advanced further by pioneering faculty and students who are deeply motivated by the purpose of the organization. As the organization evolves, it can draw on these founding elements and renew itself by recalling the original vision, remembering the words and deeds of its founders, and testing new programs and campus life innovations against the touchstone of the original idea. Great faculty and student recruitment efforts, bold programs and initial failures, and wondrous tales of challenge, courage, calling, and unlikely success enter the institutional saga over time. As the origin story builds, it becomes both a valuable archive of institutional aspiration and a bottomless font of renewal, growth, and continuous creation.

Most universities today were created between the 18th century and the middle of the 20th. Few would have had the luxury or even the motion to create an oral history of their beginnings while their founders and first faculty and students would have been able to bear witness. The flourishing of oral history since the 1960s was predicated on the popularization of tape recorders and the evolution of digital video and database technology. NYU Abu Dhabi is fortunate to have been envisioned in 2006–07, when those methods of creating a live institutional archive were well established. Thanks to the prodigious, thoughtful, and creative efforts of Diane Yu and the wonderful contributions of our Abu Dhabi government partners and many NYU and NYUAD colleagues, NYUAD now has a first record of its origin story. I am profoundly grateful to all who shared their memories and insights. We hope that over time this composition in many voices will be complemented with the stories of faculty, students, and staff who have brought our campus to further life and embedded NYUAD in our local and global communities.

May this story be the beginning of one of the great institutional sagas in the history of higher education, and a source of unending renewal and inspiration for decades to come.

The book before you is an oral history of the early days of this remarkable institution, and particularly of the vision and hard work of those who founded it and were among the pioneers who turned a magnificent, alluring idea into a viable and vital academic institution, a place, and a community of learning and inquiry. It is a story of origins, with particular focus on the founding ideas and actions that led to the opening of our Downtown Campus in just three years, and the move to our permanent home on Saadiyat Island in 2014, at the time of our first Commencement.

The prodigious literature on the history of higher education does not have many in-depth accounts of the origins of innovative institutions. One of the finest is The Distinctive College (1970), in which the sociologist Burton Clark traced the development of these outstanding liberal arts colleges founded between 1853 and 1940. Clark wanted to ascertain what made these three institutions—Antioch in Ohio, Swarthmore in Pennsylvania, and Reed in Oregon—so distinctively excellent. Although many factors went into their success, including charismatic leadership, a strong originating vision, a passionate faculty and staff, and an ability to raise resources at critical moments, Clark thought there was something that made these three colleges especially mission-driven and distinctive. Ultimately, he concluded, central to the making of the distinctive college is “the phenomenon of the organizational saga.” While we may be used to thinking of “saga” as a general term for a great story, Clark had a more specific idea in mind.

Clark’s case studies, from 1991 to 2009.

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ي обрат إلى محوره مبكرًا للتس开拓 Quantitative-Natural History of C.1995-2010 القريبية الأمثلة للدكتورات في القانون وغيرها من مجالات تزويهم جزءًا من مساهمات أفراد مجتمع الجامعة الذين أضافوا إلى توثيق الروايات إلا في الستينيات من القرن الماضي بعد توفر أجهزة التسجيل الصوتية. 

تتبلور حول هذه الفكرة المحورية فقرات إضافية تزيده وتجدد روحها، ولكي تصبح جزءاً من تراثها ومصدر للعديد من مساهمات أفراد مجتمع الجامعة الذين أضفوا إلى توثيق الروايات إلا في الستينيات من القرن الماضي بعد توفر أجهزة التسجيل الصوتية. 

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a BOLD IDEA
 فكرة جريئة
JOHN SEXTON: There was an evolution to the moment NYU Abu Dhabi was conceived.

1.0, the first phase, was a view of New York City. In 2001, as I was moving to become president of NYU, I was looking to find a distinct quality for the University that could justify people’s commitment.

I was then involved with Dan Doctoroff, who was not yet deputy mayor under Mike Bloomberg, and Jay Kriegel, who had been deputy mayor under John Lindsay, in an effort to bring the 2008 Olympics to New York.

They had conceptualized New York City as the first city in the world that had a neighborhood for every country in the world, inhabited by people born in that country.

So the motto for the Olympic bid became, “Come to New York, the world’s second home.”

That prompted me to think of New York as a unique community of communities – because people in the neighborhoods thought of themselves as part of this overarching whole, which was New York City. They identified as New Yorkers, even as they carried their heritage with them.

That made New York, to use my word, the first ecumenical city – in the sense of being comprised and embracing of every category of people.

NYU could then be viewed as the first ecumenical university. It was interconnected with this city precisely because it didn’t have a traditional campus. All of a sudden, what had been viewed by some as a liability became an asset.

2.0 came from a different vision of NYU’s four leg-acy study-away sites – Madrid and Paris for language students, La Pietra in Florence, and London.

With the 1.0 view of the University as ecumenical, the 2.0 phase became our making the sites part of the curriculum and encouraging our students in New York to spend time in those places.

There was then a natural expansion. Sites in Prague and Berlin followed quickly, but the Eurocentrism was evident. To ameliorate it, we created sites in Accra in Ghana, Shanghai in China, and Buenos Aires in Argentina.

We were beginning to think about our presence in a more expansive way.
“we wanted MORE”

JOHN SEXTON: Some time around 2005, the obvious absence of NYU’s presence in the Arab world occurred to us, and we began to study the feasibility of a study-away site.

In this tiptoeing toward what became the global network university, we were first movers. We were getting visits from people all the time, week after week. They would come to New York from all parts of the world, wanting us to open a site there. A study-away site, a school: The proposals were across the gantum. It was largely private entrepreneurial people, who may have viewed that as an opportunity – which, of course, was not attractive to us. But there were some governments as well.

Very quickly, six possible sites in the Arab and Muslim world materialized: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi – and Egypt, especially in Cairo. Those were the places we began to investigate.

As I talked to a wide range of people – from heads of state in the West and in the region to people who did business in the Gulf – there was a consensus that Abu Dhabi was a special place.

KHALDOON AL MUBARAK: Sheikh Mohammed had been speaking to me about the priority of higher education and having an elite US university based in Abu Dhabi. The aim was to provide a first-rate university education in Abu Dhabi for future generations who wanted to study in the UAE rather than abroad.

The idea was to create a liberal arts university for people who, we were betting, would have had a great experience in Abu Dhabi. We had a conversation about the potential of creating a liberal arts university in Abu Dhabi.

WALEED AL MOKARRAB AL MUHAIRI: One of the things that was so compelling about this partnership is that both NYU and Abu Dhabi were asking the same questions: What does the future of higher ed look like? How do you educate students in a world that is more interconnected? How do you prepare them for rapid technological change, more globalization?

JOHN SEXTON: That’s number one.

WALEED AL MOKARRAB AL MUHAIRI: And number two is: We were ready for top-tier rigorous education. That’s why we brought NYU on board.

There was a recognition that if you fast-forward 15, 20 years, and we have been successful in building this wonderful university, with great researchers, with the best of the best coming in from everywhere in the world, in addition to educating 20, 30 percent of the population over time, you are really going to have an impact.

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The idea was a simple but powerful one. He knew I would understand it quickly because I went to a liberal arts college in the United States. He said: ‘We want to be forward-looking.

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YW Nyarko: It began in 2005, with an email from Dave Finney, then dean of NYU School of Continuing Professional Studies (now SPS), saying there were some people in town who were interested in setting up global online courses for universities.

Coming from the Faculty of Arts and Science, I admit I wasn’t passionate about online study. But I was vice provost for globalization and multicultural affairs, responsible for NYU’s international campuses and programs, which were increasingly a focus of the University.

People come, and you listen.

This delegation was thinking about the United Arab Emirates and Abu Dhabi.

I had come to the provost’s office in 2002, the first year of John Sexton’s presidency. John said very clearly that he wanted to have global campuses. They would be his signature.

Dave McLaughlin, the provost, also wanted us to have as many campuses abroad as possible.

We were having lots of conversations with faculty about it. It was in the air.

Dick Foley: Everybody who was involved in the upper administration was thinking about these issues. But Yaw had the responsibility of taking the lead and looking for potential partners.

The delegation continued to come in 2005. Over several conversations that year, we started to dream: Wouldn’t it be wonderful if NYU could open a full-fledged campus in Abu Dhabi?

NYU is made up of a large number of constituents. Everybody has a different view about why global campuses are good. Undergraduate students want to see other worlds. Professors want to do research abroad. Graduate students working on Italian history may want to be at the La Pietra campus in Florence. Some faculty members who work on Africa may live for a year on the Ghana campus.

Those are the two main constituencies – students and professors.

But a lot of people, many of them very quiet, are really passionate about our international programs.

Especially in the global office, you never know what’s going to become something. I said to myself, “Maybe this will work, maybe it won’t. But if it works, it’ll be a great thing, so pursue it.”

“IT WAS IN THE AIR”
“THINK THERE’S SOMETHING HERE”

“…”

DIANE YU: I first heard about this idea in late 2005, when NYU started thinking about having some kind of a study-away or a study center in the Middle East or Gulf region. In 2000, Abu Dhabi began to emerge as a prime candidate.

During that year, I was hearing about more and more meetings with Abu Dhabi officials. When it looked as if it was actually going to happen, we learned that a study-away site was not ambitious enough. Abu Dhabi was interested in going bigger and more bold – to create an actual university.

It was a dramatic change from what we had thought, a real boundary breaker.

DAVE McLAUGHLIN: We were looking for ways to internationalize NYU. The creation of a full university in the Middle East seemed to us a very strong step in that direction, exactly the sort of thing NYU and other universities were beginning to do in the world.

YAU NYARKO: At the first meeting, I knew zero about the UAE. I had never been there. I knew Egypt, Tunisia, but not the Middle East.

In those days, I talked to the provost every day. So Dave knew what was going on and was very encouraging.

Of course, I had to do due diligence and cross-check with fellow faculty members in the Middle Eastern studies department that it was actually a good idea.

DAVE McLAUGHLIN: We were pretty positive almost from the start.

So I went to the UAE several times, and to Abu Dhabi – and saw that the people running things on the UAE side are very, very sophisticated. They understood the American higher education system. They were in it not as a business deal but to change their society. They knew the risks in bringing a Western institution to Abu Dhabi, but they bought into it.

That’s what made me feel comfortable.

I spoke to Dave, and he said, “Go talk to John Sexton.”

I actually don’t remember this, but John said I knocked on his door and asked, “Hey, John, have you ever heard of a place called Abu Dhabi?”

He hadn’t.

We sat down and had a conversation. I explained everything that was going on and that I had confidence that the people I was working with on the other side were serious people. And that it would be good for the University.

John was cautious. He wanted me to go back to double-check things.

“GO TALK TO JOHN SEXTON”

“I think there’s something here.”

“…”

DIANE YU: It started with John Brademas, when he was president of NYU, and continued through Jay Oliva. John Sexton brought it to fruition.

MIKE ALFANO: It was just a concept at that time. It wasn’t something we sought out. Abu Dhabi came to us.

We had international scope in the law school before John, but he developed it at the law school and the University. He had put the University on a very good trajectory when the opportunity in Abu Dhabi came to us.

It wasn’t something we sought out. Abu Dhabi had the concept of creating a full campus for an American-style university there. They proposed it.

DAVE McLAUGHLIN: A few countries had come to us previously, but they always wanted professional schools. They wanted to be profit-making in the end. None of them wanted the American-style liberal arts the way Abu Dhabi did.

One strategy is to correct and fill in weaknesses. You have to do that.

Another is to build on your strengths. Take what are already great strengths and try to make them overwhelming.

The concept of international scope was not new. It started with John Brademas, when he was president of NYU, and continued through Jay Oliva. John Sexton brought it to fruition.

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MIKE ALFANO: A few countries had come to us previously, but they always wanted professional schools. They wanted to be profit-making in the end. None of them wanted the American-style liberal arts the way Abu Dhabi did.

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Another is to build on your strengths. Take what are already great strengths and try to make them overwhelming.

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DAVE McLAUGHLIN: When we began thinking about Abu Dhabi, NYU had gone through a period of extraordinary growth. Extraordinary in size but, even more important, in the quality of faculty and students. Obviously, we were interested in building on that and accelerating it.

We were also in a time when every corporation, person, and university was thinking increasingly in global terms. But most universities were doing so in a relatively piecemeal fashion.

“One strategy is to correct and fill in weaknesses. You have to do that.

Another is to build on your strengths. Take what are already great strengths and try to make them overwhelming.”

DYLAN N. YU:

At the first meeting, I knew zero about the UAE. I had never been there. I knew Egypt, Tunisia, but not the Middle East.

DAVE McLAUGHLIN: We were pretty positive almost from the start.

So I went to the UAE several times, and to Abu Dhabi – and saw that the people running things on the UAE side are very, very sophisticated. They understood the American higher education system. They were in it not as a business deal but to change their society. They knew the risks in bringing a Western institution to Abu Dhabi, but they bought into it.

That’s what made me feel comfortable.

I spoke to Dave, and he said, “Go talk to John Sexton.”

I actually don’t remember this, but John said I knocked on his door and asked, “Hey, John, have you ever heard of a place called Abu Dhabi?”

He hadn’t.

We sat down and had a conversation. I explained everything that was going on and that I had confidence that the people I was working with on the other side were serious people. And that it would be good for the University.

John was cautious. He wanted me to go back to double-check things.

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DIANE YU: I was astonished by how breathtakingly original the idea was, not just in the region but in the world. It was definitely something that had not been undertaken by any other university. I was very excited about NYU being the first to pioneer the concept, the arrangement, and the partnership.

The fact that we would create a unique university, when it’s pretty hard to find something unique anymore: It was very, very captivating.

JOHN SEXTON: Through connections of President Clinton, a man came into my life by the name of Marty Edelman, who is one of the people closest to me today.

MARTY EDELMAN: On a Saturday morning, Cheryl Mills, whom I’ve known for many years, called to say that there was a group of people interested in trying to create an educational institution somewhere in the Middle East, perhaps in the UAE. Since Cheryl knew I spent a lot of time in the UAE and was an advisor to the royal family and some of the institutions there, she asked what my views were.

I told her I would get back to her in 10 minutes and called a senior colleague in Abu Dhabi. We spoke about the possibility of locating an American-style university in the UAE – and there was interest.

In fact, I’d had a very preliminary conversation with Princeton, where I was an alumnus, about possibly doing something like this. And they weren’t interested at the time.

When I called Cheryl back, she said, “You have to meet John Sexton.”

JOHN SEXTON: Very early, there were counterparts in Abu Dhabi – most notably Khaldoon Al Mubarak, Waleed Al Mokarrab, and Rima Al Mokarrab – who stood as allies and full partners in the development of this idea.

DAVE McLAUGHLIN: Their desire was to convert Abu Dhabi into the center of the Middle East, in transportation, culture, and leadership. And they really believed that to accomplish it, they needed a very strong liberal arts university. The aspiration was to have the leading university in the region.

WALEED AL MOKARRAB AL MUHAIRI: If you think about what a university is, it’s this: A university, other than making you study and hopefully learn something, is a way to have a dialogue between different segments of society. It’s a great mixer in terms of folks who would not ordinarily have mixed – whether it’s the expats who have come in just for the purpose of studying at NYUAD or the different segments of Emiratis who are coming in – so that social cohesion element was also recognized and is important, because dialogue is critically important.

And I think there was a recognition from the leadership, both at the NYU level and the Abu Dhabi level, that we wanted to promote that type of dialogue.

DIANE YU: The more we found out how sincere our government partners were in Abu Dhabi, the more convinced we were that this was the right commitment to make, the right partner, country, and leadership.

We assembled a very strong leadership team in New York so that we could know what was crucial to us, try to understand what was crucial to them, and be able to move forward.

It was John Sexton, Dave McLaughlin, the provost; Bob Biers, executive vice president for health; Jack Lew, executive vice president in 2005, and later Mike Alfano; and Dick Foley, who was then dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science. Occasionally, Harvey Stedman, a provost emeritus, would join us. I was there as chief of staff to John.

Because the model was unprecedented, we had to be our own advisors. We did tap into existing expertise – politically, culturally, religiously – but we didn’t have any people we could talk to, any counterparts who’d had a similar experience building a true academic institution.

Our Abu Dhabi government partners had pushed us to think beyond the study-away notion, to build a new university, something we had not contemplated.

What would it entail? What would we need to have in place in terms of knowledge and know-how, in order to build a university from the very beginning? Not to deal with a place where you’d have to change and transform and revamp and recognize it to become the liberal arts college and eventually the research university of the future, but to have the time and effort and new platform to do it as you would want to.

It was an astounding opportunity.

JOHN SEXTON: All of it was talked out with the deans and the senior leadership team. It was fully discussed every step of the way.
We had been grappling for some time with how to make this explosion of our global programs, primarily across Europe, work in a way that gave students the ability to get a degree off-campus. But it was impossible to figure out how to put all the puzzle pieces together.

With the opportunity of Abu Dhabi, we saw a strategy – to develop what they were seeking as a country and leadership position and what we were seeking in establishing an entire curriculum and degree-granting site.

BOB BERNE: John thought we could do a degree-granting campus. Degree-granting is the key term, because of the ventures taking place in the Middle East, in US higher education, and, to some degree, British higher education, very few were degree-granting. An exception was Cornell and its medical school in Qatar.

JEANNE SMITH: The excitement of working for and with John Sexton was his tremendous entrepreneurial spirit. There were always at least a dozen, sometimes more, ideas in formation.

RIMA AL MOKARRAB: Of course, there are differences between NYU and Abu Dhabi, but that is the point. We're different – but we're the same in the way we deal with difference.

JOHN SEXTON: Then it's about taking the next step, where you don't insist only that the wonderful people who enlighten your world by displaying their differences, manifesting their humanity and their experiences, come to you and your territory – but you welcome going to them and seeing them in their context.

And you make adjustments for them that are not essential to the core of what you are but are important to them, rather than asking them only to make adjustments for you.

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JEANNEMARIE (JEANNE) SMITH جينماري (جين) سميث Senior Vice President for Fiscal Affairs at NYU from 2002-2010; Associate Dean and Chief Financial Officer of the Law School from 1994-2002
“THIS MAY HAVE SOME LEGS”

JOHN SEXTON: There was also conversation with the trustees, who were experiencing an interconnected world in ways that we as academics might not have seen.

TONY WELTERS: It was in a conversation with John Sexton that I first heard about it. John was excited. He had this great idea. He thought he had found a great partner, great opportunity, and he wanted to move out on it.

I had a little bit of information about the UAE, but nothing to understand the significance. Not at all.

I believe in letting things percolate, so I put John’s idea about Abu Dhabi in that category to see what would happen.

When I started to hear about it from other trustees, I said, “This may have some legs.”

MARITY LIPTON: We discussed it. We thought it would fulfill a concept we had been pursuing - to give our students exposure to other countries. For many years, we had been bringing distinguished academics from around the world to spend time at New York University.

It fit into a pattern.

HARVEY STEDMAN: NYU has a long history of international involvement. We had study-away sites for Washington Square, undergraduates in particular. Over the years, we’d also welcomed thousands of students from abroad to study in New York City.

The idea was exciting and far-reaching, but none-connected world in ways that we as academics might not have seen.

JOHN SEXTON: One of the things that exacerbated some of the tensions was that we could not explain completely what we were doing. We had a direction, an intuition. But we didn’t know.

“READY TO TRY SOMETHING NEW”

MARTY EDELMAN: You know when you’re watching TV, and they start telling you that a hurricane is coming, and you see the weather map? My meeting John for the first time was like going into the red zone.

John is today, as he probably was for his whole life – and certainly during the time I’ve known him – an extraordinary leader and thinker. He took my original vision for Princeton and put it, as usual, on steroids. His notion was grander and more thoughtful, more creative, more dynamic, which was to create a full-scale American-style university in Abu Dhabi and have it provide opportunities not only for Emiratis, but for young people all over the world.

As the group of these NYU graduates became members of society, they would understand what Abu Dhabi is, what it could be – and well be.

BOB BERNE: The role I brought was as someone thinking to do in Abu Dhabi.

That is: What are the things that if they said, “This may have some legs.”

I could step back with John and say, “What real-ly are the risks in doing this? How could we mitigate them? And what are the walk-aways that we couldn’t negotiate?”

This is what the things that if they said, “This is as far as we could go on an issue,” and we needed to go farther, we would say, “Thanks very much, but it’s not going to work.”

I’d been a dean of a school, so I knew what it took to run a school and to guarantee the resources and freedoms. But I also had a sense of how multiple disciplines are integrated and work together to form the whole university.

So an introduction was made to Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed.

JOHN SEXTON: So an introduction was made to Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed.
A number of conversations, we ended up bringing a small group over to have John meet Sheikh Mohamed – which started the project. This would be around 2006.

At a critical juncture, John and His Highness needed to meet. I arranged for John to be a guest of His Highness’s majlis. They both had to look each other in the eye.

Word came that we could have 15 minutes with Sheikh Mohamed at the majlis that was going to occur on the coming Sunday. Sunday is the first day of the week in Abu Dhabi. And the majlis is when the Sheikh opens up his court to any citizen who wishes to come, along with some appointments.

It’s a tradition that Sheikh Mohamed has kept, which leaders of tribal cultures keep. Members of the society come and talk to each other, but also apply to the Crown Prince for resources of various kinds – support for a family member, discussion of a divorce, or a personal issue. People come from all over.

Many members of the royal family have a regular majlis. It is a listening-consensus society. A guest will come and sit publicly with the convening sheikh. There aren’t microphones, so nobody else can hear the conversation except the people immediately proximate.

The group that went over was Bob Berne, a trusted friend and advisor. Cheryl Mills, who was just becoming general counsel. NYU trustee Jay Furman. And Lee Huebner, an old friend with a deep and varied background in politics, journalism, and international development.

It was an intense few hours. But Lee participated in other aspects of the visit.

Enough people have told and retold the story that you’d think there were actually 150 people who came to the majlis. But we were really a small group.

We landed around 2pm and drove to the Emirates Palace Hotel, where they had set up rooms for us. Our appointment was supposed to be for 6:30pm, so we were going to leave the hotel at 5:45pm. But then we learned that the appointment had to be moved up.

The cars they’d sent for us were waiting. We all rushed out and jumped in.

When we got to the palace for the majlis, we realized we had left Lee Huebner behind.

It was an intense few hours. But Lee participated in other aspects of the visit.

Enough people have told and retold the story that you’d think there were actually 150 people who came to the majlis. But we were really a small group.

We pulled up in front of the palace. On the way, I’m being briefed: “Please, when you meet His Highness, no hugs.”

We got out of the cars. There were people there to greet us, and then we were whisked through the various palaces. It was the first experience of this kind for me.
MARTY EDELMAN: At a muffa, people are around the sides of the room, chatting, with the Crown Prince sitting in the middle. Then someone will come up to sit and talk to him, either in front of him or next to him. It's not done in loud voices. It's an intimate setting, despite the number of people.

JOHN SEXTON: Suddenly, we're in a large rectangular room – close to the length and width of a football field. Around the walls are seated men in traditional dress, a sea of white on the perimeter. To the right, a person who turned out to be His Highness stood up, with one or two others, and walked toward me.

He gestured me in the middle of the room by extending his hand. Then he brought me over, and people cleared space.

He and I sat down on a couch. I remember that Jay was to my right and Cheryl to my left. The others in our party spread out, but the only two who could really hear the conversation were Jay and Cheryl.

BOB BERNE: We were all in a row facing the center of the room, with John and the Crown Prince leaning toward each other and speaking.

We weren't exactly sure what part we were supposed to play, because we weren't talking to the Crown Prince. I was close enough to the conversation to hear snippets, but not really close enough to follow it. I also didn't know whether I was supposed to be listening – pretending I wasn't listening.

There wasn't anyone else there to talk to. So we talked to ourselves a little bit. But the room was pretty quiet when John and the Crown Prince were speaking.

There were others from Abu Dhabi around, including Khaldoon Al Mubarak, people involved on the education side, and several senior officials. But they were playing a role similar to ours, in the sense that they weren't directly involved in the conversation.

I told him, "You can't imagine what's necessary to create a great university. Because we wouldn't want to lose the research nature of NYU. That means creating an undergraduate school, a liberal arts school in the context of a research university. On the other hand, we could create very easily, without your knowing any better, admit A-students, send A-faculty. Frankly, what we'd want is to admit students we admit to NYU! New York but sometimes lose to other universities."

"It has never been done before." The Crown Prince raised with me some of my writing about this century's having a network of idea capitals that connected the talented people of the world. In addition to the basic institutions of a city – finance, insurance, real estate, and cultural institutions – these idea capitals would be characterized by one or more great educational institutions.

I was afraid. Because it was an animated conversation. We were really enthusiastic and talking candidly with each other.

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JOHN SEXTON: The conversation went on and on. I was expecting 15 minutes, but it ended up being more than an hour.

The Crown Prince raised with me some of my writing about this century's having a network of idea capitals that connected the talented people of the world. In addition to the basic institutions of a city – finance, insurance, real estate, and cultural institutions – these idea capitals would be characterized by one or more great educational institutions.

He asked if I could conceive of creating a university in the Gulf that would be as good as the best universities in the world, far more than a study-away site.

"There's that moment when the pit might pit itself." If history looks at this conversation, there was that moment when the pit might have destroyed the entire opportunity.

JOHN SEXTON: "These dates are the first product of my mother's trees. We were really enthusiastic and talking candidly with each other.

I said to myself, "Well, this will be fun to watch." John talked a little bit with the date in his mouth. You have to picture the room: Everyone's sitting around the edge, all eyes on the Crown Prince.

"No one had ever imagined doing anything like this," I think we both realized we had to make that decision.

"The Date Episode"... Hungarian

JOHN SEXTON: The Crown Prince said, "Those dates are the first product of my mother's trees. We want you to have the honor of having some." I took one. And he took one. He put it in his mouth. The Crown Prince de-pit the date in a second and proceeded to talk. And I put it in my mouth. There was a pit in it. I hadn't seen him do anything with the pit – and there was no obvious place to put the pit.

So I lodged it up in my mouth for a while. But then I was afraid: because it was an unrehearsed conversation. We were really enthusiastic and talking candidly with each other.

I didn't tell him this for a year: I swallowed the pit.

"We were really enthusiastic"... Hungarian
“WHERE’S MY HUG?”

BOB BERNE: The meeting went extremely well.

Several times, John apologized for taking up so much of his time. The Crown Prince would say, “Don’t worry, don’t worry.”

When John did it for the seventh time, he said, “Okay, we’ll walk out to the car.”

MARTY EDELMAN: We walked out, and His Highness said, “So say goodbye.”

BOB BERNE: Just as we were briefed about no hugging, he was probably briefed that John was a hugger. Meanwhile, John is doing what people told him to do – not hugging the Prince.

And the Crown Prince says, “Where’s my hug?”

They hugged.

BOB BERNE: There are very few ventures in life when you can see the exact point it all began. It was dramatic.

You could tell from the conversation that they were talking as though they’d known each other for a long time. They talked about what was important to them. They talked about their kids. And that evolved into a discussion about education.

It laid the foundation for the longer-term relationship they still have and for everything to come.

“GET THIS DONE”

KHALDOON AL MUBARAK: From day one, John’s view was to go all the way.

He was very clear and open in his conversations about what Abu Dhabi would need to do in order for this project to happen together.

Early on, John introduced to His Highness the leadership, government support, and commitment that would be required from us. There was clarity quickly.

His Highness appreciated John’s approach, his personality, and his clear commitment to education. To use an expression of John’s, it was love at first sight. They clicked.

During that majlis, they had thoughtful, deep conversations. John knew His Highness had a vision and genuine leadership.

His Highness saw in John someone he could trust.

After that meeting, Sheikh Mohamed said to me: “Get this done.”

It all became real after the first majlis meeting.

BOB BERNE: There are very few ventures in life when you can see the exact point it all began. It was dramatic.

They wanted to do an experiment, something they couldn’t do themselves. This was an opportunity to partner with an organization that perhaps they couldn’t do by themselves. This was an opportunity to partner with an organization that perhaps they could work with.

I felt they were doing it for the right reasons.

“THEY WANTED TO EXPERIMENT”

MARTY EDELMAN: What was exchanged in that conversation was trust.

That’s all it took. That’s all it takes. They believed in each other.

BOB BERNE: In my judgment, John’s vision and relationship with the Crown Prince played a crucial role.

Both were willing to take risks. Both wanted it to be high quality. And neither wanted to do it if it wasn’t going to be high quality.

MARTY EDELMAN: There are certainly personalities who are able to change the direction of cultures. John Sexton is one in the educational environment. And Mohamed bin Zayed is one in the region.

BOB BERNE: The leadership who reported to the Crown Prince had a sense that the relationship was important to him, which it was. That led to our working relationship with the leadership there, which was critically important in this incredible university experiment.

There was an openness to this kind of venture. You felt it early on, from the various officials we met – not just the Crown Prince but others – that they wanted to be different. They cared about education. They thought the world could learn about their culture and benefit, and they could learn about other cultures and benefit.

They wanted to do an experiment, something they couldn’t do by themselves. This was an opportunity to partner with an organization that perhaps they could work with.

I felt they were doing it for the right reasons.
“WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?”

“ما خطوتنا التالية؟”

When we came back, we said, “Now we’ve got to develop a proposal and really think about what this means.”

The trip began the conversation about: Where do we go from here? What do we have to develop? There was a lot of back and forth about the idea between New York and Abu Dhabi – enough so that we believed we could do it. We were now in direct contact with the leaders in Abu Dhabi, and they were interested.

You knew there were many, many ways it could unravel, go off the tracks.

At the same time, you have a leader in Abu Dhabi and someone as bold and innovative as John who agree to try to do something together. You rarely get to witness that.

MARTY EDelman:

Sheikh Mohamed was the final decision maker. There were skeptics in Abu Dhabi. It was a dramatic change in the way the educational system functioned, to have this kind of institution there.

“STRONG LEADERSHIP ON BOTH SIDES”

HH SHEIKHA MARIAM BINT MOHAMED BIN ZAYED AL NAHYAN:

I had no reservations about the project. Not at all. Not for a second. I don’t know if it was my being naïve, or if I just had a lot of trust in the two people who were leading this partnership – by which I mean my father and John Sexton.

I remember my father introducing me to John for the first time. I immediately knew, within a few minutes of meeting him, that this was a perfect partnership. They are actually similar in a lot of ways, and you could already see the friendship and the warmth between them.

This project would not have worked without strong leadership on both sides. It’s one thing to collaborate or partner with talented people, but it’s another to partner with talented people who share your vision. A lot of people, especially at that time, might have painted the Middle East with one big brush stroke and been judgmental or cynical, but John was not like that.

My father is also a very optimistic man. The reality is that this kind of partnership just doesn’t happen all the time. It’s very rare to see two people come together with a shared vision, shared values, shared interests, and a clear direction for where they want to go.

I definitely think that the connection between them was a big part of it, but it was the right time as well. Our country had spent a long time basically trying to survive. For our founding fathers, it was, “Quick, quick, quick, let’s build schools, let’s build hospitals, let’s build houses, let’s build museums, and so many other things. Our leaders seemed determined to make sure we would take advantage of every single opportunity that was available to us. If we can do it, and it will be good for the country, then why not?

But during the period we are talking about, around the time that the NYUAD partnership was established, there was something in the air in Abu Dhabi – a lot of reflection and a growing desire to move from surviving to thriving.

There were so many announcements during those years. We’re going to develop Saadiyat Island, and we’re going to create museums, and we’re going to establish NYUAD, and the Sorbonne – and so many other things. Our leaders seemed determined to make sure we would take advantage of every single opportunity that was available to us. If we can do it, and it will be good for the country, then why not?

It was an uplifting time, and it was exciting. In that context, I had no reason to doubt that the partnership with NYU was going to be positive.

JOHN Sexton:

The single most important thing that contributed to the ultimate success of NYU Abu Dhabi was the fact that we had great partners.

We’ve been in very, very good partnerships in many dimensions over the 14 years I was coaching the team at NYU. But on a scale of 100, Sheikh Mohamed as a partner is 100. Khaldoon – to whom the Crown Prince turned to work out the details – and Rima, understood and embraced and encouraged his support.

We remain very, very good friends and frequently say to each other that each of us has exceeded the other’s expectation. And continues to do so.

That great partnership is key to the enterprise. Everything else flows from that.
PARTNERSHIP
of
EQUALS
شراكة متوازنة
BUILDING THE TEAM

MARTY LIPTON: As is true in any endeavor of this kind, it’s that nucleus group you start with, which then expands and attracts people. As soon as you attract one whose interest, reputation is well-regarded, others come in.

The people who were involved in the first three years were the ones who got it started and off the ground. That’s why we’re where we are today. John put it together. And Diane Yu was a major factor.

It was a stellar team.

DIANE YU: We brought in some experts in international education, people with experience and knowledge about the region and higher education ideas that might take hold there.

We knew we were treading on new ground – very fertile, but also uncertain.

JOHN SEXTON: Obviously, I had the tremendous team inside of NYU to work with. But there were a few external people who were particularly important in that testing period, university presidents who were my colleagues.

They were the people to whom I would say, “Is this crazy? Do you think I should go forward with it? What would you suggest?”

One was Tom Jackson.

TOM JACKSON: After I was intrigued by John’s idea, I came down to NYU and met with him and a group he had assembled at NYU to work on it.

I was hooked from that moment on.

JOHN SEXTON: Tom had been dean of University of Virginia School of Law when I was dean of NYU law school, and then had gone on to be president of the University of Rochester. During that year, he acted more or less as a consultant to the process.

His memo on academic freedom was particularly useful and important.

TOM JACKSON: The core negotiating group was already in place. It was Cheryl Mills and Jeanne Smith, Bob Berne and Marty Edelman.

Unanswered early questions were: Will the students come? Are there enough students who want our teaching standards to get them? I don’t think any of us had a clue about the answer to that.

Will the faculty come? Is anybody going to be interested in having a tenure-track position at this place in Abu Dhabi? If so, will they meet the standards of Washington-Square faculty in terms of how they will be perceived?

I don’t think we had an answer to that, either.

STARTING WITH FACULTY

SYLVAIN CAPPELL: I was very interested in the idea from the get-go. I was well aware of the tensions that had to be overcome in the region to make this project go forward. But in principle I was very positive.

I’m a mathematician. While most people think of mathematicians as an isolated bunch of nerds, mathematics is an extremely international and cross-cultural activity.

Moreover, mathematics has a history that goes back to the Middle East strongly. Beyond Greek mathematics, Babylonian mathematics are the ultimate sources of what we think of as the Western mathematical tradition.

Also, mathematicians are very cooperative with one another. We get along well. We collaborate internationally a great deal, which has only been augmented by the internet and other new modes of interaction.

That is to say, mathematics transcends culture. Which set us up in advance to be open-minded about this possibility.

As chair, I helped introduce this issue to the Faculty Senate and, through them, to the faculty at large. I had many conversations with President Sexton, Diane Yu, and other officers of the administration.

I helped set up some of the committees for the Faculty Senate that dealt with this issue. And also participated in University committees, including those with specific oversight for the global network university.

DICK FOLEY: Faculty members are trained to be skeptical. That’s what we do for a living. Somebody says X, and the first thing we do is think of two dozen reasons for not-X.

So there was one side of me that was filled with, “What about this? What about that?” But I know Yaw Nyarko well, and I know his values well. His academic values are not just strong but of the very, very highest level. I knew that he didn’t come to positive views lightly.
SYLVAIN CAPPELL: Many questions came up in the Faculty Senate and at faculty forums. At the beginning, there was a lot of ignorance, inevitably, about the region and its issues.

That's bound to lead to some initial difficulties. There were concerns about the stability of the region, about the roles of women and their academic rights – in particular, the academic participation of women and how it would be accommodated. There were questions about how homosexual rights would be respected for gay people among faculty or students. There were concerns about how Jews might be received, and Israelis within that.

There were also basic questions. Remember, NYU already had an international character, but nowhere near as much as it would. There were lots of questions, not all of which can be put to bed at any one time – and are still not put to bed entirely – about how you coordinate an international program.

There were the concerns that everybody has when you don't know a country – civil rights, human rights, freedom of speech. All the concerns the faculty had when they learned about Abu Dhabi, the deans had initially.

Academic freedom was a big one. ‘Are we going to be an ugly American over there?’ “How do we do this in a way that's culturally respectful and appropriate?”

Among the deans, those issues were raised, openly discussed, and explored – sometimes ad nauseam.

MARY BRABECK: I first heard about it in a university leadership team meeting, which occurred pretty regularly, usually once a week. I can remember John's exuberance and enthusiasm about the possibility.

It was very easy to get excited. And indeed, the rationale he gave – which I understand was something he and Lisa, his wife, had talked about – was the potential of having a partner in the Middle East at a time when the Middle East had so many challenges for the rest of the world and so much in resources, but had not really partnered with the West. So it was a bridge.

There were the concerns that everybody has when you don't know a country – civil rights, human rights, freedom of speech. All the concerns the faculty had when they learned about Abu Dhabi, the deans had initially.
But faculty trust is a dicey thing. You build it. And doing the hard work of recruiting faculty to come to the place, you suppress experimentation, local individuality, or manifestations of local culture. The Faculty Senate committee said, “Go forward if those questions can be answered well.”

Throughout that time, there were several meetings among Khaldoon and Waleed Al Mokarrab and me. Cheryl Mills was involved, as was Mariët Westermann.

MARIËT WESTERMANN: I had been very aware of what was happening at the University from John’s university leadership team and also from the Deans Council. Both were active bodies in creating a sense of common enterprise among us. John was good about bringing to the table ideas as they were developing. Sometime in the middle of 2006, we heard about this meeting between the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and John.

MARCY EDELMAN: On our side of the equation, help interpret a lot of what was meant in our conversations. Every few weeks, we would go to Abu Dhabi – Cheryl, Marty, and I – to meet with Waleed, Ali, and sometimes other folks to negotiate the points of what it would mean if we went forward.

As John and others developed a stronger relationship with the leadership of the country, it became clear that there was a strategy to advance in terms of what they were seeking as a country and a leadership position and what we were seeking: To have the capacity, in a number of different ways, to establish an entire degree-granting site.

WALEED AL MOKARRAB AL MUHAIRI: I’m convinced that but for John Sexton – his vision and his ability to articulate the benefits of having NYU in Abu Dhabi – we would have gotten something suboptimal. They would have walked away, or we would have walked away.

In many ways, John inspired our leadership to say: This is what we want. And then he brought Abu Dhabi along for the ride.

Because in the early days, not everybody moved at the same speed as John. Not everybody on the NYU side had fully bought into what he wanted to do, especially when we started talking about business it built that would come to bear, academic freedom, and visa issues.
JOHN SEXTON: It was December 2006, some months after the first meeting in Abu Dhabi. I decided I would crystallize the objectives of the project in a brief memo I wrote - six or seven pages - in which I laid out a couple of irreducible principles.

Our goal was to create something that, judged objectively, would represent the finest in higher education anywhere in the world; that both on its own - and this was an important part - and in conjunction with New York University, it would be judged to be the very best by whatever norm people used for excellence.

A collateral goal was to create in Abu Dhabi itself one of the premier idea capitals in the world, and a singular idea capital in the Gulf and the greater Middle East region.

The memo went on to talk about how, if we were going to achieve these goals, what we were creating could not be solitary. We could not be building a university that stood alone as excellence in the desert and shoulder to shoulder with the great universities of the world.

Rather, neither NYU New York nor NYU Abu Dhabi would be the fullness of itself without the other. It would be complete integration.

Another principle was that the integration would be performed by, supervised by, defined by, and implemented by NYU as a university.

The idea was to create, as far as possible, a certain degree of overlapping Venn diagrams between the interests of Abu Dhabi in particular areas and NYU’s interests – but that in the end, the definition fell to NYU to make. That was without compromise.

Then there were elements in the memo about complete control over admissions, complete control over faculty, complete control over curriculum. And that both partners wanted to show how a working community at all levels – not just the professorate, not just the academic offices, but everybody in the security force, the driving force, the janitorial force, the construction force, all of that – would set a new standard for the region.

They would provide complete financial support.

So that was the gist of it.

But there was still an enormous amount of detail to work out. I don’t think either their side or our side had certitude at that point.
KHALDOON AL MUBARAK: After this majlis meeting came a year of long, hard negotiations – getting into things we never knew we would have to discuss.

Marty Edelman was a bridge to both parties.

Rima, Waled, and Ali were part of my team and deeply involved at this stage.

RIMA AL MOKARRAB: My mandate for this project was very simple and straightforward. It was to work with these wonderful people and get it done – in our lifetime, not in 200 years. Which is a pretty tall order.

What was remarkable wasn’t the mandate but the vision animating it. The vision for why we were building NYU Abu Dhabi was very specific. We wanted a new kind of higher education that created a forum for dialogue. The forum would reflect our values, of inclusion, openness, tolerance, and engagement with others – where the first instinct is to see the common humanity of the other person, to seek to understand them, and, where you disagree, to disagree respectfully.

We have 200 nationalities living in the UAE, so the student body had to reflect that diversity.

We wanted to create a place that had an Arab identity, a New York identity, and a global identity, and show that these three things could live together harmoniously, enrich one another, and do good for the world. And that great things can happen when you collaborate and when you bring these different perspectives together.

These were some of the important visions, aside from the obvious vision of academic excellence. We wanted our students to be among the best in the world, to compete with Oxbridge, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford. The faculty, too, should be at that level of quality and conduct serious research. But that research would be animated by those core visions of being globally facing, feeling responsible to a global citizenry, trying to solve global as well as local problems.

That kind of person is very outward oriented and feels a responsibility not only to one place but to a common humanity, to the world. Those values then need to be reflected in everything from the curriculum, to the student body, to the research agenda. They represent the future-looking model for higher education.
“We wanted to create a place that had an Arab identity, a New York identity, and a global identity, and show that those three things could live together harmoniously, enrich one another, and do good for the world. And that great things can happen when you collaborate and when you bring these different perspectives together.”
THE FIRST PROVOST

MARIËT WESTERMANN: Sometimes in February 2007 - I remember it very well – when John had returned to work, he pulled me out of a meeting and said, “I think this Abu Dhabi thing is going to happen, and I want you to play a role.”

I was quite startled, because I hadn’t been that close to how the conversations Yameen had been having with faculty had evolved. But I certainly wanted to be open and hear what was possible.

When I asked why, he told me one of the things he had considered. Just looking at the dean’s around the table, he realized that very few of them would have had the capacity to build programs and for working internationally.

Although I am very far from an Arabist, it is true that at the Institute we had dug in Turkey, where cognate languages would be spoken, and at Abidos, Upper Egypt. I certainly had spent time in those places negotiating our concessions and supporting our faculty and staff on the ground.

I had about 10 sentences in Arabic. It still wasn’t a lack of a fact.

It turns out that in Abu Dhabi you can get around with English very well, but it was helpful at least to have a certain sense of how negotiations in those parts of the world can proceed, how difficult and lengthy they can be – and the kind of patience they require. I slowly began to see why John came to the conclusion that they can be very lengthy – and the kind of patience they require.

If I’d been saying this forever – that you can’t do it just by bombing places and fighting wars – I should have understood this.

What was a new university going to look like? Let me give you a hypothesis. Let’s say it’s in a place that hadn’t really had a traditional model of a university available to it. It seemed a big challenge. I wasn’t sure I was the right person to do it, but it was too good a leadership opportunity to pass up.

John’s very persuasive – and so is my husband, who had worked with the government of Abu Dhabi in international investment since the early nineties. He had great confidence not only in me but in the country.

So I was very interested in making sure that mutual respect and mutual learning were built into the way we were going to do business together.

REACHING AGREEMENT

BOB BERNE: For us, it was a chance to think about the Arab and Muslim world, how much we could infuse it into our curriculum in Abu Dhabi and how much would spill over to New York.

It was a different society, a different set of rules. Even years later, there still are people who feel that the ground rules in Abu Dhabi – the life, the culture, the laws – are such that we shouldn’t be doing any business there.

But we felt that if we could get a guarantee for the freedom on our campus about what we teach and how we do research - recognizing that off campus, there would be limitations to what we could do when they were students and faculty – and that if the on-campus guarantees were adhered to, we could do something really special.

MARIËT WESTERMANN: When I signed on some time in April 2007, we’d even had a contract with Abu Dhabi. The first order of business was that the MOU, the memorandum of understanding, have the right academic framework.

Cheryl Mills made sure we stayed close to that goal, as did Jeanne Smith, who really got the conditions set up correctly.

PETER CHRISTENSEN: What made the planning easier was that a group of people – John, Mariët, and a few others - had developed a financial modeling document that we used when we set it up, and in the early years of the university.

Although in some ways NYU Abu Dhabi is very different from what was in the document, which was written in the early years, many of the document’s elements continue today.

They created the foundation for our success.

MARIËT WESTERMANN: At the same time, in those first four or five years, I was very concerned that the people in Abu Dhabi, whom we barely knew, didn’t see us as just another baron coming in and trying to get their money to do it – which, of course, they weren’t.

PETER CHRISTENSEN: Marty DeLong sent Cathy DeLong, who had worked for the provost on finance, to see if she could sort out the budget – and asked me to go along.

JOHN SEXTON: There was a good bit of conversation about trying to make sure it always in the spirit of a partnership. One of the things that made it a success was that each of the partners was determined to make sure the other partner had a full understanding of what was at stake.

There were conversations, for example, in which Khaldoon would say to me, “What’s His Highness wants is the NYU that’s at Washington Square.”

I said, “That carries a lot of implications you shouldn’t want and we shouldn’t want.” Because if it were just going to be Washington Square someplace else, why would we do it?

THE PARAMOUNT ISSUE OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

JEANNIE SMITH: In our partnering in Abu Dhabi, and in the UAE, we worked very closely with Cheryl, because there were quite a few things about academic freedom and freedom of thought and expression that were not as easily solved in terms of how they were being in that part of the world.

Those were the first barriers we were trying to figure out.

JOHN SEXTON: There was a good bit of conversation to try to specify it, always in the spirit of a partnership. One of the things that made it a success was that each of the partners was determined to make sure the other partner had a full understanding of what was at stake.

They assured us of academic freedom standpoint than Washington Square, someplace else, why would we do it?

We’re very happy in Washington Square. We had to think of this project as bringing something distinct and additive to the world.

We got into a conversation about academic freedom. What did academic freedom mean?

MARTY LIPTON: They assured us of academic free- dom – our campus would be different from an academic freedom standpoint where Washington Square.

JOHN SEXTON: Khaldoon and Waleed said, “Of course there will be academic freedom. You’ll have all the freedom in the world.”

“Wow,” this is complex stuff, I said, “so let me define for you what I’m talking about. I teach the First Amendment religion classes. But there are also the First Amendment speech classes. And the Supreme Court has wrestled with what it means to say, ‘The government may make no law restricting speech.’

“Whatever is speech? Is gesture speech? Is pornog- raphy speech? Pornography has vexed the Court. Through the seventies, there were maybe a dozen Supreme Court opinions, until finally Potter Stewart famously said, ‘I know it when I see it’. There’s a way in that’s why that’s the true test for the Supreme Court for whether or not something is pornography, in which case it’s not protected by the First Amend- ment according to the United States Supreme Court; or it’s speech and is protected. That makes all the difference in the world.

“Now,” I said, “I’m going to give you a hypothesis. I’ve never known of any American law professor to do this, but as a professor I think, ‘What’s a minute? If the test is, I know it when I see it, I’m going to bring in 12 photographs to class. One will be of Bertolucci’s The Wedding of the Virgin. Another will be hardcore pornography: And I’m going to say to the class: Which of these is 12 pornography and which isn’t?”

I continued, “Here’s what academic freedom is. I am going to try to get a law profes- sor who is so sophomoric that he or she would do that. And the difference is, whether or not you really respect academic freedom.

On the other hand, I may send over a professor who, perhaps not for sophomoric reasons but for very good reasons, decides to do it.

“Whatever the reasons, if it’s done, you have to put up with it. That’s academic freedom.”
and what we were being asked to do: Agreeing to I remember hearing the words “unfettered access,” which were very difficult.

Khaldoon Al Mubarak: the conversations were. We kept thinking we could find a hybrid solution: We would give as much as we could within our constraints, but not everything. We tried to find solutions but couldn’t.

At the same time, His Highness’s relationship with John continued to grow. I finally went to Sheikh Mohamed and said: Either we accept these terms—which were unacceptable for us—or we walk away. His Highness understood the challenges and understood that it was a leap, but he also had trust in John.

We were all doing this project for all the right reasons. We were all doing this project for all the right reasons. We were all doing this project for all the right reasons. We were all doing this project for all the right reasons.

Waleed Al Mokarrab Al Muhairi: Everybody understood that academic freedom was at the core of a liberal arts education—and that it would be fundamental to attract the best professors, the best students, and have the best kind of debate.

But New York and Abu Dhabi don’t necessarily move at the same speed, and I don’t mean from an implementation perspective. New York, especially when we’re talking about NYU, is the bastion of left-leaning liberalism. And Abu Dhabi’s is a bit different. It doesn’t mean we’re not open or tolerant, and it doesn’t mean that Abu Dhabi didn’t want to do all these great things.

It was never about convincing us that we needed academic freedom. It was about speed and trajectory and what made sense. That’s where most of the conversations were.

Khaldoon Al Mubarak: It was a challenge. There were points for us—back 10 or 15 years ago—that were very difficult.

I remember hearing the words “unfettered access,” the same level of “unfettered access” as NYU in New York.

For us, there was no precedent to this negotiation and what we were being asked to do: Agreeing to full academic freedom, with NYU managing its curriculum. Back then, this was very difficult.

Cheryl Mills was the chief negotiator for NYU, and Abu is a tough New York lawyer.

John had made it clear from the very beginning that there was no way NYU could bend on key issues, which we were not opposed to. In fact, we were aligned in our belief in those fundamental points. However, this realm was new to us in the development of a young country’s agenda.

We were all doing this project for all the right reasons. We were all doing this project for all the right reasons. We were all doing this project for all the right reasons.

Then people went off and gave it more thought—and, I’m sure, many more meetings.

At some point, Cheryl Mills came to me to say we were going to go forward, and we now had to negotiate to get an agreement in place.

That’s when I became very involved.

I was on the team that negotiated those agreements, and then in my role to draft them. We had many, many negotiating sessions with Cheryl and Jeanne, and sometimes with Marty Edelman.

It was a hellish step-by-step process. From the very beginning, there were topics that were not negotiable and not open to discussion. The openness of the discussion is important. The openness of the discussion is important.

I was concerned about how it would be viewed by various communi- ties within the University. One of the things I did, encouraged by President Sexton, was to contact some leading Israeli academics to get their input. In particular, I spoke to friends who are professors of Arab and Israeli universities.

The response of Israeli colleagues, especially the presidents, was overwhelmingly positive. They were, I would say, very enthusiastic about the idea—that the academic context would benefit everybody and could be a fulcrum to leverage further progress.

John Sexton: I had important conversations with the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations, Dan Gillerman, who aggressively urged me to do this and said he would stand behind me. And with Itamar Rabinovich, who had been the ambassador from Israel to the United States and was president of Tel-Aviv University. And Abe Foxman, who was head of the Anti-Defamation League.

Mary Brabeck: We were all doing this project for all the right reasons. We were all doing this project for all the right reasons. We were all doing this project for all the right reasons.

Marty Edelman: Of course, periodically issues would have to come up to John or to Sheikh Moh-amed. I can’t even begin to tell you how many hours and hours of phone call meetings there were in places all around the world, and the disruptions of world events that affected what we were doing. It was a turbulent period.

Mary Brabeck: People like Marty Edelman played a key role in working both sides. He was with us, but he was well-respected there, so he could help us find a middle ground.

Marty Edelman: I think the criticism is important. The openness of the discussion is important. I also think that using any one of those topics as the hammer that allows you to break the model is narrow-minded and its own kind of destructive weapon.

If we always allow what you can’t do to stop us from trying, we’ll end up encircling America in a different kind of prison.
MARTY LIPTON: NYUAD would give us the opportunity to have a major campus, with 2,000 undergraduate students from all over the world – not just from one or two or even four or five countries, but from as many as 100.

It would give students from Washington Square an opportunity for exposure to 100 different cultures by spending a semester or so in Abu Dhabi.

DIANE YU: We also expected about 200 graduate students.

MARTY LIPTON: There are always trustees and faculty members and others who are cautious about bold ventures. But the University – in 2006, 2007 – had had a long run of great success. We were prepared to make a major move and, assuming we did succeed, bring NYU to a new level in the world of academic universities.

MARTY LIPTON: We were prepared to make a major move and, assuming we did succeed, bring NYU to a new level in the world of academic universities.

DICK FOLEY: The best relationships have to be symmetrical. Any relationship – between people, between groups of people, between institutions – has to be based on mutual regard for one another. That’s what developed over time.

PIETRINA SCARAGLINO: There was always a willingness – on both sides – to listen to what the concerns were. And then to try to make accommodations.

There was an atmosphere of trying to understand where each side was coming from.

JOHN SEXTON: Trust was the bedrock on which it was built. Twelve or 15 months in, I knew with certainty that something special was going to happen. Then came the testing of trying to make it concrete. But at that point we knew we had the relationship that was key to making the enterprise work.
I started thinking about the communication strategy pretty early on. Universities are not like many other institutions. There is a notion of consultation that takes place in a university that doesn’t really have an equivalent in government or in the private sector. Unless something is pretty strictly administrative, to make a big announcement and surprise the faculty, surprise the students, surprise the various constituencies on campus is often not such a great idea. They don’t really want to read about it in the newspaper first.

And so, while I had in mind the idea that we would give this story as an exclusive to a major newspaper or some other major news organization, every time NYU Abu Dhabi got talked about in public, I knew we were making it more and more difficult for that to happen.

John would go to a room with 100 people and say, “Listen, this is totally off the record. But let me tell you that we’re talking with people in a country I won’t name, but the first part is Abu and the second part is Dhabi, about the possibility of creating a whole new campus.”

As John is talking to more and more groups and saying, “By the way, this is completely off the record…” – there is, by the way, no off the record when you’re talking to a room with 100 people – I kept thinking: This is going to be that much harder to pitch.

After the news came out, we moved early to let the NYU community know that academic freedom in the agreement would be consistent with the way we knew it at the Washington Square campus.

October 12, 2007

NEWS RELEASE
NYU TO OPEN CAMPUS IN ABU DHABI

Important Step in Transforming NYU into a Global Network University

First Comprehensive Liberal Arts Campus Abroad Developed by a Major U.S. Research University

Martin Lipton, Chair of NYU’s Board of Trustees; John Sexton, President of NYU; and His Excellency Khaldoon Al Mubarak, Chairman of the Executive Affairs Authority of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, today announced that they have reached an agreement to create NYU Abu Dhabi, a Middle Eastern campus of NYU. This will be the first comprehensive liberal arts campus established abroad by a major U.S. research university. It is projected that a first class of students will enroll in 2010….

NYU Abu Dhabi will be a residential research university built with academic quality and practices consistent with the prevailing standards at NYU’s Washington Square campus, including adherence to its standards of academic freedom. The development of all the programs at the Abu Dhabi campus will be overseen by the New York-based faculty and senior administrators. The campus, created using programs and standards set by NYU, will include extensive classroom, library and information technology facilities, laboratories, academic buildings, dormitories, faculty and residential housing, student services, and athletic and performance facilities.

The Abu Dhabi Government has committed to provide land, funding, and financing for the development, construction, equipping, maintenance, and operation of the NYU Abu Dhabi campus. It has also made a commitment to NYU that will enhance the University’s investment in faculty and programming, both of which are important in achieving world-class educational and research opportunities at NYU, NYU Abu Dhabi, and all of its network locations.

Dr. Sexton said, “This is an extraordinarily exciting and challenging opportunity. NYU was established 175 years ago as a university in and of the city, and it will always remain firmly anchored in Washington Square, but as a foundation, not a limitation. In the 21st century, NYU must also be in and of the world, a role for which our home, New York – that most international of cities – has well prepared us, and which we will fulfill through a network of our global sites for scholarship and education. It is in NYU’s institutional nature to be open to change and to see and grasp opportunities others would not. We have found just the right partners in Abu Dhabi….

Commenting on the agreement, His Excellency Khaldoon Al Mubarak said, “NYU is renowned for having one of the most expansive and successful global programs in higher education. The partnership we have announced today will precipitate a legacy of opportunity for students and researchers from around the world in years to come.”
COLLABORATING on the GROUND

التعاون على أرض الواقع
INSTALLATION VIEW OF SHEHIRA AL SOWAIDI AND SHAMSAA AL DhAHERI: ROOTS & FIBERS, 2017, OPENING NIGHT, AT THE NYUAD PROJECT SPACE
MARIËT WESTERMANN: Once the agreement was signed, we had to think about how to move the project forward. It was a big learning curve for all of us. In the early days, the real worry was having enough capacity in Abu Dhabi to reach what was an absolute promise and commitment that we would open in September 2010. We had three years to do it.

The other big worry, for Diane, Jeanne, Cheryl, and me, was the question of how to mobilize the capacities of NYU – the intellectual capacities, the pedagogic capacities, the know-how of the way a university is built and run, export it in a way that is respectful of that culture, and, at the same time, make sure that the political questions in New York were attended to.

I realized that I needed a very strong partner who could marry curriculum development and a commitment to the liberal arts and teaching with the physical initiation of a campus.

One of the first and best moves I made was hiring Hilary Ballon from Columbia.

HILARY BALLON: Once I was enlisted in the project, just making things happen from day to day became all-absorbing.

There were occasional moments where you took a step back and thought, “Wow, this is a dazzling idea.” John Sexton, as president of the University, was really stressing the impact on higher education. But the very ambitious performance standards were what I was focused on.

I was tasked to oversee the development of the curriculum and the facilities to assure that they would fulfill our educational vision.

MARIËT WESTERMANN: The initial team was, as John Sexton used to say, all women. We had Cheryl, Jeanne, Hilary, and, pretty soon, Diane very much joining the team to help develop the Sheikh Mohamed Scholars Program.

JOHN SEXTON: When you have talented people around you, and they’ve agreed to modify their lives to become part of the team, you always have to worry: Are they stimulated enough? Are they fulfilled by their lives?

A key moment was when Sheikh Mohamed described to me one night, very late, in one of our private meetings, how he was trying to advance women in the Emirates. And that his immediate project at the moment was his daughter, Sheikha Mariam, who had just graduated with an MBA.

He said, “Next time you come, I’m going to introduce you.”

The next time came. She was sitting on the arm of his chair, and I asked her what she was going to do. She described something her father had planned for her.

I said, “I’m going to offer you something different. You’re going to meet with two phenomenal women, Mariët Westermann and Diane Yu, who will become friends for life. And I’m going to try to co-opt you into the enterprise of NYU Abu Dhabi.”

HILARY BALLON: A DAZZLING IDEA


Hilary Ballon: Deputy Vice-Chancellor of NYU Abu Dhabi from 2007-2017; Professor of Urban Studies and Architecture at NYU Wagner from 2007-2017

Diane Yu: CEO of the Community Development Group Limited and President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Abu Dhabi; previously the President of Crowne Plaza Abu Dhabi Hotel & Convention Centre
LAUNCHING THE NYU ABU DHABI INSTITUTE

“THE POTENTIAL TO BE TRULY TRANSFORMATIVE”

Shekha Mariam: It was shortly after the idea had been originally conceived. I was having lunch with my father and other members of my family, and he told us about it. That was when I first heard about the idea. I can still remember how excited he was.

Education has always been at the core of my father’s interests. It’s been his vision, and you could tell from the very beginning that he believed this project had the potential to be truly transformative.

I think my initial assumption was that it was going to be just a satellite campus. I was very surprised, in a good way, to learn that it would actually be a transformative institution.

It began under Ilhami Bajraktar’s leadership and then under Philip Kennedy’s. Two or three years before the first undergraduate class, we realized we could jumpstart the educational opportunities for the public well in advance of getting an undergraduate class in place.

That part of the institute was very important for the public face of NYU Abu Dhabi.

PETER CHRISTENSEN: For the first couple years, we were running NYU Abu Dhabi out of Washington Square.

Davile McLaughlin: It’s an institute for public outreach to the Abu Dhabi and UAE community that hosts lectures, seminars, and workshops at a very high rate during the academic year.

LAUNCHING THE SHEIKH MOHAMED SCHOLARS PROGRAM (SMSP)

DYANE YU: We had already signed the agreement in November 2007, with some modest fanfare. People had lots of questions, but the general mood was expectant and cautiously optimistic that something was going to change NYU in very interesting and positive ways.

Early in 2008, I asked to talk to John about my own involvement. I said, “Look, I’m your chief of staff and deputy. I already have a relatively heavy portfolio in New York, but given that this is likely to be a game changer for NYU, please think of a project I can manage or run or take part in, still being based in New York.”

In the fall, we had a strategy, a plan, a business proposition, a program that gets me a group of students I can manage, or run, or take part in, still being based in New York. That gave me some confidence that I’d have a few students by the time the fall semester rolled around.

JOHN SEXTON: We’d announced NYU Abu Dhabi, but we weren’t going to open for three years. Since we wanted to start things, we came up with two ideas: the NYU Abu Dhabi Institute and the Sheikh Mohamed Scholars Program.

Shekha Mariam took over the former, and Diane took over the latter.

SHEIKHA MARIAM: When we give them an NYU Abu Dhabi experience, even though they would not be full-time students there, they would expose them to the ideas NYU will be bringing to the Emirates and give them a chance to get some academic learning, leadership activities, and cross-cultural experience.

Shekha Mariam: We had already signed the agreement in November 2007, with some modest fanfare. People had lots of questions, but the general mood was expectant and cautiously optimistic that something was going to change NYU in very interesting and positive ways.

SHEIKHA MARIAM: “BE VERY COLLABORATIVE”

Shekha Mariam: “We put together a strategy, a plan, a business proposition, and met with both of them in April. I remember thinking when I first arrived in the country it was not at all what I expected – how beautiful parts of the city are in architecture and development. Then I worked for several months with Mariët and Her Highness Sheikha Mariam.

SHEIKHA MARIAM: “BE VERY COLLABORATIVE”

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NEWS RELEASE
First Group Selected as Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed University Scholars
Her Highness Sheikha Mariam bint Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, co-chair of the Scholars Program Steering Committee, said, “The students selected to be part of the inaugural class of Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed University Scholars for 2008-09 already have an academic record to be very proud of. Participating in this program over the coming year will provide them with even greater access to opportunities to enhance their leadership skills and academic capabilities.”

July 23, 2008

DIANE YU: The long-term vision His Highness had for the Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Scholars was not just that we find academically talented students, but students who have leadership ability and a commitment to service and giving back, so that they could rise to leadership positions in the country, whether in business or industry or government or any other endeavor, such as the arts, music, or the professions.

It was exciting. I used a lot of different ideas to put together the selection process, which was new in the country – to have the schools nominate students.

The first year, we interviewed everybody they nominated, because they had so little time to think about it. But we chose a terrific group of students – 15 women and three men. It was a bit of a surprise, but in terms of organization and getting their dossiers together, the women students who heard about it jumped on it right away. We did, in fact, have a class that was ready to go in September 2008.

SHEIKHA MARIAM: I learned so much from working closely with Diane and Mariët. The work they did, just the amount of effort it took to create and then build and run a program that was tailored to our local environment, that connected people from so many different backgrounds, faiths, and nationalities, and to make it work as well as it did. They were pioneers.

Diane is like a mother to the students. She knows everything about them – their background, their family, where they’re really gifted, and where there’s room for improvement. She dedicates so much of her time, and her life, to helping students flourish and grow.

If you think about it, these students aren’t in the Scholars Program for a very long period of time, but it can change their lives because of how carefully they are monitored, and challenged, and guided through what is actually quite a daunting process. It can be transformative for them, both academically and personally.

Mariët was the same. She was also incredible at connecting and building bridges, engaging with all of the different stakeholders. She was instrumental in putting in place the right governance structure for the program, the systems and framework that allowed it to work.

What’s amazing about both of them is that, despite how much they have achieved, they are so down to earth, so human.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF A PIONEERING PROGRAM
DIANE YU: Both the leadership of the NYU Abu Dhabi Institute – Philip Kennedy and Larry Fabian – and I took very seriously our role as pathbreakers to make sure things went well.

We had to market ourselves in ways that retained a level of dignity, but also get the word out that there was something new happening because of this partnership between NYU and the Abu Dhabi government.

Finally, since Abu Dhabi was the seat of government in the UAE, we felt the students should see our seat of government in Washington. So I created a two-city trip for the second semester – New York City and Washington.

The Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Scholars Program offered those very gifted, leadership-oriented students a chance to meet students from the other Emirati universities, which they seldom have a chance to do. And it would be small, so that we could give them personal attention.

His Highness also had a notion that if any of them decided to go to graduate school and got into an NYU graduate or professional school, the government would offer that student a full scholarship.

It was a way to entice them to pursue higher education through graduate and professional degrees. And it was terrific for New York, because those schools would benefit from having some outstanding students join their ranks.

SHEIKHA MARIAM: At the very beginning, some parents expressed an interest in there being a separate girls-only and boys-only program. However, when we said that this was going to be it, I think they made their peace with it, because I’m not aware of that question coming up again.

DIANE YU: I gave the first class some orientation information and materials to prepare them for what they had not encountered in college.

First, mixed gender classrooms, which were rare. This was something His Highness thought was important, because he said, “If they’re going to be future leaders, they’re going to be successes in their fields and need to understand how to work with both genders.”

Second, they would be taking four courses we designed, taught by NYU-affiliated faculty, in ways that would challenge them academically, especially in terms of subject matter.

The first course, which John taught, focused on the relationship between church and state in the United States, as seen through the lens of US Supreme Court decisions on the First Amendment, religious freedom, and against the establishment of religion.

It may seem like a strange choice, but it’s a course John had been teaching since 1981, with great success, to undergraduates at NYU. And it was a course he very much wanted to teach in a whole new setting.

THE ORIGIN STORY: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE FOUNDING OF NYU ABU DHABI 2005-2010
JOHN SEXTON: In retrospect, I think the idea that I would teach the Sheikh Mohamed Scholars, and then both the Scholars and the NYU Abu Dhabi kids, was an important element of the success of NYU Abu Dhabi. Not because of what happened in the class, but because of two things that resulted from my teaching.

First, it brought me closer to the Crown Prince. That I was in Abu Dhabi about 16 times a year allowed us to spend time together such that a real friendship developed, a major unintended consequence of my teaching there.

I had realized it was logistically possible. If you’re at JFK by 1pm on Friday night, you land in Abu Dhabi on Saturday night. Because Sunday is the first day of the week, you teach on Sunday and then head to the airport. You’re back in New York by 7am Monday morning.

Second, my deep understanding of the Sheikh Mohamed Scholars Program, under Diane’s extraordinary leadership, underscored our commitment to NYU Abu Dhabi, since I started going over to teach in the program two or three years before NYU Abu Dhabi opened.

So the combination of the Sheikh Mohamed Scholars Program and Elizabeth Boller’s idea to have conferences there with NYU faculty through the NYU Abu Dhabi Institute meant that we were already active on the ground.
THE ORIGIN STORY: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE FOUNDING OF NYU ABU DHABI 2005-2010

WRITTEN IN WATER

BY RAGAMALA DANCE COMPANY, THE ARTS CENTER AT NYUAD IN 2018
CONSIDERING CURRICULUM
تحديد المناهج

HILARY BALLON: There was a small group of people who developed the educational vision, including John Sexton himself, who was very hands-on at this early stage. The basic premise—that we would have a coeducational liberal arts curriculum—was in place. Now the questions were: What fields would we offer? How would those fields relate to fields at NYU in New York? How might we adapt a liberal arts curriculum for the 21st century for our location in the Middle East and for our student body that, we increas-ingly understood, would be very international?

HARVEY STEDMAN: John imagined it as not an extension of the undergraduate education at NYU—so interesting and positive as the many versions of NYU undergraduate education at Washington Square are—but as an opportunity to create a new undergraduate liberal arts curriculum.

ELLEN SCHALL: The fun of thinking about the cur-riculum was the opportunity to reframe it with- out being constrained by history or precedent or departmental divisions or existing commitments.

DIANE YU: It might not be as variegated as New York’s, but it could be exceptional, something a very diverse global student body would love to study.

Hilary Ballon and others deserve a huge amount of credit for envisioning what had truly never been seen before in an undergraduate college curriculum. Hilary worked closely with faculty in New York to come up with brilliantly innovative approaches on how to educate a worldwide student body in a very intensive, rigorous, demanding academic environment.

DEAN WILLIAMSON: In November 2007, I was hired by Hilary Ballon and Mariet Westermann to help with the NYU Abu Dhabi project. The project was not familiar to the NYU New York crowd. What were we doing in the Middle East? Why were we doing it?

From the very beginning, I thought it was a tremen-dous project. That startup blood started to flow through my veins: “I want to be part of this. I want to see where it goes.”

Working with Mariet and Hilary meant anything from helping set up curriculum committees to taking notes for those committees to hiring and training staff. It was calls or emails, meeting after meeting to let people know what the project was about. Why it was important not just for NYU Abu Dhabi, but for NYU as a university.

By that point, I had been with NYU for 21 years. I knew a lot of departments. It took an omnibus-minded type person to explain NYU Abu Dhabi to the New York community to say, “This is urgent, and here’s why.” My main message was, “Just work with us. Let’s get it done.”

Once we started the curriculum committees, which involved most of the faculty who were probably going to go over to Abu Dhabi to teach, the excitement started to build.

Hilary Ballon worked very, very closely with all the affiliated faculty in New York, and all the faculty for that matter, building trust to the point where people started to feel comfortable.

HILARY BALLON: We could have planned in a way that reflected our location so extensively that the curriculum became parochial—indeed, we once looked at developing a Middle Eastern Studies locale. That meant that students would come only if it were their subject of interest. But we determined very, very early on that our goal was to create a curriculum that was universal, with the characteristics of excellence that are found in the best curricula in the States, in England, and elsewhere.

We would then inflict that curriculum with certain programs that reflected our location. Place-speci-ficity emerged, for example, in our selection of the languages we would offer—Arabic, and in the way we thought about a Middle Eastern studies program, which we called “Arab Crossroads.”

We also decided we would have engineering. Some of the work on curriculum coincided with the merger of Brooklyn Poly with NYU, so key faculty leaders at Poly were involved.

Finding that place along a spectrum between reflecting where we were and yet establishing a program that would be attractive to students from anywhere, whether or not they were interested in Middle Eastern studies—that was our goal.
FABIO PIANO: In the earliest days, I participated as a faculty member in a committee of peers to come up with ideas of how we might develop a new, complete undergraduate education with a strong research mission. I was asked by the then-chair of the biology department, Gloria Coruzzi, if I'd be willing to participate from the biology side of the academic world.

At the time, I was the director of the Center for Genomics and Systems Biology and a professor in biology.

In some sense, the way I had developed the center in New York was partly a preparation for all the things that happened later. The center was a transformation of how things were done in the biology world, because genomics changed the way we do some fundamental things in biology. The genetic revolution then became the genomic revolution.

We built the center in New York mostly on the basis of extremely talented but generally young faculty, as opposed to the Nobel Prize winners you attract and then build around. That became a powerful model, so I felt it could be a way to build science somewhere else.

It was an interesting group of people because several knew the region. But they also brought with them a lot of baggage. And so they would say, “You can’t do this there. You can’t do that there.” Naïve people like me were the ones who said, “Why not?”

I was really intrigued. I went to some of the first meetings with faculty to think about, “What would we do if we were to be able to develop a new project for NYU?” in a place I had never visited, in a city I had to look up on the map.

As I got together with other faculty and heard John Sexton’s ideas, I started to think it could be very exciting.

My reaction to most things is often just to absorb it. During the first few weeks and months of listening to each other, I certainly had moments when I said, “What are we doing here, and where are we going with this?”

There were already different voices and opinions wondering, “What could NYU really do? What are we putting ourselves involved in? Would we be able to pull off anything that could have a significant mission and increase NYU’s ability to continue to grow as a university?”

I left that initial questioning behind pretty fast. As an international student – and I’ve been at NYU for a long time – I appreciated the possibility of having something that was truly international rather than conceptually just a study-away site. The whole University was built around the idea of being international.

And I was very intrigued by the UAE, a country and a part of the world I didn’t know.

I immediately said to myself and several of my colleagues, “Even if we don’t do it, it’s a very useful conversation.” Because it was an amazing intellectual conversation about the future of education and the future of research: What would you do if you were able to build a new university in the new millennium at the crossroads of the world?

David Hoagar was one of the faculty with whom we wrote a report around the concept of how we would start research in Abu Dhabi, which ultimately became part of the input to the Research Institute.

WHY NOT?

A NEW KIND OF SCIENCE EDUCATION

FABIO PIANO

Provost of NYU Abu Dhabi from 2010-2020; founding director and Director of the Center for Genomics and Systems Biology from 2009; NYU Professor of Biology since 2002

WHY NOT?

A NEW KIND OF SCIENCE EDUCATION

FABIO PIANO

قبل التخرج؟ نهج جديد في تدريس العلوم
FABIO PIANO: The Research Institute was developed conceptually as a standalone institute that would initiate very high-level research. We knew from the beginning that it would take us a while to develop that quality of research, more time than it would take to build the undergraduate program.

The institute was originally made up of faculty who were coming from New York to develop the kinds of centers that would be top research centers in the US or anywhere in the world.

Today, we have over a dozen such centers. One of the early projects was the Library of Arabic Literature—“the LAL.” Philip Kennedy is the principal investigator, with colleagues from all over the world, whose goal is to collect and make available the most significant Arabic texts, translated into English for scholars and students but also for a general audience.

I’m told that more than 99% of all Arabic literature has never been translated. The world that doesn’t speak Arabic is missing out on a treasure trove of ideas and ways of thinking from the history of humanity. It might be history of medicine, law, or theater in the very old Arabic tradition. There is beautiful poetry—at much more.

At the LAL, translations are not undertaken by one solitary scholar, but by a group of people who bring their knowledge to bear on the words in relation to the context of their era. All of a sudden, the humanities scholars were working as teams.

The process is reinvigorating the translation world, the Arabic literature world, and how to think about the history of these ideas in the context of the Islamic and pre-Islamic tradition.

This project has been one of the impacts of arts and humanities at NYU Abu Dhabi.
DEVELOPING RESEARCH

DAVE McLAUGHLIN: The Research Institute had two components. Its major component and the major funding, by far, is as an institute modeled after a combination of the Max Planck Institutes in Germany, the Howard Hughes research institutes in the US, and the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. It was designed to support research across not only the sciences but also the liberal arts, and the extent of support the faculty member received was critical.

I was very, very involved in the Research Institute – its formation, which projects were funded, the proposal to the Abu Dhabi government, and faculty hiring.

UNA CHAUDHURI
Dean of Humanities

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AMBITIOUS FOR THE ARTS

UNA CHAUDHURI: I first heard about the idea very early, when faculty were just getting involved, in 2007, 2008. I was invited to be on an exploratory faculty committee for the arts by the person who had been asked informally to start that conversation, Hilary Ballon and Mariët Westermann.

The three unique elements of our academic approach were: interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and comparative offerings; global components in both the curriculum and in the mandatory study-away junior year; and no classic departments but rather larger, integrated clusters.

HILARY BALLON: We conceived the core curriculum as being comparative. It wasn’t going to be about Western civilization – or any one civilization. Rather, it would focus on fundamental ideas, looked at through different lenses, different moments in time, and in different cultures.

And so we would find faculty asking colleagues, “Do you know of a text in the Confucian tradition?” Or “Can you point me to an Islamic text that focuses on X topic?”

In negotiating these courses with faculty, there was invariably a course with a longish title that sounded a lot like an elective in a major: “Japanese History from 1600 to 1800.”

People would tease me, because I said: “The more words in the title, the more specific it is, the more you are abandoning the idea of our core, which is to focus on a fundamental idea.”

So I would drive faculty in this negotiation toward one-word titles with strong nouns, like Equality, Justice, Tolerance, because they embodied the fundamental question of these courses.

We set the class size for those core classes at 12 to 15, so that they were small enough for discussion.

Encouraged strongly by John, we put out a bulletin during the year before we opened to students, saying that we were offering 20 undergraduate majors across the humanities, the arts, social sciences, and engineering.

DIANE YU: The most ambitious thing was to give students the opportunity to take two semesters in New York or at another NYU site.

HILARY BALLON: Clearly, we did not have sufficient faculty at the outset to deliver all those majors. But a key feature was that we would bring over New York faculty to Abu Dhabi, and that our Abu Dhabi students would have the opportunity to take two semesters in New York or at another NYU site.

Knowing we could draw upon the extensive resources in New York gave us greater confidence in sourcing applicants that they would be able to complete all the requirements of a major in this wide variety of fields, even ahead of our ability to hire all the faculty on the ground.

JOHN SEXTON: I could see that the curriculum was developing. Then the only question became: Would we get students of the first order?

Linda Mills was driving recruitment.

RESEARCH

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FOCUS ON UNDERGRADS

DIANE YU: Everyone would take the core curriculum – but students could choose different majors.

HILARY BALLON: Keeping graduate students out of the picture was important. What can happen in research universities is that the curious faculty teach to the undergraduates become slightly milder versions of their graduate courses. We wanted to create a curriculum that foregrounded fundamental problems in the human condition, in the natural world.

DIANE YU: People would ask me, “What’s the problem in your title?”

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DIANE YU: We felt strongly that an arts curriculum should include practice as well as academic study – art making as well as art history, theater studies, cinema studies.

So that was my first phase with the project.

Along the way, we all had to learn about cultural sensitivities, and also some of the boundaries between in-house and public matters. And we had to keep our students aware of that. It’s never clean-cut or simple. It isn’t in America, either.

We now have the most amazing arts program – great artists coming, doing their shows, including very cutting-edge contemporary performance artists we’ve invited. It can cause all sorts of debate and discussion within our community. And it has.

I also felt we had as much to learn from their culture. We have scholars in Arabic history, literature, and culture. Very quickly, for those of us who’ve been spending time in Abu Dhabi, the idea that we are going to another planet simply dissipated.

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ZIMOUN, 350 PREPARED DC-MOTORS, 2142' M ROPE, WOODEN STICKS 20 CM, 2019 (AS INSTALLED IN ZIMOUN AT THE NYUAD ART GALLERY, 2019, OPENING NIGHT). PHOTO BY WISEMONKEYS/SHIJI ULLERI
Pioneering Students
طلابنا المتميزون
When we began, I was overseeing both admissions and student life. I’ve always had a global perspective, so the idea that we were going to the Arab world to think with leaders there about how to create a university in the Middle East was exciting.

My mother was a Holocaust survivor, and my family and I had experienced 9/11 directly in downtown New York. To me, the world needs more engagement, not less – not pulling back but pushing forward.

John’s philosophy and approach were clear: NYU was not afraid of complexity and was open to engaging with the Middle East and all that meant.

He also had ideas about the importance of bringing the best students from around the world. And starting very high, with exceptionally outstanding students. They would then become the magnet for the talent that came afterward.
“We knew we could recruit stronger students if we recruited all over the world.”

JOHN SEXTON: You have to reverse engineer this, right? We were hoping to open with a freshman class in September 2010. Which means that those students are entering their senior year of high school in September 2009. If they’re Americans, if they’re middle- or upper-class families, then from September 2008, they’re beginning to think about what college are going to be on their lists. And they’re going to be well into it by January 2009.

If you want them to think about NYU Abu Dhabi, you’ve got to have it cataloging, and courses, and you’ve got to be able to say, “These people are going to be the faculty.”

You have to get a lot of stuff done.

New, it doesn’t have to be at the level of detail you need by the time you open. The biology course doesn’t have to be worked out week by week. But you have to be able to explain to prospective students how you’re going to teach them biology.

ELLEN SCHALL: John’s dream started to take shape. In an early visit to Abu Dhabi as the MOU was negotiated, I was with Linda Mills in the Emirates Palace. I remember moments of uncertainty and anxiety: Could this happen? Would it actually come to fruition?

But when you look back on the history of NYU, its capacity to reinvent, to imagine things that aren’t possible, it’s very much a place that isn’t bound by its history but driven by people who help us think about what could be.

Our wish was to develop students who could take up leadership positions across the globe and create a more peaceful, thoughtful world.

JOHN SEXTON: We decided that the first people we would deal with would be principals and guidance counselors. We wanted to let them know something big was happening, something new: initially, it was me and Maritiz and Hilary – and, when on board in 2008, Al Bloom.

ELLEN SCHALL: I was the person who brought Al Bloom’s name to John’s attention. My brother had worked for Al at Swarthmore and called to tell me Al was retiring.

I walked into John’s office and told him that – and John called Al that afternoon.

John Sexton: We decided that the first people we would deal with would be principals and guidance counselors. We wanted to let them know something big was happening, something new: initially, it was me and Maritiz and Hilary – and, when on board in 2008, Al Bloom.

AL BLOOM: I was president of NYU Abu Dhabi. I thought it was probably a recommendation he had for a student or faculty member he’d like me to hire at Swarthmore.

I was dealing with the press, and with the fact that I was going to be leaving Swarthmore in a year, so I called him back a week later. He said to me, “I hear you’ve just decided to step down from Swarthmore, and I wanted to tell you about a project that I and NYU are undertaking that I thought you might find interesting.”

The call went on for about an hour. John started by talking about creating a liberal arts college of the highest quality in Abu Dhabi, based on a partnership with the Abu Dhabi government. He went on to say that it would be nested within a larger research university, and committed not only to the best of the liberal arts tradition, but to preparing students to be global citizens, leaders of a global world.

I listened, thinking that I was leaving Swarthmore in part because I wanted to go into international education, and that it was quite amazing to have this call within a week of when I had told people I was stepping down.

We made an arrangement to meet each other in New York soon after that. Over the summer, what at first seemed like a total dream became an increasingly exciting reality.

In September 2008, I was appointed vice chancellor.

JOHN BECKMAN: Our idea was that we were going to establish a first-rate, liberal arts research university. Being able to recruit somebody like Al Bloom sent a signal – that serious people were trying to build a serious place.

And we have experience in working in education in the Middle East.

AL BLOOM: I was there to witness the last negotiations, when the initial contracts were signed. I spoke to the board of my dreams for NYU Abu Dhabi. From that point on, it was about setting up recruitment, how we would get students, how we would get faculty, and what the curriculum would be, although groups of NYU faculty had already discussed the curriculum in many ways.

I remember bringing the head of admissions from Swarthmore to New York and saying, “The only way we can recruit around the world is if we get to know the top high schools in the world.”

IIE does undergraduate admissions for no one. But they run the Fulbright Scholar Program and the Gilman International Scholarship Program. They are the platinum standard of international education, working in about 180 countries.

I had the idea that NYU Abu Dhabi could be presented as a very special project that might fit with in IIE’s mandate – and perhaps get the permission of their board. Of course, I recused myself from those discussions. But Allan Goodman, the president, was able to persuade the board that this idea was unique, essentially like a Rhodes Scholarship for undergraduates.

ALLAN GOODMAN: The president of NYU has traditionally been on the board of the institute, a relationship that goes back many years.

IIE was founded in 1919, right after the end of World War I. The aim was to get Americans out of their comfort zone and make sure they interacted with the rest of the world, but also make sure the rest of the world knew they could study in America.

The founder, Elba Root, one of NYU’s alumni, was part of the progressive internationalist movement. Its supporters believed that if you get people studying in each other’s countries, going to each other’s classes, they would better understand each other and so prevent another world war.

IIE has succeeded in many things since then. They haven’t prevented other wars, but we hope we contributed to having fewer.

IIE. Linda Mills and I went to see Allan Goodman at IIE.

ELLEN SCHALL: Something big was happening, something new. And we have experience in working in education in the Middle East.

AL BLOOM: I was there to witness the last negotiations, when the initial contracts were signed. I spoke to the board of my dreams for NYU Abu Dhabi. From that point on, it was about setting up recruitment, how we would get students, how we would get faculty; and what the curriculum would be, although groups of NYU faculty had already discussed the curriculum in many ways.

I remember bringing the head of admissions from Swarthmore to New York and saying, “The only way we can recruit around the world is if we get to know the top high schools in the world,” which is what NYU Abu Dhabi did. How in Mongolia, and in Ecuador, and in Malaysia do you raise the reputation of the school?

LINDA MILLS: Once the decision was made that we were going to do a four-year college and start bringing students, I would have to think through a plan. So I sat down with Allan.

How would we scout talent? Nobody had ever done that before for an entire university.

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THE ORIGIN STORY: AN ORAL HISTORY OF

ALLAN GOODMAN: My first encounter with the NYU Abu Dhabi idea began when I attended the American Council on Education’s annual conference with a fellow named John Sexton. John was on one panel talking about international education. I was on another talking about international student exchanges.

When I’d finished mine, I went to his session. It was overwhelmingly crowded, standing room only. I was in the back with maybe half a dozen university presidents while John was talking about a global network university – and NYU’s concept of being in and of the city and of the world.

He was describing a system whereby students could enter NYU without geography as an obstacle. A student could receive an NYU education in multiple locations. And the faculty could also cycle through.

One Big Ten president poked me to say, “Hey, he’s not talking about studying abroad. He’s talking about a whole paradigm shift of what higher education is and does.”

That was my eureka moment.

John and I talked pretty soon afterward. He said he was going to road test the idea by actually going to Abu Dhabi and teaching students in the Sheikh Mohamed Scholars Program.

I thought it was a brilliant way of anticipating all the problems that the lawyers – John being a lawyer – would have. Or trustees or students, their parents, and especially faculty, who would think Abu Dhabi is not a good place to go.

It’s pretty hard to argue with someone who says, “I’ve driven the car, I’ve tested the tires, I’ve gone 100,000 miles.” It allows people who are advocates, as I was, to say, “He isn’t just talking abstractly and then letting a staff make it happen. He’s understanding what it’s like to teach religion, the separation of church and state, liberal arts on the ground.”

LINDA MILLS: To identify potential students for this visionary idea, we needed people in-country, who understood those countries and would have enough connections with school principals and teachers who could identify the best students.

They had to have sensibility and mindset – to feel comfortable sending their students to Abu Dhabi and endorsing NYU Abu Dhabi to parents.

It wasn’t enough to identify talent. We had to convince teachers and principals that this new project really was a viable option.

We knew we were competing with Harvard, Princeton, Yale, MIT. So we started to have very intimate events in which we’d identify the top principals and teachers at the top schools in each country or region. These meetings took place in hotels around the world.

I remember going to Berlin and having this remarkable event where there were probably 20, 25 teachers sitting around the table. We were in a hotel that was very close to the Berlin Wall, which had a deep resonance.

Working with IIE on materials, it occurred to me that we needed to imagine a curriculum of what students would do over four years that would make their experience different from every other college experience in the world.

JOSH TAYLOR: I had worked at NYU from 2003 to 2006 and then left to go do other things. In early 2008, I started reading about Abu Dhabi and was fascinated.

I got back in touch with John Beckman and said, “If, at some point, you’re looking to get help with this, it’s the kind of project that could have a huge impact. It will be a little controversial. And it’s not something that will ever allow me to be bored – which sounds great.”

It took about a year, but I wound up coming back to NYU and joining the project.

The initial idea was that I’d be working for the project from New York. I was a lifelong New Yorker, except for about a year and a half in California, and I never thought I’d go farther than San Francisco.

But in a post-9/11 era, the idea of trying to come up with a new mechanism to engage US-Middle East dynamics was really important to me.

The hardest part of my role was: How do you talk about a place that doesn’t exist? How do you speak about yourself in the company of the Ivies and Stanford and Oxford and Cambridge without sounding like you’re either bragging or certifiable? We were somewhere in between.
I would say from the beginning: There are four things we have to do in admissions.

We have to match with the right kids. And that means possibly turning down kids with a perfect grade point average and a perfect SAT score and great letters if they don’t have that cosmopolitan gene.

Then we have to retain them. Because if 100 come and 30 leave, it’s over.

Then we have to fulfill them, so that at the end of four years they’re glad they came.

And then we have to place them in the best graduate and professional programs or careers in the world.

From day one, we have to be looking at what they’ll be doing four years from now.

So admissions was tough, because they had to be students that Harvard and Oxford and Beirut-Peking would want. But they also had to have the genes of cosmopolitanism and ecumenism.

I was very nervous – but also liberated by this possibility.

Linda and Mariët and Hilary said to me, “We’ll get it done.”

LINDA MILLS: We were a very collaborative team.

That’s the startup nature, which is that everybody pitches in, in whatever ways they think they can help.

It was amazing to do it with John. It was amazing to do it with my colleagues. And it was amazing that I could play this role – to create an environment in Abu Dhabi that everybody said they wouldn’t go to.

I was especially sensitive to the concerns of parents. They saw the Middle East as a war-torn place. They were not going to send their children there. With my own family background and the experience of trauma, I understood how they felt.

In the very early years, when I was talking to countless parents, especially Americans, about the safety and security issues in Abu Dhabi, I could bring that dimension to the conversation and reassure them.

At NYU, we know the security and stability of Abu Dhabi and the Emirates – and the sense of safety.

And we had planning expectations, of course, about the size we would eventually get to. But who knew, going in, what the applicant pool would be?

JOHN SEXTON: Early in 2009, a terrifying reality hit me. We knew by then that we were going to have a great curriculum and a great faculty – that the quality of the education was going to be as good as any. And we thought we had something else – the notion of the ecumenical, integrated university that had never existed before.

The realization I had that was terrifying was: The world could not judge the faculty and the curriculum. Everybody claims to have excellent faculty.

But the world would know how to judge the quality of our students.

The one thing parents know is, “Did the best kid or one of the two or three best kids from my kid’s high school go to NYU Abu Dhabi last year?” If the kids who went to NYU Abu Dhabi last year from my kid’s high school came from the middle or bottom of the class, well, I know where NYU Abu Dhabi fits. But if the valedictorians went, or the kid in the top two or three, ah, now I know where it fits.

What was going to define us most out there in the talent market was the quality of the first class.

We had been in hotels and talking to guidance counselors around the world. And we’d brought in IIE to help us.

But I didn’t think we could do it.

So in early 2009, in a meeting with Linda Mills and Mariët and Hilary, I said, “I don’t think we should open in September 2010, because I don’t think we’re ready to produce that group of kids.”
LINDA MILLS: In the first six months, we didn’t quite have the introduction right. Then we asked the students to bring an object from home. So there are 50, 100 students in the room, and everybody stands up and says what this object means to me. What’s so profound about that experience is the relationship between home, family, and country. One of the most moving moments was a Rwandan student who opened up his object, and it was a UN flag. He said, “This is my family. This is who saved me. My parents died.”

The object became a shared experience. Everybody talked about their objects with one another. All of a sudden, there was a means by which people could have a conversation.

They went to class, and then they heard about student life, and then in the evening they went to the desert.

The desert in Abu Dhabi is very special. We arrive as the sun is going down. It’s a powerful bonding experience. By now they’ve had a very complete day, some of them traveling as much as 36 hours to get there.

The next day they had a moment with John, where he would talk about the vision. He did what I used to call “paradoxical intervention” and said, “I don’t want you to take a slot, I don’t want you to come unless you’re serious about coming. And we’re not going to think that all of you are the right fit.”

Sometimes it’s important to be lucky as well as good.

AL BLOOM: One of the distinguishing features of the student body in Abu Dhabi is that there is no dominant culture. There is not the feeling that you are there to assimilate into an American or French or Chinese university. Rather, everyone is working together from different perspectives to figure out the best ways they can build a united and cooperative and productive world.

The first Candidate Weekend, when the kids were coming back from the desert, one group of about 30 kids on a bus started singing, “Move It, Move It” from Madagascar – in 29 different languages simultaneously.

RIMA AL MKARRAB: The composition of the class is purposeful. There are nearly 120 nationalities at any given time. There is no single majority, because it is healthy and appropriate to figure out: How do you live when you don’t have the comfort and power of the majority, when you aren’t in the dominant position?

When you are just like everyone else, how do you behave? How do you befriended people? Do you form an identity, and what makes you form that identity?

We think there are common values to bind you – that you can form a united community, even though you’re very different, and still keep your own identity.

LINDA MILLS: We sculpted something profoundly different from what any other university had done. We had top students from around the world, the most diverse class, incredible spokespeople, and people who were articulate about why they made the choice.

Is this the right place for me?

"هل هذا هو المكان المناسب لي؟"

"أود أن أشارك في هذا المشروع"
THE CHARLIE GENE

JOHN SEXTON: We had five Candidate Weekends a year every year. Until the end of my NYU presidency, I participated in every one of them.

As part of the weekend, each kid would spend two hours in a group session with me. I would explain to them what I call the essence of the NYU Abu Dhabi difference. I’d introduce them to the word ecumenical or ecumenical, describing the concept of Vatican II, Pope John XXIII, and Teilhard de Chardin as a way of looking at the diversity of the world.

But I’d explain that this religious concept can also be rendered as a secular, progressive view, where one sees the differences among people as a great gift. And how one can adopt an attitude of embrace and view the world not through the one window you’ve grown at birth – whether political or religious or cultural or the sports team for which you root – but rather as through the many facets of a diamond.

Which means entering into a dialogue with the other person, not only to try to convert them, but to truly try to understand the world through the other person’s eyes – and to understand yourself through the way that person sees you.

All of this, I would explain, came to me from a great man, Charlie Winans, who taught me when I was in high school, in the formative years of my life. He had a phrase that encapsulated the spirit of NYU Abu Dhabi: “Play another octave of the piano.”

There are notes you haven’t touched on the piano. Rauch out and touch them. Listen to how they sound. If there’s a food you haven’t tasted, if there’s music you haven’t heard, if there’s a kind of person you haven’t met, if there’s a place you haven’t been, if there’s a food you haven’t tasted, if there’s a music you haven’t heard, if there’s a kind of person you haven’t met, if there’s a place you haven’t been.

There are notes you haven’t touched on the piano. If it’s legal and moral and not one of those things, try it once. And then if you don’t like the way anchovies taste, fine. Don’t eat anchovies again. Or if you’re in Iceland, and on the menu they have the thing that is culturally specific to Iceland but nobody ever orders, which is the fermented shark meat, you order it. And when they bring it to the table and its smell fills the room, you eat a piece of it. And if you don’t like it, you never order it again. But do it once.

That’s what I call the Charlie gene. Are you a truly ecumenical person? Are you a person who is going to embrace that way of being in the world as part of your mission? Because we’re born in Abu Dhabi with a particular mission. To create the finest school in the world, plus.

The finest school in the world, and the plus is that we want to bring together the most diverse student body in the world. Really diverse. Economically, from every sector of society. Geographically, from every corner of the world. And we want to bring those human beings together and cause them to love each other and every one of the other people in the class over the four years they interact.

If you want to hide from people, this isn’t the place to come. If you want to divide people, this isn’t the place to come. Go do that in the world. Just don’t do it here. Because this is a sacred pact – that we’re going to try to live this way.

Then when we will disperse $50 of you a year into the world, and you will go to the four corners of the earth to use the talent you’ve been lucky enough to be born with. Because all of us were the lottery if we were born smart.

But if you’ve been born smart, you have an obligation to use it in some way to improve the world.

RIMA AL MOKARRAB: One of the core values that was really important to NYU, to Abu Dhabi, and to me was that access to a high-quality education should not put you into crippling debt.

That’s why we designed the financial aid policy the way it is. This opportunity should be available to everyone – every Arab, every person in the world who can get into this really great university. Your financial status will not be a barrier.

DIANE YU: We did our best to make it very clear early on that the opportunity had to be affordable to students worldwide.

LINDA MILLS: From a sudden, NYU Abu Dhabi opened doors that NYU New York couldn’t open to a whole set of disadvantaged students from all over the world, which provided them with a world-class education and a transformative experience that meant they would be positioned differently for the rest of their lives.

JOHN SEXTON: If I find a kid who is unable to pay for a pencil, I can still give that kid the best education in the world. If a kid is good enough, I can provide that kid with an NYU education in Abu Dhabi.

The finest school in the world, plus.

LINDA MILLS: We gathered the momentum from the students themselves. They were looking for what they could connect to – for what it was initially that got all of us intrigued, interested, and profoundly invested.

JOHN SEXTON: Al Bloom told us, “If you want 100 acceptances, you’ve got to make 180 offers – if you can find 180 qualified kids.”

At this point we knew we’d have quality.

We made 180 offers, because Swarthmore’s yield had been 60%.

About 140 kids said yes.

So we opened with a class of 140.

Once we got that initial class, we were off and running.
DIANE YU: It might have been a bit of a risk for those because it was a school with no history, no pedigree, but the idea of this university in the desert appealed to many. And when we included the Candidate Weekend strategy of bringing some of the very best of those candidates to campus — well, we didn’t even have a campus then — to the country to meet each other, to have some sample classes, to have opportunities to interact, to have their own time to bond in the desert, we found that after those two and a half days, the camaraderie was so strong that, with the help of social media, students started talking about this place as the most exciting place in the world to go to college.

That helped us attract not only great candidates, but also to enjoy one of the most extraordinary yields of any university in history when it came time to offers going out and being accepted. We broke a lot of records in the admissions strategy and process.

It turned out to be a very savvy calculus, because in terms of our ability to attract some of the world’s most talented and outstanding students, we pulled out all the stops and were able to bring that kind of student body together for the very first class.

That set a tone, a level of expectation and excellence we’ve tried our utmost to maintain since.

JOSH TAYLOR: Once we started recruiting a class, it was immediately evident that there was something special going on.

LISA TAYLOR: I first learned about NYU Abu Dhabi from my husband, Josh, who brought home the idea in around 2008. As it became more and more real, I knew we would move abroad as a family to embark on this adventure.

We already had a daughter and were thinking about expanding our family. So we visited before making the decision to move, to see what it was like and whether we could visualize ourselves there.

When people asked me, “Why Abu Dhabi?” and “What’s your point of view?” I said, “It’s the most familiar unfamiliar place you’ll ever be.”

You see all these things that you’d find anywhere in the United States or any global city — and then you find them juxtaposed against deserts and camels.

RIMA AL MOKARRAB: In over 10 years of working on this project, nurturing it, and loving every minute, there are some things that stand out as learnings.

The first is to have enormous faith in the adventurous spirit of 18-year-olds all around the world, who immediately understood what we were trying to do and believed we were going to deliver it.

They then jumped and convinced their parents to jump, saying, “I’m going to Abu Dhabi to enroll in this brand-new university that didn’t exist before. I’m going to bet my future educational career that this university is going to be a force for good, and that it’s real.”

My role was admissions, but I didn’t come until after the first year of recruitment. In 2010, right before the freshmen were coming in that fall, I joined the team.

Our amazing advantage was that we could bring students to tell their own story. I’m a grownup. Who’s going to care what I have to say? I’m not the one who is putting myself out there, making a decision to go to college in Abu Dhabi.

But if an interesting student who is my peer says, “I know it sounds crazy, but this is absolutely the best place you could possibly think of. Everyone’s so wonderful.” a prospective student will hear that story really differently.

So we integrated students into the process. One of the primary reasons students said yes was because of the other students. Consistently, applicants were making decisions based on the experience they could see themselves having over four years with the students they met at Candidate Weekend and others.

We have an amazing yield rate, which to me means we’ve doing a really good job in choosing the students who are the best fit and then admitting those who are really committed to being part of this story we’re building.

LISA TAYLOR: Once we started recruiting a class, it was great. Because we could actually start explaining the kind of students who were attracted to a new school in the Gulf.

I remember beginning to talk to The New York Times a few months in advance of finalizing that first class. The reporter understood that this was something really different. The result was one of the first stories about the students, which helped put a real face on NYU Abu Dhabi — that it wasn’t just an abstract idea.

It certainly didn’t mean that stories about controversial topics disappeared. But once reporters got to meet the kind of students who would pick up and move to Abu Dhabi, especially in that first class, it was immediately evident that there was something special going on.

It takes a certain kind of 18-, 19-year-old to do that.


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THE FOUNDING OF NYU ABU DHABI 2005-2010
THE ORIGIN STORY: AN ORAL HISTORY OF
trailblazing F A C U L T Y
كادر تعليمي رياضي
RECRUITING THE FACULTY

SYLVAIN CAPPELL: Building up a top-level faculty that has real standing in the academic world is an enormously complex, time-consuming, and demanding effort. Most people think of universities as a unit. But faculty, to a great extent, live not just in their department but in their field, which is at least as much their self-definition.

When they operate in their professional lives, they have to function in ways that not only justify themselves vis-à-vis the University and to their colleagues at the University but justify whatever initiatives they’re involved in across their particular profession.

Their choice has to make sense to people outside. They have to be able to explain it and even defend it when it’s criticized.

DICK FOLEY: The administration could talk until we’re blue in the face about the opportunity of Abu Dhabi, about changing the face of higher education. By and large, faculty are not individually conservative. But when it comes to their academic or professional lives, they’re pretty conservative: We’ve got this system. It’s worked well in the past. We don’t particularly want it to change.

And we were asking them to change.

So the process has to happen in steps, almost faculty member by faculty member. It certainly has to happen department by department, because the primary way things get done at universities is not at the level of individuals but at the level of departments.

“WHAT’S THE STANDARD NYU WAY OF DEALING WITH THIS?”

DICK FOLEY: In my first months at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, I would say, “We have this problem. What’s the standard NYU way of dealing with it?”

People would look at me and say, “Standard way of dealing with it?”

That gave me a lot of freedom.

We wanted outstanding academic leaders in Abu Dhabi. But we also wanted all this talent we had assembled at the Square to be involved. When we were hiring faculty in Abu Dhabi, there wasn’t really a model out there. We were inventing it.

We didn’t quite know what would work and what wouldn’t work, which means you have to run a lot of experiments, try a lot of things.

SYLVAIN CAPPELL: Our philosophy was that the Faculty Senate needed to be perceived by the faculty as neither a pushover, in automatically approving everything that was coming down the pike, nor as obstructionist, just for the sake of proving independence.

The idea was to have a reasonable position, where we worked for our common goals and vision for the development of the University, educationally and academically. But also, if necessary, forcefully bring back the administration’s attention to matters the faculty thought hadn’t been considered to the extent they should have been.

There were questions about how faculty would be hired, by whom and what kinds of faculty, and what would be the relationships between faculty at a foreign campus and faculty in New York. What kinds of tenure would be granted? Would people have tenure in one place, the other, both? What kind of assurance would people have about permanence of employment, since the region was famous even then for a certain amount of instability?

Admittedly, the Gulf states have been an island of stability in the larger turmoil of the region. Nevertheless, the University and faculty were concerned about what would happen in certain worst-case eventualities. What kind of contracts or guarantees would there be for the different kinds of faculty?

All of these were complex questions, which involved not only faculty concerns but also had legal aspects—some clearly beyond the purview of the Faculty Senate.

There were a lot of things to think through and get to feel comfortable about.

“A PRIVILEGE TO GO”

JOHN SEXTON: NYU is a very, very large place. And NYU Abu Dhabi is relatively small. So you’re talking about a New York faculty of thousands, whereas we needed only 12 to open the first year.

Jared Cohon gave me essential advice, based on his Carnegie Mellon University experience in Educations City in Qatar.

“John, the key thing is not allowing the question presented to a faculty member to be, ‘Will you do us the favor of going?’ You’ve got to make it a privilege to go.”

I took his advice seriously. Even before the faculty began to have the experience of being there and teaching these extraordinary students, we said, “This is a privilege. Tell us why should you be among the select cadre we’ve going to send to Abu Dhabi.”

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But also, if necessary, forcefully bring back the administration’s attention to matters the faculty thought hadn’t been considered to the extent they should have been.

There were questions about how faculty would be hired, by whom and what kinds of faculty, and what would be the relationships between faculty at a foreign campus and faculty in New York. What kinds of tenure would be granted? Would people have tenure in one place, the other, both? What kind of assurance would people have about permanence of employment, since the region was famous even then for a certain amount of instability?

Admittedly, the Gulf states have been an island of stability in the larger turmoil of the region. Nevertheless, the University and faculty were concerned about what would happen in certain worst-case eventualities. What kind of contracts or guarantees would there be for the different kinds of faculty?

All of these were complex questions, which involved not only faculty concerns but also had legal aspects—some clearly beyond the purview of the Faculty Senate.

There were a lot of things to think through and get to feel comfortable about.

“A PRIVILEGE TO GO”

JOHN SEXTON: NYU is a very, very large place. And NYU Abu Dhabi is relatively small. So you’re talking about a New York faculty of thousands, whereas we needed only 12 to open the first year.

Jared Cohon gave me essential advice, based on his Carnegie Mellon University experience in Educations City in Qatar.

“John, the key thing is not allowing the question presented to a faculty member to be, ‘Will you do us the favor of going?’ You’ve got to make it a privilege to go.”

I took his advice seriously. Even before the faculty began to have the experience of being there and teaching these extraordinary students, we said, “This is a privilege. Tell us why should you be among the select cadre we’ve going to send to Abu Dhabi.”

Mariët and Hilary were the ones who drove that process.
The repetition of that message was crucial, because the bias of most people was, “If you want to go to Abu Dhabi, you’re not going to be of the same caliber as people who were hired in New York. Who would want to go to Abu Dhabi if they could be hired in New York?”

We needed to evolve to a place where we recognized that what we were offering – a faculty position at NYU Abu Dhabi – was extraordinary and had very many distinctive, mission-driven features that would be attractive to the finest faculty.

Adjusting the mindsets of faculty so that we agreed on the standards we were looking for was the most important accomplishment in the first few years of our faculty hiring.

The second significant element in recruitment is that when we began, we had no faculty in Abu Dhabi. So the faculty search committees were constituted entirely of New York faculty.

Naturally, they brought to the process a set of goals shaped by their New York experience. But the New York experience wasn’t necessarily identical to our aspirations for Abu Dhabi.

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Naturally, they brought to the process a set of goals shaped by their New York experience. But the New York experience wasn’t necessarily identical to our aspirations for Abu Dhabi.

In the first place, NYU Abu Dhabi was starting out as a purely undergraduate institution. We expected to build graduate programs over time, but our student body at the outset was undergraduates.

The faculty in New York also taught graduate students and saw graduate education as a fundamental part of their mission. But a curriculum designed, in part, for graduate students would look rather different than a curriculum that focused on undergraduates. A faculty candidate’s research profile and range of interests – whether addressing a particular niche in a field or aiming for broader exposure to the field – would be different if the focus were undergraduates rather than graduate students.

These were the kinds of issues that emerged.

DICK FOLEY: We also thought we might have trouble recruiting faculty members with families.

So we went out of our way to make Abu Dhabi and the campus and the life of faculty there as family-friendly as we could. And we found that we were able to recruit young and mid-career faculty members.

Then we thought we’d have trouble recruiting really, really distinguished senior people. Because it’s always difficult to recruit them. They’re part of the life of a university – and it’s hard work to extract them.

But we were able to do that as well.

JOHN SEXTON: Here, Jess Benhabib became very helpful. Jess was a very respected economist, but also a former dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

We enlisted him to try to help us shape faculty recruitment.
JESS BENHABIB: The initial responses by New York faculty were very mixed. There were questions from some about whether NYU wanted to be in Abu Dhabi. Also, a lot of criticism that the UAE is not a completely democratic society.

You have to have chutzpah to start something like this.

The biggest challenge was to have a coherent plan and an idea that was attractive to sell to the faculty so that they would go along.

But the other big challenge is that whenever anybody gets an offer anywhere in the country, the first question they ask before they think of going to a place is, “Who’s there?”

If nobody is there whom they know – by which they mean other researchers in their field – they won’t go. Because their productivity very much depends on it.

How were we going to create an environment where people would be willing to go? And then create a critical mass of people so that it could turn out to be attractive?

Of course, good faculty is good faculty. But you can’t get them to go there if there’s nobody to talk to.

So the strategy was to focus first on sending our good faculty to spend some time in Abu Dhabi. Then the word gets around that a group of people are there continually in a variety of fields. And then others look around and say, “Look, there may be some concentration of people I can work with.”

Initially, we focused on getting faculty from New York to go. Once there was something close to a critical mass, we could turn to others beyond NYU and say, “Would you like to come?”

One person would not go alone. There had to be an incentive structure so that quite a number would go together.

It wasn’t only a matter of who else would be there. There are also questions such as: Is there a seminar budget? Are there going to be other kinds of visitors? Will there be money to have conferences?

All that had to be put in place as well.
MARIE WESTERMANN: We had to make sure that our partners in Abu Dhabi - but also some very skeptical voices in New York - understood that tenure should be available, as a pathway, to faculty recruited to NYU Abu Dhabi as a school of NYU.

If we couldn’t have tenure there, we could forget about recruiting a top-quality faculty.

Once we developed the model, with the great help of Juan Benhabib, and once we explained to both the provost in New York and our partners in Abu Dhabi that tenure was critical, and that it would also set the University apart from every other university in the Middle East, we would have a recipe for recruitment and credibility with the faculty.

Then we could tell the faculty, “You’re worried about who we are hiring there? We’re going to have you do the reviewing with us.”

We set up committees of tenured faculty in New York to review potential candidates.

But what do you do until you have a tenured faculty in Abu Dhabi? We decided that to verify a really high quality, we had to have the best faculty from NYU New York willing to teach there – and make it possible for them to do so.
HILARY BALLON: When we began, we thought: It’s going to be very hard to tear away the most distin- guished faculty from their very rich, energetic New York lives. We were going to have to come up with a shorter time increment that seemed manageable.

MARIËT WESTERMANN: So we agreed that we could have semester-long courses taught by NYU faculty; seven-week courses that would cover a whole semester of material; and a January term or J-Term, which we developed with Linda Mills and others.

In this way, there was a range of opportunities for faculty based in New York to get involved, but not necessarily to move there for a longer period of time.

We developed a model, which Hilary was very crit- ical in structuring, where in the first years of NYU Abu Dhabi, perhaps as much as 75% of the courses would be taught by faculty from New York – and only the best faculty.

HILARY BALLON: The role of the NYU faculty, whom we called affiliated faculty, was a very dis- tinctive and critical component of the vision. It was critical because the opportunity for New York faculty to participate fully in NYU Abu Dhabi was a key to integrating the two campuses.

If the faculty went back and forth and felt a sense of belonging to Abu Dhabi, just as we anticipated, they would sit with the professor to get an understand- ing of the professor’s goals about what those more experiential activities might be. We would digest them and then come back with a set of proposals.

Providing opportunities for both the New York fac- ulty to go to Abu Dhabi and the Abu Dhabi faculty to come to New York was really one of the most creative moves we made.

JESS BENHABIB: There were concerns about New York faculty being isolated there, far away from ev- erything. Will it be too small a community? Do I really like the expat life?

We overcame those misgivings by making the stays short. They go for seven weeks. And then they go for several years. And sometimes they extend it.

It was a curricular challenge to have seven weeks and then another seven weeks with two different faculty, one the continuation of the course after the other.

But that’s what we could do. To get people there, you have to make it attractive. So you have to be flexible. Everybody has to make compromise deci- sions.

“ONE OF THE GEMS OF OUR CURRICULUM”

HILARY BALLON: The concept of J-Term – Janu- ary term – began in dialogue with Mariët, who was the lead person on the project in the early years. She had gone to college at Williams, where, during J-Term, they brought to Williams artists and all kinds of people whom they couldn’t normally get to come for a full semester.

As we began to talk about Abu Dhabi, we saw a cer- tain analogy – that there would be a remarkable ar- ray of people who might be available to come for a short period of time, during which students would intensively study their single area of expertise.

John was extremely enthusiastic about the idea of a J-Term because it would also allow us to leverage the variety of NYU sites around the world.

In the first year, some of my colleagues were quite apprehensive about it. After all, students were very far away from home. We were sending them home for Christmas break. And the idea of having a very short Christmas break and then asking them to come back within a week to 10 days to start again felt as if it might be too onerous and cause too much homesickness.

LINDA MILLS: Yet there was something profound about touching the global experience early on in the first year, which got students out of Abu Dhabi, out of themselves, into those one-on-one classes. They came back happy.

HILARY BALLON: Even in that first year, it was clear that J-Term was a very special experience precisely because of the intensity, the cohort that formed, the day-in-and-day-out contact with a professor. The fact that it was such an encompass- ing three weeks changed the nature of the learning experience from something that was totally cere- bral and about reading into something that was much more lived.

We also tried to build into each course a set of ex- periences that complemented the more academic content – whether field trips or more extend- ed travel or guest speakers. The mix of activities would take a different form, depending on the course.

These courses were offered not just in Abu Dhabi and New York, but at our sites in London and Ber- lin and Buenos Aires and Shanghai.

It was also a thrilling way to discover those other NYU sites. For example, we recruited a professor of history, now provost of NYU Shanghai, Joanna Waley-Cohen, to teach a course on the history of food in China.

Imagine how exciting it is for students – to be studying with this great professor and then walk- ing the streets of Shanghai, going into the food markets, seeing the whole cultural history played out through food. J-Term has turned out to be one of the gems of our curriculum.

We benefited greatly from the amazing work of Carol Brandi, who, after we agreed on the topic, would sit with the professor to get an understand- ing of the professor’s goals about what those more experiential activities might be. She would digest them and then come back with a set of proposals.

Many faculty who were coming to teach in Abu Dhabi didn’t know the place well enough. Carol was essential in developing on-the-ground experi- ences for students.

For the faculty, it became a remarkable way to dis- cover NYU Abu Dhabi and to go off-campus.
It makes a difference to the discourse, to the speaker. And now there are three. And the reason I attracted Dean Mary Brabeck’s attention at Steinhardt was the leadership experience I’d had in Haifa. I’d been dean of students during very tumultuous times. It was during the second intifada, or uprising, at a university where about 30% of the students are Arab. You can just imagine the type of tension that existed on campus – and the need to manage that tension, with both faculty and students.

That sounds interesting. I’ll go.

And yet, virtually every faculty member who has gone to Abu Dhabi comes back to New York convinced that it was worth the effort, that it’s an extraordinary place and really deserves support.

The early steps were to work very hard to get not just the faculty to understand that the future of Abu Dhabi lies in a knowledge economy, rather than investing exclusively in oil or the oil price. Rather than depending exclusively on oil, they would use the money generated from oil judiciously to plan for the future when oil becomes a less valuable commodity.

We would acknowledge that it was a legitimate criticism, which we were trying to alleviate by providing generous funding to bring eminent visitors in the field. Sometimes it was very easy to get the same quality of people to visit and commit and be around New York.

If you’re in the desert, there isn’t that kind of infrastructure. What are you going to do?

We had an evolving strategy. We knew in the early years that to get the kind of academic comity we needed, we would have to rely heavily on New York faculty.

It was in year two or three of our planning that I reached out to Ron Robin, who was senior vice provost of NYU Abu Dhabi from 2009-2017; Steinhardt Associate Dean for Academic Affairs from 2006–2009; Professor of Media, Culture, and Communication at Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development from 2004-2016.

Ron’s role evolved to overseeing faculty hiring. The form of faculty hiring was different from New York. Our children had grown up. It seemed like a perfect time to try something new: That’s how we got to NYU.

From day one, I felt I’d won the lottery. That became infinitely clear, two years later, when I joined NYU Abu Dhabi’s venture, which happened around 2008.

I cannot think of a better job in academia than building a university from scratch.
Having a team that understood they should expect the unexpected was what made it work. You need a very special person to deal with a startup — someone who feels comfortable with surprises, because there turn out to be surprises every single day.

All of a sudden, the lab couldn’t be built on campus, but had to be built 30 minutes away for a number of years. Or there was no place to teach an art class, so we had to go to the housing complex and transform an apartment into an art studio.

It was an exciting experience — but only for people with the stamina and nature to handle it.

DICK FOLEY: There were faculty members in New York who were first movers, willing to take a risk. We owe them a lot.

Many were young, just beginning their academic careers. We were also institution building, which meant that in addition to all the scholarly work we were expecting them to do, they had to build an institution.

The flip side is that we also gave them a lot. If you talk to them, they’ll say they felt it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

There were all sorts of hassles and pains associated with it. But there were glorious pleasures as well.

NYU FACULTY: “FIRST MOVERS”
JESS BENHABIB: Not everybody went. But anybody in New York who was good and wanted to go had the option. It was voluntary.

Some people made more money because they went to Abu Dhabi. But I didn’t hear much criticism that “some people are getting paid more.” The response was, “Fair enough.”

Because there is a cost to those who go. And the cost is very clear. The way academic research works is that you get your ideas from talking to the people in the corridor and at seminars, or with visitors. You need that infrastructure. If you don’t have that, your productivity drops.

People who are about to retire also have their role—and we had some in Abu Dhabi. But to get the young 40-, 45-year-olds to abandon their research and their labs: That’s a huge cost. So you have to incentivize.

After a while, when Abu Dhabi was able to recruit standing faculty of its own and there was a core there, fewer and fewer affiliated faculty from New York were going. The incentive package was substantially reduced, as it should have been—because now you didn’t need New York faculty as much.

RON ROBIN: One of the greatest challenges for faculty was balancing this moment of creation with their research agenda.

For obvious reasons, most faculty wanted to engulf, get their hands really dirty, in building this dream curriculum, this dream campus, from the beginning.

And here we have junior faculty straight out of graduate school, just finished a dissertation. For most, it’s their first job. And they have a research agenda.

We recruited them with the idea that they would meet New York standards. Now they are spending hours and hours and hours building this dream university at the expense of their research time.

We came up with a strategy that has served us well. We extended the tenure timeline in Abu Dhabi by another year, to allow people to spend time building this campus without hurting their research and their chances of becoming tenured.

Another huge challenge was family. Most of our faculty came to Abu Dhabi with spouses, some with young kids, but most with the idea of starting a family, under circumstances where there was a lot of outside pressure connected to building a new university.

On the other hand, we had a community that was second to none, where everybody felt they were in the same boat and stretched out a helping hand. We all went through a rough patch at one time or another. But we knew that somebody was looking after us, looking after our children and our spouses, taking care of the greater community.
HILARY BALLON: In the early years, it was built in structurally to the contracts of the Abu Dhabi faculty we hired that they would first have the opportunity to spend an integration semester or year in NYU New York, to feel themselves a part of the large NYU community. That was important as we were establishing our credibility as a new institution.

There’s no question that we were able to recruit such excellent faculty because they saw themselves as part of NYU and part of American higher education, not at an outpost in a place most of them had never visited before.

But they were not sidelining themselves by going to NYU Abu Dhabi. On the contrary, they were participating in one of the most dynamic universities in America and around the world by taking a job there.

In addition to this integration semester or year, faculty who were hired for Abu Dhabi had the opportunity to take sabbatical years in New York or at other NYU sites.
THE ORIGIN STORY: AN ORAL HISTORY OF

"IT REQUIRED BOTH SIDES TO GIVE A LITTLE BIT"

DICK FOLEY: Everybody had to think about things a little differently, especially the Faculty of Arts and Science departments and faculty. We wanted to be hiring faculty in Abu Dhabi who were, in a sense, New York faculty as well. Obviously, they’d be spending most of their time in Abu Dhabi, and most of their responsibilities would be there. But they would still be history faculty or philosophy faculty or biology faculty. It was something nobody else had tried to do. We thought it was really interesting – to create an American-style liberal arts education in Abu Dhabi. But from the very beginning, we also thought it was a vehicle to keep the improvement, the upward trajectory going in New York City. It's always a balancing act. In the hiring of faculty at Abu Dhabi, we wanted the departments – economics, politics, physics, or my own department, philosophy – to be involved. We wanted their expertise. And also, frankly, we wanted their connections.

All these departments had been doing lots of hiring and had a network of people. Twenty, 25 years ago, the network in physics and philosophy and history would have been mostly North American, with a few countries in Europe – but these days it is almost always international. Some of them were leaving tenured positions at Ivy League universities, saying, “This proposition is so compelling, these students are so incredible, this is where I want to be and what I want to build.” There was also the draw of the city, which is so energetic, entrepreneurial, and welcoming.
“IT WAS AN ADVENTURE”

“I had been at DePaul University, in a great department with really wonderful people. I had no reason to leave. I was not unhappy by any stretch.”

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“I submitted the application, not really thinking anything would come of it. Then, I got an email inviting me out to New York for an interview.”

“I was stunned, because it suddenly became very real to me.”

“NYU had set up a whole schedule, bought the plane tickets, reserved the hotel room. I was set to go. At the very last minute, I got cold feet and said, “I can’t do this. I can’t just give up everything and leave. It’s too risky. I’ve got a great job, what the hell am I thinking?”

“I didn’t even visit, which is also extraordinary. I just went on blind faith. It was an adventure.”

“They did.”

“AN INTEGRATION YEAR”

“In the first year, fall 2009, I had to stay in New York because there was no Abu Dhabi. The Downtown Campus hadn’t even opened yet, so there were no students.”

“In New York, the concept was an integration year. To me, it was critical for new faculty. Because the spirit behind it was to get those new faculty familiar with NYU culture, the sense of what the University was like.”

“I spent that year networking with psychologists all over the University – Arts and Science, Stern, Wagner, Steinhardt.”

“I also spent a lot of time meeting people in very different departments. At that time, I was the only psychologist hired to go there.”

“A lot of us were really young. I was among the most senior faculty – and I had just gotten tenure at DePaul. Many were straight out of graduate school. They would be nervous anywhere, let alone at a university that didn’t yet exist, over 10,000 miles away.”

“We shared a sense of adventure and a willingness to tolerate ambiguity and lack of structure. It sounds very simple, but it’s actually not. If you’re just out of graduate school, you really need a structure in place, where there’s a hierarchy and a way of doing things.”

“So these people who signed on, especially the younger faculty, were taking an extraordinary risk.”

“I contacted John Jost and said, “Look, I’m really sorry, and I know this is a terrible inconvenience, but I can’t do it. Thank you so much for this opportunity, but I probably need to stay where I am.”

“John wrote me back almost immediately and said, “P.J., you haven’t even given us a chance. Just come to New York. It won’t cost you a thing. See a couple of Broadway shows. There’s no obligation whatsoever. Just hear our story!”

“I said, “Okay, fine, I love New York. I’ll come out to New York, why not?”

“So I did. And I was blown away, mostly because I had no idea what NYU Abu Dhabi was trying to be. Once I realized what the reality was, I thought, “This is something extraordinary!”

“I didn’t even visit, which is also extraordinary. I just went on blind faith. It was an adventure.”

“But I treated the vision, that it was going to work, and I thought, “If I just do my job, things will fall into place.”

“They did.”

“IT WAS AN ADVENTURE”

“I was one of the first faculty to be interviewed, to sign a contract.”

“I got an email passed around to the Society for Social and Personality Psychology, advertising a position with NYU Abu Dhabi. I’m a part of the society. The email was from John Jost, a psychology faculty member at NYU. He’s a man whose work I deeply respect and have always admired. So it really caught my attention.”

“My first position out of graduate school was at the American University of Beirut. I find myself attracted to these kinds of positions. When this one came up, my eyes opened wide.”

“I was at DePaul University, in a great department with really wonderful people. I had no reason to leave. I was not unhappy by any stretch.”

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FROM DOWNTOWN to SAADIYAT
الانتقال من المدينة إلى السعديات
MARIËT WESTERMANN: We had no site for our first campus and no idea what it was going to look like. We had no site for our residences. We needed performance spaces. We didn’t know where our athletic facilities were going to be – and we had no labs.

Meanwhile, we had promised a liberal arts college with majors in 18 to 20 fields, from the sciences and engineering to the social sciences, arts, and humanities.

I realized I had to be on the ground to start running what was basically an all-out real estate project. With my great project partner, Rima Al Mokarrab, who came at the same time to be in the Abu Dhabi government, we went around in her car looking at sites.

RIMA AL MOKARRAB: Very early on in the partnership, it was decided that we would take a two-phased campus approach, which would allow us to welcome our inaugural class while the permanent Saadiyat Island campus was still in development.

HILARY BALLON: Mubadala showed us two different sites downtown to consider for our interim campus. The first was a closed-down post office that had great exposure on a main road.

MARIËT WESTERMANN: The other site was the one we ended up choosing, which had been the original fish market. It has a historical resonance for the people of Abu Dhabi and was in a very prime location.

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HILARY BALLON: The Downtown Campus housed the learning spaces, but not the student and faculty housing, or the research facilities.

ELLEN SCHALL: Abu Dhabi is so new. There was very much a sense of the place shifting incredibly rapidly. It was a fish market. Then it was an empty site. And then it was a prefab building that became NYU’s Downtown Campus.

HILARY BALLON: We were very busy with modeling questions, such as the size of the student body, the size of the administration, the curriculum, how many classrooms did we need, what size should they be, and how many offices did we need.

Since we were not, by city regulation, allowed to build science labs there, or student residences, it wasn’t the only facility. But it was the heart of NYU Abu Dhabi in the early years.
DEAN WILLIAMSON: Our interim campus served us very well. It was very intimate, two modular buildings, where you would get up from your office and see faculty, students, staff—every day, seven days a week.

HILARY BALLON: One of the biggest surprises was how appealing the Downtown Campus was. These were very, very modest facilities, and yet there was an intimacy people really appreciated. We created two buildings connected at the third floor. The ground level framed an open area and led to a garden. That open area became the central meeting place. Anyone coming and going from the building crossed it, so there was the sense of a community, where you knew everyone.

AL BLOOM: It was a beautiful garden, a little oasis next to the two major academic buildings.

MARIËT WESTERMANN: The garden was going to be a parking lot. I said, “Can we please not have another parking lot? We need some shelter from the environment, but also a verdant place people can look at from their apartments.”

HILARY BALLON: This prefab structure turned out to be so hospitable and nurturing to the project. The downtown location was wonderful because our community were naturally intrepid explorers. They walked all the streets. And where we were located, there was a lot of urban fabric to explore. That sense of really being in Abu Dhabi was something people prized.

AL BLOOM: True to the name Downtown Campus, it was right in the middle of Abu Dhabi city. The buildings were purple, a great stroke of distinctiveness in a city that doesn’t have much purple.
Rima Al Mokarrab: At that time, real estate inventory in Abu Dhabi was remarkably difficult to find, with demand far outweighing supply. Our real estate team had a monumental task, but they identified two options for housing – a community of low-rise villas and a new-build high-rise.

Mariët Westermann: Rima and I had looked at compounds and other buildings coming online. None of them was very suitable. And all were a little far from the Downtown Campus.

Rima Al Mokarrab: Ultimately, we all agreed that the new-build high rise, in close proximity to the Downtown Campus, was not only convenient and in keeping with the University’s urban feel, but that vertical living would bring forth a sense of community in those early days.

Mariët Westermann: It’s a little hard to have a vertical campus, but if you have the bottom floors for student dormitories and residences, and you have the dining hall and a little grab-and-go and a bookstore and the gym, it might work.

Hilary Ballon: It was a very short walk, only a few minutes away; from the Downtown Campus, which was a high priority – to create an experience that would not require commuting by bus. We took floors there for student and faculty residences, and also for some of the student life spaces that the Downtown Campus couldn’t accommodate.

Our unified urban campus was born.

Josh Taylor: The amazing thing about NYU Abu Dhabi, especially early on, was just how much of a community it was.

Lisa and I had met working at NYU, so we were accustomed to working with one another. But I was struck by the symbolism. I was there with my family, but then, suddenly, our family became much bigger.

We were all in it together. We knew we were all crazy — and we embraced it. We worked really hard, but because we were a startup, there weren’t instant boundaries between staff and faculty, or, for that matter, even with students.

When our son was born in Abu Dhabi, on the day we came home from the hospital there were students waiting to meet the baby.

December 7, 2009
NEWS RELEASE
NYU ABU DHABI OPENS DOORS TO DOWNTOWN CAMPUS

His Excellency Khaldoon Al Mubarak, Chairman of the Executive Affairs Authority said: “The opening of the downtown campus today represents a major milestone in the establishment of NYU Abu Dhabi. Alongside other new and existing institutions, NYU Abu Dhabi will contribute to the development of the Emirate’s education system, the diversification of the local economy, and the establishment of Abu Dhabi as one of the world’s true cultural capitals.”
ENSHURING THE SYSTEMS

MARTY DORPH: My predecessor, Jeanne Marie Smith, had been the central player in the negotiations, from a finance and administration standpoint. When I came on board as CFO, she continued in that role.

It was only once Jeanne Marie moved on to other things in early 2009 that I became directly involved in what was happening in Abu Dhabi. We’re going to have this four-year campus in this other part of the world. How do we do accounting? Have administrative systems? Have technology? Have all the things that we need to run a university in place?

The Downtown Campus building was occupied, and staff began to come onboard. Now we had to figure out how to pay people. There were a lot of glitches around things like making sure our accounting system in Abu Dhabi was talking to our system in New York.

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At the END of the FIRST year

DAVE McLAUGHLIN: We had a very small standing faculty or tenure-track faculty in Abu Dhabi, whose quality was higher than our expectations. And the student body from the first year was just stellar. Their high school credentials placed them at the very top of students at Harvard, Stanford, and Princeton.

The facilities, while temporary, were very good. We had a strong group of affiliated faculty who were there from New York. We were beginning the Research Institute with some strong research projects. And the public outreach was going full speed by then.

All in all, at the end of the first year, we were extremely pleased by where we were.
HILARY BALLOON: Very early on, the government of Abu Dhabi determined that Saadiyat Island would be the site for the permanent campus.

In 2007, Saadiyat was a natural sand island about a mile off the coast of the main island of Abu Dhabi. It was completely undeveloped, without any vehicular access. My first trips to the site were by boat.

The Emirate had established an entity called the Tourism Development and Investment Company, or TDIC, to develop a diversified tourism program in Abu Dhabi. One element of the broad program was to make Saadiyat Island a cultural and resort destination, since the beaches and aquamarine water are natural attractions.

RIMA AL MOKARRAB: In terms of design, we wanted the Saadiyat Island campus to be unique. It was offering something new in the world, different from NYU in New York. The campus should embody its global character and novel approach to higher education, including NYUAD’s “hybrid” nature. It would embody the philosophy of a liberal arts college, with its intimate spaces, where the community could think, be creative, and come together. But it should also reflect the scope of larger research universities, taking the best of both kinds of institutions.

HILARY BALLOON: TDIC had a plan for the island that subdivided it into six different zones, with a target population of approximately 120,000 people when it was fully developed after 20 or so years. When Mariet and I attended a meeting in the offices of the firm TDIC had hired to work on the Saadiyat plans, we learned that the University would be located in the marina district.

First, we had to tell the firm how much land we needed. It took an intensive space planning effort in 2007-2008 to answer that question for the decades ahead.

In the spring of 2008, we made a request for a certain number of acres. It turned out that we would have a site significantly smaller than what we requested. Of course, that seemed disappointing. But in the end, the size of our site became an asset, because we built a denser campus.

Given how small we would be in our early years and our desire to have a pedestrian environment, our having a compact campus was very helpful.
“SHARED LABOR VALUES”

DIANE YU: Labor values were a topic of conversations right from the beginning, along with academic freedom and openness and diversity among students and faculty. We set out to do something different, unique in the region, including shared labor values.

MARIËT WESTERMANN: The statement of workers’ rights was truly progressive. In the summer of 2009, we sat in Abu Dhabi, going over every condition.

JOSH TAYLOR: We were very proud of our labor standards, which we had worked with our partners to develop. When they were released in 2009, they were recognized for setting a new bar for that part of the world.

HILARY BALLON: The agreement between NYU and the government of Abu Dhabi said we would determine the highest prevailing standards affecting the labor of those highest prevailing standards would be recognized for setting a new bar for that part of the world.

RIMA AL MOKARRAB: As a result, the government of Abu Dhabi said we would determine the highest prevailing standards affecting the labor of those highest prevailing standards would be recognized for setting a new bar for that part of the world.

JOSH TAYLOR: And that those highest prevailing standards would be recognized for setting a new bar for that part of the world.

JAY BARGMANN: It became a rather extraordinary experiment, because the time schedules were completely off the wall. But the people in the local organizations that controlled the project had a level of commitment and sophistication that is hard to imagine anywhere else.

RIMA ANDERSON: We had our offices in the middle of the UAE, and we had to be on site. We had one piece of information before we even left the UAE. And finally, we wanted to lead by example, with a campus that reflected the values and priorities of Abu Dhabi and New York — and the meeting of those two seemingly disparate worlds.

RAFAEL VIÑOLY: So how do you translate an institution that is organized in the center of the economic and political power of the world, New York City? How can it adapt itself to a situation that is completely different without losing its identity — and without trying to impose its identity on a place that is already very well developed?

JAY BARGMANN: Rafael and I had been working together for 20 years. We’re a very atypical firm in that we have a wide variety of projects. We do performing arts centers, convention centers, housing. We do office buildings, but I also really enjoy running big jobs.

RAFAEL VIÑOLY: We were very proud of our labor values, and we set out to do something different, unique in the region, including shared labor values. And that those highest prevailing standards would be recognized for setting a new bar for that part of the world.

RIMA AL MOKARRAB: The design process was guided by four principles.

It would combine traditional and modern elements to reflect not only Abu Dhabi and New York but also our global mission.

The University had to connect with and contribute to the wider community of Abu Dhabi.

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With Mariët and Hilary and Diane, I had a sense of partnership that Jay Bargmann, who put the project together, adopted immediately. I don’t think the project would exist if it weren’t for him, because how do you manage to deliver the product, with quality, in a ridiculously compressed time frame?

JAY BARGMANN: I must have struck a chord in Hilary and Mariët, because I talked about Rafael but also Jay Bargmann and Andrea Lamberg from a completely blank piece of paper.

When the request for proposal came in, we put together a very detailed proposal that outlined our qualifications and how we would approach the project.

Then we all flew to Abu Dhabi to make the presentation.

Surprisingly, the decision was made very quickly, before we even left the UAE.

RAFAEL VIÑOLY: It became a rather extraordinary experiment, because the time schedules were completely off the wall. But the people in the local organizations that controlled the project had a level of commitment and sophistication that is hard to imagine anywhere else.

Rima and her colleagues: They were a pleasure to relate to and an honor to get to know.

On our team, Jay was the one, along with Stephanie Tung, who did a stellar job in understanding the complexities of the project, because you cannot dissociate form from purpose.

We immediately started working with Hilary Bal- lon and Mariët Westermann and John Sexton in putting together the space plan, listing all the space requirements in a university, which was extremely interesting — to sit down and design a university from a completely blank piece of paper.

HILARY BALLON: It had to be quite fine-grained to align with the amount of space we had.

THE MASTER PLAN: DESIGNING TOGETHER

RAFAEL VIÑOLY: We were doing work in Abu Dhabi on a couple of very large projects, and I already had an office there.

When the opportunity came to apply for the work on the master plan of NYU Abu Dhabi, we had a series of meetings with the two people who were the eyes and ears of the project. John had put together — Hilary and Mariët. They came across as people who really understood, in a much shorter period than it took me, what the project was from the perspective of the mission of the University.

I must have struck a chord in Hilary and Mariët, because I talked about the mission much more than the physical form.

JAY BARGMANN: If you do take the campus view or the way of NYU’s campus in New York and translate it into a site that is so different in terms of size and proximity to other services?

I always say that university people become separated from reality, but for a very good reason. And they’re smart enough to come back to reality when you describe it in a way that doesn’t deny or negate their aspirations.

Integrated into the role of the architect is the temptation to believe that you know more than they do. To a certain extent it’s true, but it’s also true that they know more than you do.

You need to be educated, and they need to be educated.
ARCHITECTS AS TRANSLATORS

RAFAEL VIÑOLY: The real challenges of the project were not related to the design implications of dealing with a harsh climate. They were about creating a sense of proximity that is so typical of villages in the area.

How do you shape the lives of the students and faculty to be in a place where they can have privacy and, at the same time, a sense of that collective?

How do you try to accommodate programming for this extraordinary partnership between the West and the East?

JAY BARGMANN: We had to make sure that the project wasn’t shaped only by the leaders of the University – both NYU New York and NYU Abu Dhabi – but also by the people who were actually participating in it.

What was brilliant is that the University started recruiting faculty and students before the building began. The educational core of the project was easy to follow because it was growing as quickly as the campus was growing.

The plan had one particular challenge that also is a virtue, which is compactness. It’s a site that under urban planning conditions in America would have to have been double the size.

But even if we’d had an endless site, we would still have the challenge – to create a sense of the core while trying to foster a new phase of universities, the dissolution of boundaries between disciplines that 20 years ago were completely separate but are now interactive.

RAFAEL VIÑOLY: From the architectural-cultural perspective, Hilary and Mariot are as responsible for the form of this project as I am. In architecture, we’re translators. And Rima and Khaldoon were as much part of this process as people from NYU New York. It was very, very integrated.

In a normal campus, the academic site is here, the dorms are here, the sports are here. For this project, everything was geared toward making the design as fluid and interconnected as it could be.

JAY BARGMANN: The plan is three plazas, all connected with diagonal walkways that lead in and out of the campus.

NYU – and Hilary particularly - did not want you to be able to walk indoors from one end of the campus to the other. She said, “I don’t want this to be a shopping mall,” which is the first knee-jerk reaction on how to build: Let’s put a roof over this thing and keep everybody indoors.

Instead, you have to go outside to get from one building to another, but you’re always in a shaded space.

RAFAEL VIÑOLY: In this design, it’s very clear that everybody’s together and that you can go directly to your destination in many, many different ways. That’s basically the soul of the project – the idea of a center spine with three buildings shaped like plazas, an interconnected pathway with a colonade, and water flowing alongside it.

Mariot had written an amazing essay on the evolution of the garden, which shows that you don’t need to be a landscape architect or an architect to get things right. That’s the kind of contribution she made.

Everything was like a discovery exercise.

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A typical way of building in the Middle East is a process called design build. It’s very rarely done in the United States – and almost never at the university level. You’re hired by the contractor, and you have to deliver a high-quality product on time for a fixed amount of money the contractor has agreed to.

In this case, it was terrific. The price was already agreed. The design was somewhat vague, but there was a great deal of specificity in what rooms were to be provided, what kind of lighting, the acoustic criteria. There could have been very serious tension between the builder and the user or the builder and Mubadala, but there wasn’t.

We were all in a trailer on site every day for three years. I had 200 engineers and architects in an office in the same building as the construction company and the subcontractors, who were all local. Every day, the librarians would come to look at the plans, or the performing arts center people would come to look at the theater plans.

We had a huge tent, in which we would first build a mockup. We actually built a faculty apartment inside this big tent, as well as a student room, a classroom, a lab. So the researcher could come in and see the actual lab, the lab bench, before it went into production in Italy and got shipped to the site. The students could see their bedrooms – how the bathroom and shower and toilet were laid out.

We encouraged it. To us, that’s the insurance. If you can get the user to walk into the laboratory and say, “This bench is exactly what I want,” you don’t have a problem when you deliver 100,000 square feet of lab and they walk in and say, “Ooh, I didn’t know I was getting this.”

It was all done in such a collaborative, open-book way.

Abu Dhabi is a very international place. The laboratory case work was prefabricated north of Milan in Italy. The glass came from China. The precast concrete came from Dubai. The stone came from India. If you think about where Abu Dhabi is, it’s the nexus of all those settings. So it was really a terrific place to work.
HILARY BALLON: The premise was that it would be a residential campus, a departure from the norm of the UAE universities, which are mostly commuter schools.

There were other dimensions of student life we would take for granted in an American context. I brought a group of Mubadala colleagues to Princeton to see the campus, in part because Rafael Viñoly had done two very significant buildings there, so it was an opportunity to see his work up close.

I remember their surprise and awe, in a very positive way, when they saw some of the dining halls and the athletic fields, which helped us to convey the wider range of activities we needed to support.

The campus would require undergraduates to live on campus. Then there were assumptions built into our planning about the percentage of graduate students and faculty who would live on campus as well. When you look at the campus today, the largest type of use is residential.

One of the successes of the design is the way our architects created a common language for the whole campus, but with enough variety to differentiate three very different kinds of housing – undergraduate, graduate, and faculty.
The challenge in the design process was in managing the expectations of our community. NYU was not the client. We didn’t hire the architect or the contractor. Our role was defined as end-user. And we were fortunate that the architect and our partners recognized that we had valuable information to share about how the campus ought to work. But we didn’t have any contractual role in the process. I felt very strongly that one of the reasons we earned a seat at the table was because we kept disproving the assumption that we would be indecisive, constantly relitigate, be fuzzy-brained professors and not recognize the commercially driven deadlines of the process.

Keeping up with the pace of the project, making decisions in a timely way while drawing in the community: That was a difficult thing to manage, because as we’d bring in professors to look at the design of offices or classrooms, they would have many things to say. Every party wanted more space – but the only way we could grant more space to one party was by taking it from another.

Those were some of the internal challenges.

As we approached the completion of the campus and move-in date in 2014, there was a lot of apprehension about the isolation of Saadiyat. We would say, especially to the faculty, “You are not obliged to live there. You can live wherever you want.” One of the pleasant surprises was how many faculty opted to live on campus and found it an appealing way of life. Even if not for the full duration of someone’s employment at NYU Abu Dhabi, it was a great place to start out as you’re getting to know the city, or when your children are young and you can take advantage of the day care center. It has proven to be tremendously popular. Ten years from now, it will be different again, because Saadiyat will have evolved considerably. I think we will find ourselves surrounded by urban fabric. There will be more natural connections – a transportation system that makes it easier to get to the main island.

When NYU first opened at Washington Square, it was north of the city’s main development. Before long, it was surrounded by New York City. I very much saw the building of NYU Abu Dhabi on Saadiyat Island as about city making. We would be the anchor institution in an entire neighborhood, potentially influencing the kind of development that happens around us. And we’re there for the long haul.

That’s the role universities often play in cities, as institutional anchors that are engines of development.

We moved to the Saadiyat campus with the graduation ceremony of our first class, four years after students had arrived.
MAY 20, 2014: STATEMENT FROM TAMKEEN, NYU ABU DHABI’S PARTNER

NYU Abu Dhabi, and its Abu Dhabi partner Tamkeen, have done and do take all allegations of contractor violations of the labor monitoring and compliance program with the utmost seriousness. The safety and welfare of those who built and operate the NYU Abu Dhabi campus is of paramount importance. In the four years of construction of the NYU Abu Dhabi campus, the groundbreaking labor standards and due diligence monitoring regime has been rigorously applied. As a result, any and all identified violations have been successfully and appropriately rectified. A thorough investigation of the allegations revealed in The New York Times article was begun immediately following its publication on May 16, 2014. Once the investigation is complete, the results will be transparently reported, as has been the case in any allegation to date and in line with the ongoing reporting commitment to safety and welfare of those who built and operate the NYU Abu Dhabi campus on Saadiyat Island.

Tamkeen and NYU Abu Dhabi take any allegations of violations of the labor monitoring and compliance program with the utmost seriousness. This appointment follows an international search for the best-qualified firm and consultation with our partner NYU Abu Dhabi. It underscores our joint and ongoing commitment to the safety and welfare of those who built and operate the NYU Abu Dhabi Saadiyat Campus.

JUNE 25, 2014: UPDATED STATEMENT FROM TAMKEEN

Further to Tamkeen’s statement of May 20, 2014: Tamkeen has appointed Nardello & Co. to conduct a review into the allegations made in recent media reports regarding labor and compliance standards as outlined in the project’s Statement of Labor Values related to the construction of the NYU Abu Dhabi campus on Saadiyat Island.

Tamkeen and NYU Abu Dhabi take any allegations of violations of labor monitoring and compliance program with the utmost seriousness. This appointment follows an international search for the best qualified firm and consultative with our partner NYU Abu Dhabi. It underscores our joint and ongoing commitment to the safety and welfare of those who built and operate the NYU Abu Dhabi Saadiyat Campus.

APRIL 16, 2015: NYU-TAMKEEN JOINT STATEMENT ON NARDELLO & CO. REPORT

...We welcome the publication of Nardello & Co’s report, which confirms that Tamkeen and NYU made good faith efforts to set and enforce standards that protected and benefited the substantial majority of the approximately 30,000 individuals who worked on the construction of the NYU Abu Dhabi campus. The report also acknowledges that the labor monitoring compliance program effectively and routinely identified and resolved issues of contractor non-compliance.

The report also identifies that the organizations responsible for the project allowed a compliance gap to occur, which resulted in some subcontractors, employed by the project’s master contractor, failing to comply with the project’s labor guidelines and compliance oversight. This gap affected workers servicing small and/or short-term subcontracts (approximately one-third of the total workforce), most of whom worked on the project during the final stages of construction.

That error – for which we take responsibility – was inconsistent with the project’s publicly stated commitment to ensure that all of those working on the construction of the NYUAD Saadiyat Campus would be covered by our standards and compliance-monitoring program.

Accordingly, we will provide payment to those workers who were not covered by the compliance-monitoring program to bring their compensation into line with what they should have received under our labor standards. NYU and Tamkeen will appoint an independent third party to implement this process, and we will commit to ensuring that we will not allow such a compliance gap to occur in the future.

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living UP to EXPECTATIONS
Peter Christensen: I cried my eyes out. In a way, these were all my kids. I knew them well. I knew their stories.

P.J. Henry: Commencement was in the new campus, which was still being built. There was definitely an excitement. We were all very proud. It felt historic.

Dean Williamson: It’s very emotional to know that you saw it from a hole in the ground to people actually graduating on stage.

It’s such an important day for everybody. For the parents who cry and cry and cry. And the students who cry and cry and cry. And staff like me who cry and cry and cry.

Al Bloom: Then we moved to the campus, architecturally splendid, using Arab as well as international elements. It’s a spectacular place.
DAVE McLAUGHLIN: I like to say that if you take any facility – whether it’s the library or the sports facility or the dormitories or the music facilities or the classroom facilities or the Research Institute’s building – it may not be the best in the world, but it’ll be in the top five of university buildings in the world for every one of them.

DEAN WILLIAMSON: There’s the ground level that spreads out east and west, north and south. You can take any stairwell – there are many – or any elevator throughout the campus up to what we call the High Line. It’s all green and beautiful.

HILARY BALLON: When I walked onto the campus for the first time, I was stunned. It was remarkable to see in three dimensions everything that had begun four years earlier on pieces of paper – to begin by pointing to properties on Saadiyat, to numbers in a space plan, and to see it realized.

It took time for people to become comfortable on the campus, which is completely understandable. Whenever you move into a new space, you bring the patterns from the space you had been in. And it takes a little while to figure out what the new space offers and how you can optimize it.

DEAN WILLIAMSON: What I thought would happen was that faculty and staff would not want to live on campus. People told me: “No one’s going to want to be out in the middle of the desert.”

When we started in June 2014, we had a number of empty apartments, so we filled them with some staff and others.

It turns out that everybody wants to live on campus. Since everything’s full, it makes a huge, vibrant community.

HILARY BALLON: It was a major accomplishment to have produced a campus with architectural distinction. The relationship of the public realm at plaza level to the High Line, the sense of connectivity, that there are so many different vistas afforded in the campus despite the common vocabulary, and the fact that although it was all designed by one architect, there still is a feeling of considerable variety on the campus. Those things amazed me.

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In the first year, there were a lot of startup problems, but by the second year, people realized what a magnificent campus it truly is.

DEAN WILLIAMSON: There’s the ground level that spreads out east and west, north and south. You can take any stairwell – there are many – or any elevator throughout the campus up to what we call the High Line. It’s all green and beautiful.

Even the way the buildings are situated to capture the desert winds so that there’s a constant breeze through the campus and the shading. Rafael Viñoly, along with Hilary Ballon, did a brilliant job with the architecture.

JAY BARGMANN: I’ve been there many times since it’s opened. It’s the most phenomenal thing to go into the dining hall and sit next to two people who are speaking German, and then three people who are speaking Chinese, and then behind you is somebody speaking Arabic.

And you’re just sitting there, taking in all this diversity within a radius of six feet around you.
“TO SEE THE WORLD FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE”

CAROL BRANDT: Our students are from so many places in the world. In coming to the United Arab Emirates as first-year students, they are starting a four-year program outside their home culture or culture.

Even for the Emirati students, coming to a co-educational system, to an American-style university, is a navigation of cultural difference one would normally experience if one were abroad.

I’ve come to realize that the first part of our students’ global education begins in Abu Dhabi on campus in the first three semesters, before they spend a semester abroad.

Creating common ground toward common good across difference is a daily endeavor. It’s not an add-on. Every day, they contend with one another across values and belief systems in the dorms, in the athletic fields, in student government, and in the classrooms. We provide a very supportive environment for exploring who they are and allowing them to grow that identity.

The core program and courses offer an important theoretical foundation for the next element of their global education, which is when students take a semester abroad and intensively immerse themselves in NYU Paris, or NYU London, or NYU New York.

The core courses – for example, on migration, on prejudice, on tolerance, on water – look at significant global issues. They raise questions that are very hard to answer from any one disciplinary perspective. They are there to baffle, to confound, to inspire, to get our students to think critically and contribute to its success.

We want our students to become global leaders and have a certain degree of cosmopolitanism and global competence.

In the best of all worlds, they become peacemakers and conflict resolvers, having the skills of media and sensitivity to other cultures and intercultural communication skills to understand different positions, different perspectives, and having the forms of expression – artistic or otherwise – to help people come together.

For NYU Abu Dhabi students, it’s almost an everyday endeavor.

“Creating common ground toward common good across difference is a daily endeavor.”

CAROL BRANDT
NYU Abu Dhabi Vice Provost and Associate Vice Chancellor, Global Education and Outreach, since 2009

“TO AIM HIGHER, TO DREAM BIGGER”

RIMA AL MOKARRAB: There are a number of mile- stones that will stay with me for a lifetime. One is when Al Injum decided to spend his next 10 years building this amazing place, and give it all his energy, and Fragi, his wife, would also come with him and contribute to its success.

Another was those first Rhodes Scholars. Here was the unavailable academic excellence we had always imagined was possible – in years three and four, before our first graduating class.

It gave us the courage to aim higher, to dream bigger, to say, “This isn’t going to take 50 or 100 years. We’re going to be able to do it faster than we imagined, and then we can do more for our students and for our community.”

Another special milestone was when Bill Bragin left Lincoln Center in New York City for the performing arts center in Abu Dhabi because this is a really exciting place. He wanted to come and build up the artistic and cultural offerings, among the other great Abu Dhabi institutions that are doing that.

And one of the most affirming ones is Mariët van der Eerden, NYU Abu Dhabi’s first provost who went to on great success at the Mellon Foundation. How incredible is it that one of the first people who helped build up the University came back to take it to its next phase. She thought it was so compelling, everything we thought it was going to be, and believed so strongly in it that she wanted to steer it into its next iteration.

I can’t think of any bigger indicator of achievement than that.

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The Origin Story: An Oral History of The Founding of NYU Abu Dhabi 2005-2010

Mariët Westermann:
I was the first employee of NYU Abu Dhabi – employee number one – when I went to work with our partners in Abu Dhabi on this mutual education project of building a kind of university that didn’t exist, very international, with the liberal arts at its core and a lot of NYU-driven research around it.

As I started the work of figuring out where the campus was going to be, what our curriculum might look like, how we would engage the faculty of NYU, how we would recruit our own faculty to NYU Abu Dhabi, I realized that I should move there. I came to love the place a lot.

I was made the first provost of NYU Abu Dhabi, working with our vice chancellor Al Bloom, helping to bring the institution to open in 2010. At which point I had always told the University that I would go back to New York to have my family all together, since not everyone lived with us when we were in Abu Dhabi.

I was then recruited by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to oversee grant making and research, which I did with enormous enthusiasm for nine years. It was a fantastic opportunity to look at higher education, especially in the humanities and the arts, from a very broad perspective across the American landscape and indeed in many other countries.

In the process of doing that work, I got to see even better than I did while we were building NYU Abu Dhabi how unique it was – how unusual and mission-driven.

And so, although I had never expected to go back, when NYU began to talk with me in concert with our partners about becoming a vice chancellor to succeed Al Bloom, I realized after a few months that it was an extraordinary opportunity to lead an institution I had helped to imagine but never thought would be as successful as it has been.

That’s why I’m back.

Rima Al Mokarrab:
An animating ethos for the kind of community we’re creating, the curriculum we’re teaching, the research we’re prioritizing is founded on the idea that problems don’t stay within national borders. We’re all really different, but we’re contending with some of the same issues, so how do you begin to tackle those?

The answer, we believe, is by engaging with your fellow citizens in the world from a place of understanding, of multidisciplinary analysis, a rigorous intellectual base through a global network.

That’s what the University is built to nurture and train you for, because the problems and issues of the future don’t live within a city or a state. They cross the world. Each citizen, each person has a responsibility to their country, and to the global citizenry they are a part of, to tackle those problems together and to work together to the best of their abilities.

If we can provide a framework, a community of people who are ready to do that and do it well, that will have been our great and good contribution to the world.
That tells you that NYUAD has been successful. We just want to make sure we help it along the journey.

MARIËT WESTERMANN: Most unexpected of all has been the success of our students. We knew we would recruit really unusual, talented, and interesting students. We didn't know just how successful they would be immediately upon graduation. We have very high rates of PhD placement. Our graduates go to the best programs in the world across disciplines. We now have 16 Rhodes Scholars out of eight graduating classes of about 1,700 students total, among other competitive honors. It's an extraordinary record for any university to build in 10 years.

WALEED AL MOKARRAB AL MUHAIRI: It's worked so well. The truth is, notwithstanding some of the hiccups we had and the challenges we faced, I think most people view NYUAD as something that, wow, in hindsight we're all so happy to have done it. We've learned so much in terms of how to be a good partner, what it means to create something like this. Everybody is unbelievably impressed with the quality of our graduates, of the folks who have come to visit Abu Dhabi or to study here, a good number of whom have now made Abu Dhabi their home, either as graduate students or people who have entered the workforce.

KHALDOON AL MUBARAK: Ten years ago, none of us would have imagined what this institution has become. Maybe John and His Highness could see it. I knew it was going to become a good university, but now it is playing out as a world-class institution, with world-class faculty and students. The true achievement is in the speed at which we have seen tangible results — this level of success this quickly. Just incredible.

If you had painted this picture 10-15 years ago, where we are now in 2020, I would not have believed it.

JOHN SEXTON: The whole project is built upon a kind of quixotic hope — that together we can create a community drawn from every sector of the world's society and send out these kids as leaders committed to a cosmopolitan, ecumenical world. That's been my life — to try to tilt at the windmills that are necessary to get there.

SHEIKHA MARIAM: NYU Abu Dhabi has exceeded my expectations. It’s not just the curriculum and the faculty and the administration, but the atmosphere you feel when you walk onto that campus, the diversity of the student body, the research that’s being done, and the expertise that is available. It’s all of these things.

I grew up at a time when your educational choices after high school were still relatively limited, especially if you wanted to stay in Abu Dhabi. So to walk onto the NYU campus now and see everything that is happening there, along with all the other options that are available to young people in our country today: It really does make you proud.

NYUAD is already adding real value, not just to its own students and faculty, and not just to Abu Dhabi, but to the whole country — which is really promising for the future.

WALEED AL MOKARRAB AL MUHAIRI: Remember, we're still growing. We still haven't hit full capacity yet — although that's secondary.

What is primary is that there are going to be a few hundred folks who graduate every year. They will be recognized over time as productive members of society, whether they're Emiratis or others. Ultimately, this institution will be woven into the fabric of Abu Dhabi and UAE society.

Fifteen years from now, people are going to say: Wow, this is such a great university. We’re so happy about the dialogue, or the community efforts, or the type of thought leadership you would expect an institution like this to have, and the integration the University has with the overall community.

Shadha Saeed AlHamadi: My expectation was that the University would have a strong impact on the local community and the students would be able to have a holistic learning experience.
THE students SPEAK: FIRST graduating class

من منظور الطلاب: الدفعة الأولى
"I was passing by my high school principal's office one day, and he called me in. 'You'll never believe this,' he said. 'I just got off the phone with NYU, and they want us to nominate a student for their school in Abu Dhabi.'

"I didn't really know what Abu Dhabi was."

May 25, 2014

NEWS RELEASE

New York University President John Sexton and NYU Abu Dhabi Vice Chancellor Alfred Bloom officiated at the University's inaugural Commencement ceremony in Abu Dhabi today. Some 140 students from 49 countries received their undergraduate honors at the ceremony.

Voices

2014

"I got invited to the March Candidate Weekend and had to rush a passport to get here. I fell in love with the campus."

"It was August. I remember stepping out of the Dubai Airport. My very first impression was, 'It is really hot.'"

"If I ever need to go on a world trip again, I can couch surf in almost every country."

"The thing I didn't expect is that it's not over. It doesn't resolve. You can access all these worlds that you only catch a little glimpse of, and then it sends you out searching and searching and searching and searching."
"We, the graduates of the inaugural class, have the obligation to go out there and try to make a change."

"I have traveled to over 15 countries."

"I'm displaying the lives of three Salvadoran artists and the artwork they produced during the civil war."

"College couldn't just be about learning a certain discipline. It had to be about pushing myself to understand a little bit more about my place in the world."

"One of the things I've learned from my four years here is how to sleep with my eyes open. I have Foundations of Science to credit for that."

"It was so interesting to come to where I'd be meeting someone who's on the other side of a world conflict."

"It's a decision that relies only on us. What are we going to do with those tools?"

"The idea of being in the inaugural class: I thought it was amazing."

"It's exciting and scary at the same time, because we were pioneers."

"I have flown over every single continent."

"I got out of the bubble I was raised in."
Afterword: LOOKING AHEAD

Andy Hamilton

As the president-in-waiting of NYU, I made my first visit to NYU Abu Dhabi with Bill and Marge Berkley, late in 2015. It was magnificent to see the integrity and sense of community the stunning campus creates. Of course, I had been hearing about the project well before then, as vice-chancellor of Oxford. I also got to know John Sexton at a number of international meetings, where he described his vision of what global education could be.

Then, as president, I saw the embodiment of the vision in the students. I meet Young people drawn from a vast and rich array of countries, with different histories and traditions, political systems and cultures; religions and races and ethnicities – all brought together to this one place to live and work together. Those exceptional young people are the true legacy of NYU Abu Dhabi. None of it would have been possible without the amazing generosity of Abu Dhabi, whose government partners, Tamkeen, have been remarkable in their ability to deliver the education we were promising to our students? 2. Could students drawn from all around the world acclimate to a cultural and social environment that would be very different in many ways from what they had experienced up to that point?

The second part of the weekend that always stays in my mind is dinner under the stars in the desert – which begins with climbing up the sand dune. Last year I got nine mats and I have done it every year. Certainly for my aging legs it gets harder and harder – which must be, I’m convinced, because that sand dune is getting taller. The students not only connect with all the faculty and staff in a mind-blowing setting, but are also able to understand Abu Dhabi’s journey to becoming a significant player on the world’s financial, energy, industrial, and cultural and educational stages.

Now we are moving into the second decade. Through the initial academic leadership of Al Bloom and Fabio Piano, and the leadership of Mariët Westermann and our new provost, Arlie Bloom and Fabio Piano, and the leadership of Mariët Westermann and our new provost, Arlie Petters, the entire world is seeing the speed with which a world-class educational institution – and increasingly, a research institution – has developed before our eyes, taking its place in the region as a foremost institution of higher learning.

In the past ten years, NYU and Abu Dhabi have created an extraordinary undergraduate institution. In the next ten, we’ll see the strengthening of graduate education and particularly professional education. I look forward to watching NYU Abu Dhabi’s academic standing grow and grow as it has a deepening impact on the life, culture, and economy of Abu Dhabi, the region, and the world.

The concept of creating a campus in Abu Dhabi was first relayed to me at a board executive committee meeting, where we were briefed by Marty Lipton. I was immediately intrigued by the idea, but, as a board member, I also immediately began to assess the risks. Some concerns I had at the time included: 1. Could we deliver the education we were promising to our students? 2. Could students drawn from all around the world acclimate to a cultural and social environment that would be very different in many ways from what they had experienced up to that point?

John and his team were able to lay out plans to meet those concerns. The team already had a recruitment strategy to attract students who could thrive in such a setting. They were intent on ensuring the host faculty to design top-notch courses. They had already thought of the risks and how to meet them, so I was convinced.

I have been to NYU Abu Dhabi no fewer than six times since the campus was established. I believe it has turned out extremely well – maybe better than I ever hoped. In retrospect, I think the reasons it has been so successful are: Recognizing that it was the right time, finding the right people to be in charge, and developing the right relationships. From my point of view, one can never overestimate how important relationships are. Starting at the top, from the initial meeting between John and Shikha Mohamed bin Zayed, and down the line with our key players at NYU and their counterparts in Abu Dhabi, what developed was trust. From my experience as a businessman, you can work out the best deal on paper, but if the trust is not there, the deal will not hold up. When trust is there, you are able to overcome challenges all along the way.

The process was not always perfect. Sometimes we made mistakes, and sometimes there were misunderstandings. But we could work them out because we trusted each other. The first five years of NYU Abu Dhabi were really the proof of concept. Ten years is, the campus is now part of NYU’s architecture. It is fully integrated into how our students and faculty move around the globe. I think NYU Abu Dhabi can and should serve as an example to other institutions of how to create a global educational center. It incorporates the American plan for higher education with the cultural framework of the host nation. An enterprise such as this requires an enormous amount of work and planning, but it is well worth it.

Bill Berkley

Chair of the NYU Board of Trustees since October 2018 (former Chair and member since 1990); Chair Emeritus of the Stern Executive Board (member since 1997); member of the NYU Langone Health Board of Trustees since 2007; BS, Stern, 1966

Andy Hamilton

President of NYU since 2016

Looking Ahead

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