

Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement: American University in Cairo President Lisa Anderson

by Lorlene Hoyt

May signals the eleventh installment of our *Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement* series. This issue features Dr. Lisa Anderson, American University in Cairo President and member of the Talloires Network's Steering Committee.

According to Dr. Lisa Anderson, her parents, "like many people in mid-twentieth century America, believed that science was the key to progress." Both parents were "progressive, hopeful, and generous people who dedicated themselves to service." Her father worked at a national laboratory and her mother "taught science to 11- and 12-year olds in the local public school."



Dr. Anderson served as Provost at the American University in Cairo (AUC) beginning in 2008 before the Board of Trustees voted unanimously to appoint her as AUC's 11th and first female President in January 2011. Early on, she "went to college planning to become a civil rights lawyer," but instead launched her "lifelong focus on North Africa" as an undergraduate at Sarah Lawrence College in New York "when a professor assigned a research paper on Egypt."

In the mid-1970s, Dr. Anderson studied Arabic for a summer at AUC. "It was a hot and dusty summer before air conditioning was widespread," she explained, "I remember thinking, correctly it turns out, I would never, ever master the language I was here to study." Dr. Anderson then turned her attention to earning a Masters degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and a doctorate in Political Science at Columbia University where she later served as Dean of the School of International and Public Affairs. She was "the first woman to hold the job," and cared deeply about the "purposes of the School—education, training, and research in global public policy."

About a decade later Dr. Anderson assumed the post of Provost because she was "utterly seduced by the bold vision of AUC" that is now represented by the new campus in Cairo. Immediately after she became President, the entire AUC community "witnessed the fruits of a generation's investment in their children" when young Egyptians headed the January 25 uprising that ended President Hosni Mubarak's thirty-year reign. In response, AUC organized "town hall meetings with faculty and students across the city" and, while the revolution was underway, Dr. Anderson led the university's new initiatives. In Cairo, she explained, "we are embedded, active, and involved partners. Our students develop business plans for small and medium enterprises, our faculty perform in theater and film, our alumni manage social service agencies, and our researchers develop new vaccines and discover new organisms."

Nonetheless, Anderson pointed out, the opportunities in the Egyptian revolution are also a challenge. "In the face of so much unleashed enthusiasm and such great unmet need, it is easy to take on too much, dissipate your efforts, and deliver less than you'd hoped." This is true of individuals as well as institutions and, she added, "It is important not to allow students and

faculty to succumb to very natural frustration and disappointment in those circumstances. This more than ever is a time in which it is important to channel their efforts into activities with discernible, worthwhile and satisfying outcomes.”

When prompted to describe, in specific terms, what she wants the global movement of civic engagement in higher education to look like in the future, Dr. Anderson replied, “In ten or twenty years, most student learning will be outside the classic classroom—an educational device, let us remember, that was designed to produce the workforce of industrial society, with its neat rows of desks, carefully timed study periods and disciplined hierarchies.” She continued, “In the digital world of the twenty-first century, learning will once again be recognized as happening everywhere and all the time, and teaching will increasingly be acknowledged to be guided learning-by-doing. In labs, seminars and other settings, the cultivation of “creative problem-solvers, effective colleagues and collaborators, and responsible citizens in many domains is essential. How better to do that than in engaging early and often in understanding the needs and aspirations of those around you?”

As our conversation came to a close, Dr. Anderson highlighted the barriers to realizing this vision, adding “It is not easy to transform institutions to meet the demands of this new world—we worked hard to get where we are and we want to reap our well-deserved rewards, but in the civic engagement movement we are creating allies and incentives for our faculty and students to think again about conventional practices in higher education and to experiment with new platforms and paradigms.” However, she offered some advice, too. “The Talloires Network can make an impact by emphasizing the importance of mentoring faculty who are willing to think in fresh ways about how civic engagement enhances and extends what they have traditionally done.”

Dr. Anderson is past president of the Middle East Studies Association and past chair of the board of the Social Science Research Council. She is also a former member of the Council of the American Political Science Association and served on the board of the Carnegie Council on Ethics in International Affairs. She is member emerita of the board of Human Rights Watch, where she served as co-chair of Human Rights Watch/Middle East, co-chair of the International Advisory Board of the Von Humboldt Foundation and member of the International Advisory Council of the World Congress for Middle East Studies. She is also a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Dr. Anderson is the author of *Pursuing Truth, Exercising Power: Social Science and Public Policy in the Twenty-first Century* (Columbia University Press, 2003), *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830-1980* (Princeton University Press, 1986), editor of *Transitions to Democracy* (Columbia University Press, 1999) and coeditor of *The Origins of Arab Nationalism* (Columbia 1991).