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Branch Campuses and Degree Programs Abroad:
the Good, the Bad, and the Unknown

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to be here today, participating in a session that addresses such a timely topic of growing interest and concern in the arena of higher education. Branch campuses have become an issue of heated debate for academics, university administrators, and even politicians, not only in the United States, but in many other parts of the world as well.

I am here of course because of Qatar's significant involvement in the international branch campuses trend evidenced by the presence of 6 major American universities alongside a host of other research and academic institutions on one single campus, called Education City. As you may know, Education City is an initiative of Qatar Foundation for Education, Science, and Community Development, which, in turn, is a private, non-profit organization founded in 1995 by the Emir of Qatar. The initiative is the embodiment of the Emir's vision for the country as a knowledge-based society, where education and skills are just as important, and eventually more so, than the country's wealth of hydrocarbon resources. With the latter being finite, the Qatari vision is to invest in the infinite possibilities of an educated, globalized, prepared, and skilled cadre of citizens.

In addition to the six branch campuses, Education City is also home to educational institutions for children and teens and to research and cultural institutions, such as RAND-Qatar Policy Institute, Qatar Science & Technology Park, Qatar National Research Fund, and Qatar Music Academy/Qatar Symphony Orchestra. The vision behind the City was to provide state-of-the-art facilities and a space for exchange and collaboration that would foster learning, curiosity, and creativity, making Education City a Center for Excellence that would benefit the whole region, and not just our own country. In fact, Education City today provides quality education to 1140 students from 59 different nationalities.

We, in Qatar, are of course well aware of the heated debate in the United States surrounding the branch campuses trend. We are aware that, while some view branch campuses as opportunities for building partnerships around the world and frontiers for promoting American values and ideals in education, others see them as thinly-disguised business ventures that push lower-quality education overseas and dilute the home university's name brand. These debates have spilled out of scholarly circles and publications into the mainstream media as well. I think it is very important to take a realistic and objective look at the facts on the ground without being naïve about the

financial considerations involved or dismissive of the real potential for global partnership in education and development.

Taking an academic approach to this debate, and in the spirit of unbiased inquiry, I will present you with a perspective you may have heard less about, which is that of the hosting country. As someone who is intimately acquainted with educational reform and challenges in Qatar, my contribution to this debate will be to give you an insider's view of how this new and bold experiment is working in Qatar. I hope that, by the end of my talk, you will conclude that I am neither defending nor attacking the branch campuses trend. Rather, I am watching closely to see the output as it materializes. For one thing that comes to my mind when I read the debates surrounding this issue, is that **very little of what is said is actually based on tangible outputs**. Simply stated, we have not yet been able to assess critically the product, namely the students, to know if the investment and the risks, for both sides have been worthwhile.

This brings me to the second observation, which is that we, as academics, need to be careful **not to generalize**. As we heard today, there are numerous forms and variations of arrangements for exporting higher education, ranging from isolated programs, to degree programs, to branch campuses, and even entire replicas of a foreign university (e.g. NYU in Abu Dhabi). These "levels" of globalized education are not all equal. They vary in a number of ways, including the mix of faculty, range of specialties offered, the strength of their association with the home campus, and the level of national support received. At the same time, just as these forms of education are different, so too are the contexts of the host countries. The gulf experience is not the Chinese or the Singaporean experience, and Qatar is not Abu Dhabi or Dubai. It is imperative that our study of this experiment be mindful of the particularities of each context, as it is critical in the assessment of success or failure.

I would like to pick up on some of the concerns about branch campuses and to tell you what the experience in Qatar has been so far:

- **The driver:**

Much can be understood about an initiative by asking about **the drive behind it**. And here, I remind you that I am speaking from the point of view of the host country, rather than the hosted university. What made Qatar pursue this enormous and enormously expensive project? Was the motivation prestige? Competition? In our case, it was a conscious step on the road to building a knowledge-based economy. Qatar is a young country that has been developing economically at an unprecedented pace. Its natural reserves of gas, the third in the world, have made it a major player in the regional and global economic markets, and its leadership style has made it an emerging political player in one of the world's most volatile areas. Recognizing its potential and its regional role, Qatar is deliberately moving away from relying on its natural resources towards developing the education and capabilities of its human resources. **The pace of the transition has necessitated a partnership with established institutions that would help educate the people, but that would also build the national capacity in the education sector for future generations.** The programs that were sought after by

Education City were ones that address our countries strategic needs and fit into its future vision, ranging from business and technology, to engineering and medicine, to communication and journalism. But at the same time, the focus is not all technical, with a dose of liberal arts education being offered through sister campuses, such as Carnegie Mellon, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, and Northwestern University.

In this context, one of the important issues to track and evaluate as well, is the extent to which the branch campuses are interacting with the larger academic society, beyond their immediate walls. Weill Cornell Medical College for example, has been cooperating with Hamad Medical Corporation, our nation's largest medical provider, and with Sidra Medical and Research Center, and there are also academic collaborations between Georgetown University School of Foreign Service and the International Relations Program at Qatar University. The branch campuses are involved in joint research programs with Qatar University and with other Qatari institutions.

From the background that I have presented, I hope it has become apparent that the drive for us in Qatar was not prestige, but a real need for quality education at a time when our society is developing so rapidly.

- **Quality of education:**

Many have raised a very real concern that the quality of education at branch campuses would be different from what is offered at the home branch, and that it would be compromised. Many have spoken of creating “two-tiers” of education within the same institution, with the branch campuses operating at a lower standard. While that is a real risk, of course, there are mechanisms to monitor this issue, including applying the home branch's criteria for admissions and testing, employing faculty members who have appointments at the home campus, bringing in visiting faculty members from the home institution to spend as much time as possible in Qatar, and exposing students to what the home campus has to offer, for example through the summer internship programs at Weill Cornell and Texas A&M. Perhaps most importantly, **the degrees that students obtain from the branch campuses in Qatar are awarded by the Home institution, which has every interest in providing education of uncompromised quality and thus preserving its name brand.**

Here I should mention that, one of the earliest tests of the quality of graduates from branch campuses came with the residency placements of the first graduating class from Weill Cornell Medical College – Qatar in 2008. Students were able to compete successfully and secure residency spots in excellent institutions in the US such as Rush University Medical Centre, Johns Hopkins Hospital, Weill Cornell Medical Centre in New York, University of Michigan, and Virginia Commonwealth University.

Let me be clear however, that, if by quality education one means applying the American curriculum in exactly the same way in Doha as in Virginia or Pennsylvania, for example, then that would be neither desirable nor realistic. It is impossible not to take the cultural context into consideration, for instance, in the examples given in class, in relevant case studies, etc. There are methods of adapting curricula to local contexts without

compromising their learning outcomes, and this is something that leading educators can indeed manage.

- **Cost:**

We understand that there is concern on the part of some educators and even politicians that American students in the US, who are having a hard time meeting financial requirements for their education, are being edged out by foreign students in a foreign land. In other words, the concern is that branches campuses are diverting from the home campus funds that would have otherwise benefitted American students in their own country. I can assure you that, at least in Qatar, this is not the case. In fact, in Qatar, the whole operation is funded by the Qatari government and that includes even the management fees that are paid to the home campus to cover their expenses in administering the branch campus. This of course raises a whole other set of concerns, chiefly about sustainability of this endeavor, and this is something for the Qatari government to consider, in consultation with the branch campuses. But, as matters stand now, there is no risk of financial loss for the home institutions.

- **The values debate:**

Some have argued against setting up campuses in countries where there might be a clash in social and cultural values. For those people, I would argue that it is precisely where there is the potential for disagreement that branch campuses can be ambassadors for dialogue, building trust, and testing boundaries. We do not see that the aim of branch campuses is to impart American values, nor are we interested in changing American values. Rather, we want to learn and to teach our new generations, about our differences and about how to communicate them respectfully and effectively. I believe that Qatar has a very good record of respecting differences, and while it is a conservative Islamic country and very proud of its Arab and Islamic heritage, it is also proud of its tolerance for different ways of life. I think if you ask most expats in Qatar, you will find that there is little restriction on their ways of life.

But the effect on values is also a concern for host countries as well. There can be no doubt that these campuses will challenge the way society thinks; it may be a very slow change, but it is happening nonetheless. For example, coeducational instruction has not been an option in Qatari schools or even at Qatar University. In education city, coeducation was started for the first time in our culture, and this is one of many subtle and not so subtle social changes that are occurring as our youth interact so intensively with western ideas and ways of life.

And finally, the concern about

- **Creating allies for America:**

The view that branch campuses encourage Arab students to stay in the Middle East for their education and therefore deprive the United States of friends and future allies does not have to be a real concern. In fact, it may be time for our American friends to come to the Arab region more extensively to get to know us and build the ties that have been strained of late and build ties in education and research.

Having described the experience in Qatar, let me say that we need to make sure we monitor quality carefully; monitor output and reevaluate based on the findings; and we need to keep an eye on sustainability. The experiment in itself is not inherently good or bad. It is in the implementation that lies the true assessment of this experiment, and it is up to us as academics and as Qataris to make sure that we get the best out of this experience.