Interview Transcript

**Interviewer:** Yomn Hussein

**Narrator:** Dr. David R. Blanks

**Date:** 26/09/2011

**Place:** The American University in Cairo, History Department, Dr. Blank’s office.

**College:** American University, Cairo

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Persons present: Yomn Hussein- I

David Blanks- Professor

Interviewer: This is Yomn Hussein and I am interviewing Dr. David Blanks who works in the history department in AUC. What is your title at the moment?

Interviewee: I’m associate professor of history.

Interviewer: And how long have you been working in AUC?

Interviewee: I came to AUC in 1992

Interviewer: Why did you decide to come to Cairo?

Interviewee: Um ya it was a job opportunity I wanted to work outside the US, I'd lived in Europe and elsewhere and uh you know I was looking for something you know more interesting career wise.

Interviewer: You were chair of history for 6 years, why did you decide to become chair?

Interviewee: Well I mean you know the department is relatively young uh we’d been there for about 5 years I guess when we became chair and we really needed to go into a growth phase so uh you know I needed..somebody had to come in and step in and try to do what needed to be done to u know raise the no of faculty members and the raise the
number of majors and um it sorta gets the department organized and rewrite the curriculum and uh that’s what I did

Interviewer: What were your greatest accomplishments?

Interviewee: Well I think the greatest accomplishment in that sense was when I became chair of the department uh in 2004 we had 5 majors and now we have over 70 so that’s what I’m proud of.

Interviewer: And why did you decide to step down as chair?

Interviewee: Um you know its never good to be in a in a you know administrative role for too long and I figured I accomplished 90 % of what I could do and you know a professors job is only partly teaching and partly administration we also have to write in public so I wanted more time to do my own research.

Interviewer: And I’ve always wondered what does a student who graduates with history degree go out to .. what jobs do they get basically?

Interviewee: Well it’s a myth that people you know get a degree in journalism or you know sociology or engineering or whatever and go out and work in that field you know mostly what happens is you have a degree from AUC and that’s what people r looking for you know being able to have good thinking skills and good reading writing speaking and English and Arabic that’s the ..these are things you take on to the job market with you so most people you know are graduating from AUC and are either working in family business’s or going to work for you know the big companies uh Promoseven or Mobinil
or uh um maybe CIB or whatever happens to be but their major almost makes no
difference in terms of um the job they actually get so the thing that history teaches you to
do is be you know self confident and to understand your world and to express yourself
clearly and the individual attention we give to our students prepares them even if they
wanted to go into something like journalism they can compete you know better than some
of the students from the journalism department because you know we’ve on a one to one
basis taught them how to go out there and market themselves, and read and write and uh
you know give them the self confidence to do that so if not you have a specific job
associated with it now some go on to graduate school and do study history and some go
into law.

Interviewer: Is that what you did, you studied history at graduate school?

Interviewee: Well ya, obviously I mean I had to do my uh ..that’s the qualification for
doing this job right

Interviewer: And what classes do you teach this semester?

Interviewee: This semester I’m teaching um one class in big history which is the history
of you know everything from the big bang till today, and I’m teaching two seminars in
world history one about the food in world history and one about the environment in world
history

Interviewer: I’ve heard about this food in world history class and its really hard to get
into what does it..like what’s the class about?
Interviewee: well I mean you know the being... part of what makes us human is our ability to communicate with you know each other and the cooking and sharing of food is sort of a way in which these skills were developed. I mean it’s a sort the quintessential human characteristic and um so basically what I do in all of my world history classes is I follow you know the role of food in human society um from the you know earliest hunter gatherer days up until the present and we cover everything from you know the creation of agricultural and the way that it led into the establishments of the first civilizations. You know all the way up through cerv you know modern restaurant culture and the cult of the celebrity chef, so you know we do all of those things from beginning to end.

Interviewer: That’s sounds quite interesting. And you have an article in the caravan, can you tell me a bit about that.

Interviewee: I used to write a column for the caravan.

Interviewer: And what was it..it was called ‘Bite me’ right?

Interviewee: Yes right

Interviewer: What did you write about?

Interviewee: Well they originally asked me to do this because they wanted me to um they wanted to make the caravan more of a community newspaper you know so not just for students but for you know faculty, staff and everybody. So they were looking to try and expand and they originally asked me to do restaurant reviews which I said I wouldn’t do
because I just you know that’s not interesting to me. So ultimately they let me create my own column and I just basically wrote about food culture in Egypt I guess I would say.

Interviewer: Why did you stop?

Interviewee: Um the caravan and I discussed this this fall somewhat but uh we decided that uh neither one of us were prepared to go ahead with that project for the time being.

Interviewer: And do you enjoy working in AUC? Or you going to leave us any time soon?

Interviewee: Well of course I enjoy it you know and uh I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t um you know, I would consider maybe taking a year off to teach somewhere else um just to get a new perspective on things. But ya for the most part I’m happy here you know I cant, no I’m not going anywhere.

Interviewer: and can you please tell me about you education before you came to AUC

Interviewee: Well you know I went to, uh I did my undergraduate degree in Michigan Sate University in political science and you know 4 years of that was enough I really hated the subject after that. So I went into history and I studied emmerdale history at Michigan State for 2 years before I got my MA and then I went to Ohio State for my PhD in history.

Interviewer: And you came to Cairo right after or did you work for a bit?
Interviewee: No. Ya and I worked for a bit I taught for a little at the University of Cincinnati and then I came here.

Interviewer: I see. And I also wanted to ask you what you thought about the strikes that have been going on?

Interviewee: Uh I didn’t I’m not really paying that much attention to be honest about it you know. I teach students to think for themselves and express themselves and I’m you know proud of you know their achievements it seemed like, they started out the students were striking to because of the tuition increase and then somehow overtime this got uh sort of merged with this idea of um you know, better rights for the workers and uh the administration ultimately responded to that and I’m proud of the student role in helping the labor settle the labor dispute and protect the rights of workers but you know at the same time what ever happened to their demands you know I mean I don’t know um ya I mean they have a right to do what they want to do and you know I’m proud of their achievements.

Interviewer: since you’ve been in AUC for 19 years have you seen any of these strikes happen in the past?

Interviewee: Ya of course I mean its common I mean the students have been doing that since always you know it used to be back in the 90s a little bit more political I would say you know they were it was more having to do with you know Palestine and things like that. But yes I mean this is this is part of student culture throughout the world at all
universities across time I mean this is always always always happened so this is nothing new.

Interviewer: You don’t think the revolution increased their ability to..to express their opinions?

Interviewee: Um you know I mean in the short run it may have given them some self-confidence and uh created a sort of atmosphere where it seems like this is acceptable but like I said there have always been strikes and demonstrations at AUC at Cairo university at Ayn Shams at all Universities u know across North Africa and the world um forever you know so there is nothing new.

Interviewer: You didn’t take part in the strike?

Interviewee: No. I didn’t I took part in the strikes when I was a student so that’s not my role now

Interviewer: But some of the faculty were involved in the strike

Interviewee: Uh they have a right to do that I mean you know I did that when I was younger and now my job is to council the students, and mentor them, and answer their questions and help them understand what’s important and what’s not

Interviewer: Yes you’re right. Thank you for your time. Bye