

Presidential Medal of Distinguished Achievement 2013

Daniel Socolow, AUP's 4th President

Dr. Socolow presided over our University's 25th Commencement half its life ago, just a year or two before I arrived in Paris. His tenure here was a difficult one—he landed at the very moment when the University was becoming legally and fiscally French. One of the several great architects of our future, he legalized and regularized the institution's status in France, as well as the status and benefits of faculty and staff; he created The American University of Paris Foundation, galvanized fundraising, strengthened the academic program, gave attention to continuing and adult education, extended the physical plant, prepared for the shift from ACP to AUP, from college to university; built a new board with Pierre Salinger, the famous chair of his board, introduced caps and gowns to AUP graduations, began the tradition of giving honorary degrees and received one of the first the University offered. He acknowledges he couldn't have done it without his stellar, principled dean, Charlotte Lacaze, Professor of Art History emerita, who is in the audience today. Dan Socolow has remained a friend of the University and has drawn especially close in recent years, for which mentorship and support I am deeply grateful.

Dr. Socolow held for 15 years after AUP what many would call “the best job in the world.” From 1997 to 2013 he was Director of the MacArthur Fellows Program (known in the US as the “Genius Awards”), from which position he gave out 400 Genius Awards, half of those awarded to date in the program's entire 34-year history. For those in the audience not familiar with these prestigious grants, genius awards have been given to people as young as 18 and as old as 80; they go to US citizens from any field and come with no strings attached; the fellowship is not a reward for past accomplishment, but rather an investment in a person's originality, insight, and potential. You can't apply for it either, so the award is always a surprise. During his tenure, people found out they were a genius when they got the call from Dan Socolow saying “Congratulations, you've just won half a million dollars to be creative, original, and, for the next year at least, to be at liberty to explore, research, craft, write, farm, sculpt, paint, develop new models, organize communities, etc., etc., etc.

Educated at The University of Wisconsin, Harvard University and The University of Chicago, Dan Socolow changed the course of The American College in Paris, prepared for the birth of The American University of Paris, and participates today in the University's flourishing.

Thank you, Dan, for being such an important part of our history and our future.