

Educating for Democracy

Designs for Learning in the Balkans and Beyond

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With world attention focused on events in Iraq, it is easy to forget that it was only a few years ago that the world witnessed the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia and its repercussions throughout the Balkans.

Unfortunately, no news is not necessarily good news. In the newly reconstructed federation of Serbia and Montenegro, as well as in neighboring Croatia, nationalists have done well in recent elections. Ethnic tensions permeate the situations in Kosovo and Macedonia. Throughout the region, organized crime is developing new caravan routes for arms, drugs, and persons. Economies remain rather sluggish, particularly in rural areas and smaller cities, compounding the difficulties faced by reform-minded governments.

Against this gray and sometimes discouraging backdrop, governmental and nongovernmental organizations continue to build working democracies and economies. While governmental funding from United States and the European Union and foreign direct investments from private corporations provide some of the necessary resources, the construction of particular infrastructure projects and the adoption of best practices will not complete the task by themselves. As domestic leaders and foreign delegations have recognized, the development of market economies, democratic norms, and the administrative capacity necessary to enforce legislation require educated and open-minded young people ready to face the region's continuing challenges.

With foreign assistance shifting to other areas of the world, it is easy to argue that developing human

potential in the region is even more important; more will have to be done with less. For those committed to building healthy, deeply rooted democracies, this makes the American University in Bulgaria's (AUBG) mission of educating a new generation of leaders more relevant than ever—in the Balkans and beyond.

The Right Place at the Right Time

When it was founded in 1991, just after the fall of totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe, the American University in Bulgaria enjoyed a base of support that gave the institution what it needed to succeed. Tasked with the broad mission of educating leaders for the Balkan region, the institution was seen by its founders from the United States, Western Europe, and Bulgaria alike as a means to advance the values common to democratic societies with free-market economies. Resources to implement this educational partnership came from philanthropist George Soros, the United States Agency for International Development, and the government of Bulgaria, which provided buildings for instructional and residential facilities at no cost.

Functioning democracies require individuals throughout the public and private sectors who can rationally evaluate and choose policies in a complex environment. While amassing knowledge and specialization are important to these ends, the ability to critically analyze information, select appropriate options, and clearly communicate them to increasingly skeptical and impatient populations are the central tasks facing

leaders in Southeast Europe, the Caucasus, and the Central Asian republics. When AUBG opened in 1991, regional institutions of higher education tended to focus on developing specialists who were deeply immersed in the theories and detailed knowledge of a particular field of study. While AUBG's academic curriculum emphasizes fields of study in such regionally critical areas as economics, computer science, business administration, political science, journalism, and European studies, AUBG is a traditional liberal arts institution. In practice, this means that all students are required to complete several core courses and to experiment in areas outside their selected majors through the University's general education requirements.

In the early years, a lack of experience with this approach to education caused misunderstandings, as many of the first students wanted the "secrets" of American success unveiled to them and assumed that these were based upon deep concentration in particular fields of study. The broad-based core and general distribution requirements appeared analogous to their high school experiences and, thus, were initially discounted.

In time, however, students came to appreciate the logic of a focused major built upon an effective foundation. For example, traditional composition courses in the basics of writing arguments are complemented by a writing-across-the-curriculum requirement as students progress through the University. In the same vein, a core course in statistics helps students better understand

the statistical information and opinion polls that regularly contribute to democratic debate.

As an English language institution in the American tradition, all majors and other courses are designed in the familiar credit system of American institutions of higher education, and they are arranged in standard sequences that maximize opportunities for seamless study abroad at U.S. institutions. All credits are fully transferable because AUBG is accredited by the New England Association of Colleges and Universities. In fact, AUBG is also accredited by the Bulgarian educational authorities and occupies a special place in Bulgaria, having been founded by a special act of the Bulgarian Parliament.

Learning to Think Critically

With high average SAT scores and often with proficiency in three languages, AUBG students arrive with a level of academic quality rivaling that of students at the best U.S. schools. Yet secondary educational systems have tended to reward memorization and an appeal to authority instead of the ability to define a problem, analyze it, and creatively arrive at a solution. In contrast to the traditional East European modality of higher education, AUBG classes tend to be smaller, discussion is encouraged, and teamwork is a common feature of the American-style pedagogy.

Through their experience, seasoned faculty members have come to understand that what works in the context of the United States may not always be appropriate for students from transitional democracies. This means that courses in

business law, for example, cannot focus on specifically American questions but must instead show the logic of law as it is applied in a wider business context. A course in American government must take a comparative approach and demonstrate how American institutions and political processes relate to those in other parts of the world. A course in macroeconomics must draw upon regional examples to make compelling cases, while a course in journalistic ethics is likely to pay more attention to issues of bribery and the individual journalist.

While the focus in many courses may be somewhat different than in the United States, the problem-solving approach taken in many courses is similar. Projects, case studies, and simulations are widely used in business, computer science, and social science courses. The goal is not regurgitation of memorized information, but encouraging the student to understand with an eye toward the use of knowledge. This attempt to show how theory helps solve practical problems is common to many courses.

To further develop their abilities to think outside of normal disciplinary patterns, AUBG students often take advantage of program flexibilities to double-major. Double-majors in business/political science, computer science/business, European studies/economics, and other combinations help students develop multiple perspectives on problems and provide them with a larger context for understanding and solving problems.

Learning to Build a Community Out of Diversity

International students, coming from the surrounding Balkan countries and several of the former Soviet republics, comprise nearly 50 percent of AUBG's student body. Well-prepared as well as full of promise and energy, the AUBG student body is a colorful mix of twenty-five nationalities whose cultural and ethnic diversity shape a unique academic setting where diversity is recognized and tolerance is expected. The AUBG administration, faculty, and office of student services have consistently set forth a presumption of respect for individual and cultural differences. This is first communicated through diversity training workshops, which are a regular feature of first-year student orientation. While these experiences may not radically change students' attitudes initially, they do clearly communicate the institution's expectation of tolerance. But even these efforts would go by the wayside if it were not for the norm of tolerance that students themselves have generated over the course of AUBG's history.

This tolerance norm is perhaps best communicated among students through a defining characteristic of the AUBG experience: its American-style residential life program. The first significant investment in facilities built specifically for the University has been residence halls, where students live and learn together. These modern facilities have been built to American standards and they are a model for the entire region. Living together, students share experiences as they compare

and understand the values of their national cultures. The intense experience of living in close quarters with people who are rather different has fostered a strong sense of tolerance among AUBG students. This does not mean, of course, that all students are always best friends. What it does mean is that students are more likely to be seen as individuals than as members of a particular group. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in AUBG's student government, where the officers, senators, and committee representatives consistently reflect the multinational student body yet continually work together to advocate common student positions.

Learning to Think Civically

Experiential learning in democracy, through the AUBG student government and direct student involvement in university governance, including representation on the AUBG Board of Trustees, contributes to the formation of AUBG students who better understand how a civil society works from the practical experience of debate, argument, lobbying, and compromise. More active in university policy processes than students on many U.S. campuses, AUBG's student government has a recognized role in the University and a history of actively working to solve student problems. This includes participation on University committees and frequent meetings with University officials. It also includes the Board-acknowledged ability of student senators to query individual University offices through written questions with the

expectation of written responses—a practice that promotes communication and transparency.

Leadership and volunteerism through student involvement in community service projects with local orphanages, environmental awareness programs, student press outlets, and a nationally licensed student-managed radio station further shape AUBG students as they grow into responsible contributors to society. The result is that AUBG students already are becoming important agents of change when they return to their own societies.

Following the liberal arts tradition and its mission, AUBG extends its educational philosophy to a wider audience in the private, government, and nonprofit sectors of the country. To this end, the University is developing a growing portfolio of educational outreach programs that now include an executive MBA program for managers from Bulgaria and beyond; technical training at the government level in preparation for EU accession; retraining of military officers released into civilian life; and English language, business, entrepreneurship, or computer skills for local citizens. AUBG has been consulted by government ministries for advice as to how the education sector might be reformed as Bulgaria moves into the next and more refined process of forming itself to operate effectively in an atmosphere of free markets and democracy. Opening a space for private higher education in Bulgaria has been a significant challenge—one with which AUBG is well equipped to render assistance.

The Balkans and Beyond

The first AUBG graduates—who earned their degrees in 1995—have developed into critical, original, quick thinkers. With their exposure to Western thought, cultural expectations, and ways of doing business, AUBG alumni soon became the employees of choice for the large multinational companies that were establishing their presence in East European markets. Many pursued advanced degrees in some of the world's most prestigious universities.

Others started their own businesses and have become successful private entrepreneurs. Together, AUBG alumni have formed a critical mass of young people who are fast becoming important agents of change for the advancement of their own countries.

In the short thirteen years since its founding, AUBG has earned a reputation as an institution that educates leaders for the new democracies. Today, with the arrival of a new president, it is reexamining its mission statement, its funding resources, and the quality of its programs in order to prepare for even greater achievements. With a proven educational track record, institutional experience in working with students from different cultures, and a talented student body that perpetuates an ethos of tolerance and respect for the individual, AUBG is a working institution of democracy building in a world that sorely needs such success stories. Having already left an impressive mark on the Balkans, AUBG now seeks to expand its contributions to the stability and prosperity of the world beyond. ■

Highlights from AAC&U Work on Greater Expectations and the New Academy

Greater Expectations

Greater Expectations is AAC&U's multi-year initiative to articulate the aims of a twenty-first century liberal education and identify comprehensive, innovative models that improve learning for all undergraduate students. Greater Expectations will help develop learner-centered campus programs in liberal education, and will link the best practices in higher education and secondary school reform.

www.aacu.org/gex

Integrative Learning: Opportunities to Connect

In a three-year project on integrative learning beginning in January 2004, AAC&U and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching will engage campuses in developing designs for comprehensive approaches aimed at providing students with purposeful, progressively more challenging, integrated educational experiences.

www.aacu.org/integrative_learning

Center for Liberal Education and Civic Engagement

The Center brings together the resources, missions, and visions of two national organizations, AAC&U and Campus Compact. This partnership enhances the powerful possibilities of campus work on civic engagement and illuminates how higher education's societal obligations can be integrated into the academy's core educational mission.

www.aacu.org/civic_engagement

Shared Futures: Global Learning and Social Responsibility

This multi-project initiative assumes we live in an interdependent but unequal world and that higher education can help prepare students not only to thrive in such a world but to remedy its inequities. Through this initiative, AAC&U seeks to support the academy in its vital role of expanding knowledge about the world's peoples and problems and about advancing democracy and justice at home and abroad.

- *Liberal Education and Global Citizenship: The Arts of Democracy* is designed to work with colleges and universities to develop societal, civic, and global knowledge in their graduates by linking liberal education and democracy in the context of our interdependent but unequal world.
- *Liberal Arts Colleges and Global Learning* is a research project designed to investigate how liberal arts colleges address global preparation and democratic engagement for their students.

www.aacu.org/SharedFutures