

J. K. Djusubalieva,
Assistant Professor, American University of Central Asia

*AUCA: Meeting New Intellectual Challenges.
(Interview with the outgoing President of AUCA
Ellen Hurwitz)*



Ellen, you came to the AUCA leadership a bit more than five years ago. Looking back, how did you find the University? What were your primary challenges?

When I came to the University more than five years ago, AUCA was recovering from a difficult struggle among the leadership reflecting, I believed, a deeper issue about our American and Central Asian identity. I decided to focus on the institutional vision and find people who would help to clarify that vision.

It was a joy to work with wise and strong individuals, deeply united in their commitment to learning. Once we became mission-driven, the leadership struggle subsided and the search for our mission began to carry the day. We set to work on the intellectual challenges before us, leaving political challenges to the government and outside the University.

So the real, strategic challenge here in AUCA is intellectual rather than political?

University politics are at best a distraction and at worse a very destructive force. I decided to get everyone to the table to talk about the idea of a university and the idea of AUCA, about its distinctiveness, its strategic value as a school that mixes American and Central

Asian ideas and its creation at a critical geographical, cultural and intellectual crossroads. We got general agreement on that approach and began to move forward in making AUCA a better place!

It was about that time that you came to the idea of the liberal arts?

The idea of the liberal arts was not a new one at AUCA – it had been there for a good while! When I came to AUCA, I heard several references to the idea that “we are following the American model of the liberal arts.”

But these felt like slogans that seemed to lack thoughtful understanding. The words had been used, but their implications had not been deeply discussed. And so we set out to probe the depths of these words. Even our approach to the credit-hour system seemed superficial. I heard that we instituted a credit-hour system so that students would be able to pick the courses they wanted. “Aha,” I thought. “So that’s what we mean by the liberal arts model: choosing the courses one wants! But choosing on what basis? Whimsy? Thoughtful reflection?”

I came to realize that our intuitively freedom-loving, dynamic young school was a bit cavalier in its terminology and its notion of choice. So it seemed clear that we needed to deepen our understanding of our shared mission.

Did you feel a resistance of some faculty?

Not active resistance, but there was a scepticism about the implications of pursuing the liberal arts dream, focussing on ideas more than skills and changing the primary language of instruction into English in order to prepare our students and faculty for interaction on a global scale. Engaged discussion about disagreements is very healthy. A liberal arts point of view is fundamentally about challenging assumptions and even authority itself. So, when people argue that specialization is the true goal of an undergraduate education and that liberal arts are superficial and opposed to specialization, I welcome the challenge to discuss it. In an undergraduate environment there can be deep thought within any specialisation as long as that specialisation is not isolated, but rather integrated into a university-wide dialogue. I think there has not been enough dialogue about the liberal arts in some parts of the University, and certainly not enough discussion among the various specializations. Now that we are maturing our curriculum, pockets of isolation are being eroded but they remain.

So what is essential to understand in that idea?

Really important is that the liberal arts are not a superficial “smorgasbord of learning” without depth, but rather a process of analysis of the deepest things. It can be argued that Albert Einstein was a liberal arts thinker. After all he challenged assumptions across all physics and math. And he reinvented the way we view the world. He invented an approach to space, time and energy that was at once specialized and universal. The juxtaposition of specialized analysis with the liberal arts is specious and the result of narrow specialization. From the depths should always emerge the broader picture.

What about the “revolution” of integration with the Bard College and how the idea came about?

It is a difficult challenge to bridge the expectations of the Ministry of Education in Bishkek with those of a US accredited liberal arts college. Actually the idea of partnering with Bard was the brainchild of three very wise men: Leon Botstein, President of Bard; Bill Newton-Smith, Chair of our Board of Trustees; and George Soros. My challenge was to make that great idea fit AUCA. I was encouraged by Bard's effort to give birth to Russia's first liberal arts college at Smolny, Saint Petersburg State University. I thought that if the partnership could work at Smolny, then why not at AUCA? First I was sceptical because if you are trained in the liberal arts, you have to be sceptical. Then I returned to Bard and was favorably impressed with how the school had been transformed since the '60s when I had first gone there for a visit. But I was concerned, and still am, that our programs in Business Administration and International and Business Law will not be accredited through Bard since there are no such programs offered there. And Bard is concerned as well and wants to help us address this challenge. Bard and AUCA are not a perfect fit, but AUCA stands to grow intellectually from a partnership with a liberal arts college that believes in both academic rigor and the search for new knowledge.

And those geniuses... you were among them?

No, I was not part of the original discussion. It was their idea. As I said, I came to see the wisdom of it, though, and had to figure out how AUCA could adjust to the great idea. It was not the most perfect fit, but it was a strategic fit that would facilitate a deeper focus on the liberal arts. Business Administration and International and Business Law are two of our most popular majors that attract some of our most talented students. I think there is an opportunity to enrich these programs through the partnership in ways to be determined. In a perfect world, I suppose, everything would fit neatly. Now we have to figure out what, if anything, we should do to get these programs accredited. The main thing is that the partnership with Bard has encouraged us to focus more deeply on the liberal arts and on the pursuit of ideas that can change the world.

Ellen, how would you describe your work as the President of AUCA?

I provide as much advice as I can and do a lot of planning and problem solving. And a whole lot of editing! I am trying my best to encourage all to keep pushing forward. I had the feeling that AUCA was an unplanned environment with a rich array of spontaneous ideas. We had a spontaneous birth. Well, almost! That's OK, but then you have to grow up, and the trick is to grow up without growing stale. Right now we realize that in order to meet all Ministry of Education and Bard requirements, we will have little room in our students' schedule for independent elective courses. I need to help the University figure out how to satisfy the educational expectations of both cultures and preserve its intellectual freedom. So I worry with my colleagues about whether we are overly structuring ourselves in order for East to meet West. Perhaps the answer lies in a more flexible approach to the way we teach our courses. We are working on finding that flexibility within ourselves and our programs.

Don't you think it can go together?

If you try to meet the requirements of two different systems in one “freedom loving” place, you get a little constrained!

It is true. Seems obvious...

I worry about the pressure on our students who must cope with that constraint every day. We need to manage the risk of bridging cultures without hampering intellectual freedom. In this sense my role is to highlight the issue and help solve it with appropriate constituencies on campus. That is what I am doing.

I think you are succeeding doing that...

Sometimes, yes, sometimes I wish I could do more.

So, do you think the University is a harmonious place now?

Actually, I do. We may not have perfect harmony, and Americans may be more comfortable with the liberal arts than those who studied here in Central Asia, but I think there is growing common ground. But I also think that there is always a danger of a split if there is not enough sensitivity to differences of opinion. I think that if relationships within the Board and between the President and Vice President for Academic Affairs are trusting, then all will be well. I have been fortunate this way. Working with Bakyt Beshimov was an honor, and now with Bermet Tursunkulova it is a great joy. Both are brilliant and well educated change agents steeped in Kyrgyz tradition and acutely aware of the opportunity for the intensive exposure to Western and American educational ideas and practice.

Ellen, sorry to press you so much about the old days. I think we are haunted sometimes by some memories in times of change...

Of course! Remember the issue is really about respecting cultural differences. We have different histories with exposure to different ideas, and the challenge is to blend them creatively and sensitively. It is an intellectual and psychological challenge to blend our cultures and to build a liberal arts university that is both American and Central Asian. We should not allow differences to impede this great mission. The atmosphere is “gemutlich,” and most respect one another. There is good camaraderie in the Board, in the Academic Senate, in the faculty and staff and among the students. No big battles.

I perfectly agree. Now, let's talk about students. Have they changed during your years here?

I don't see dramatic change over the five years in the nature of the student body. I had more time in the beginning of my presidency to get to know the students than I had later because of the intensity of what I do. The brightness of their eyes, the work ethic, the effectiveness of the learning environment all lead to easy matriculation into graduate school

and access to careers. All of this speaks to a very healthy academic environment. I think we have become more student-centered, although we may be a little less experimental than we were five years ago. Now, for example, all students are required to do a senior thesis. It is totally different and demands more structure. I think our students are immensely creative, but I also think that they come to us just as bright but less well trained than five years ago, and that is a reflection of the education they have been able to receive more than anything else. The economic situation is inherently more stressful as well such that students often have to work long hours just to be able to afford their tuition. Despite changes in the times, we have a wonderful and academically engaged student body!

Are they very different from the American students?

I guess the motivation to learn is higher here than in the US. Central Asian students know that doing well in school will make their lives better, indeed that the very quality of their life is at stake. American students take more for granted, thinking “Oh well, I’ll be OK!” At the same time, students in America don’t have the 3,000-year experience and are in some ways more naive. Yet they are incredibly entrepreneurial and inventive.

What about the American style, “academic honesty” policy?

Oh, yes. Americans are taught from grade school not to cheat or copy other people’s ideas without attribution. American University of Central Asia develops in our students a deep awareness of the negative value of cheating. But this does not mean some students do not bring to AUCA habits from the society around them: to copy somebody else’s ideas without attribution or to attempt to achieve a better grade by flattering a professor. We are 99 percent there, but we must remain vigilant and wise in our policies. And so must American universities.

Ellen, do you have any regrets?

Of course! I didn’t transform the University as fully as I would have liked. But I know well that it is not that easy! I see how much we have improved our governance, our curriculum and our partnerships and funding sources. I am very pleased with how much I have done, but I always wish I could be doing more.

What makes you proud as you leave?

That AUCA is growing up! I am deeply proud to hand over a more mature institution to my successor who will be able to deepen our liberal arts mission and continue our remarkable journey. I have tried to make AUCA a contemporary university that has practices and ideas aligned with our commitment to develop students who address their academic and personal freedom responsibly. I think we have grown significantly in this area and we will continue to grow in years to come.