IU Southeast Professor Teaches at American University of Kyrgyzstan

Indiana University is now entering the third year of its faculty development and administrative training program with the American University in Kyrgyzstan (see International News, October 2000). The article below was contributed by John Newman, director of the Applied Research and Education Center and professor of sociology in the School of Social Sciences at IU Southeast. Newman's short-term stay in Kyrgyzstan was his first professional assignment abroad.

The American University in Kyrgyzstan (AUK) was my host for a six-week period starting in late February until the end of March. Kyrgyzstan is a beautiful, mountainous country in Central Asia, and the university is the academic home to about 700 students from Kyrgyzstan; from the other Central Asian nations of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan; and from other nations such as Albania, Japan, India, Russia, and Turkey. Like IU Southeast, AUK is a commuter campus although quite dissimilar in other respects. It is located in two buildings within walking distance from all the museums, parks, and markets in Bishkek. It sits across the street from the parliament building and within a few blocks of the national government building, called the “White House.” Within AUK’s two buildings, faculty and students can be found in the classrooms, library, faculty offices, or in one of the three public places where they can gather to discuss the events of the day over tea, pastries, or lunch, often to the sound of the university orchestra practicing in the background.

I was assigned to the Anglo-American Studies Department with the broad charge of assisting the department and the faculty in my teaching areas of criminology and research methods. Fortunately, this left a lot of latitude for me to learn from the faculty what they felt might be useful to them. On my arrival, I was introduced to the faculty and staff and was immediately made to feel welcome. Lyudmilla Sergeenko and Louis Petrich, acting co-chairs of the department, took time from their incredibly busy teaching schedules to introduce me to the faculty and give suggestions as to how I might contribute to the department. By noon, a two-week schedule of lectures and workshops for the faculty was scheduled and everyone notified. The next day, I was introduced to the sociology faculty. Again, the enthusiasm and warmth of the faculty was phenomenal. This resulted in another two-week set of lectures and workshops.

The university is undergoing great change and the faculty development charge that I was given was clearly directed at facilitating that change. Universities in Kyrgyzstan, not surprisingly, were structured after Soviet-style universities. The differences are sometimes subtle, sometimes striking. As AUK is now following a more Western tradition, many changes have been planned and undoubtedly more will follow. A few of those differences and likely transformations are noted below.

The separation between research and teaching institutions has traditionally been sharper in Kyrgyzstan than in the United States. Some of the new structural changes taking place might be interpreted as blurring those distinctions. For example, AUK has embraced the idea of the teacher/scholar wherein the link between teaching and research is more clearly articulated. It has adjusted teaching loads in part to compensate for this new research emphasis. Several of the teaching faculty are now submitting proposals for research projects. Although it would come as no surprise to an American faculty member to have his or her proposal returned for revision, this was a completely alien notion for most AUK faculty. I was asked to comment on some of the proposals and to help my new colleagues not only clarify their research plans but also lead them to understand how to connect those research interests to the classroom and to their lives outside the university, in order to help
students understand the relevance of the research.

Another notable difference was in pedagogical styles. Western pedagogy has evolved over the past years into an active, student-centered enterprise where learners are given significant responsibility for their own intellectual growth. AUK is now committed to moving from the historical style of lecture-test formats to a more active learning style. To that end, teaching loads have been significantly reduced for faculty, the student class load has been lightened, and classes are being restructured so that an increasing amount of the learning takes place in collaborative learning groups and outside the classroom. Limited resources have had an impact on this transition, but the expansion of the library and the computing facilities will hasten this change.

Perhaps the most notable change is the transition from an hours system to a credit system much like that found at IU. While anticipation of this change was the source of some discomfort while I was there, my AUK colleagues have since told me that the change has been made without difficulty. Along with this administrative restructuring to the semester/credit system, the curriculum was in the process of being revamped to more closely resemble that of a typical American university. While I was there, the traditional curriculum for all majors was spelled out in complete detail. Each course the student would take during each session was determined by a preexisting plan. Today, the idea of electives is being introduced and some limited choice is being given to the student. Before the IUB–AUK partnership, this freedom of choice was unheard of, for either the students or the faculty.

Such changes, especially those involving increased choice and student-centered responsibility, will take time and will undoubtedly require some cultural reorientation. My limited, yet memorable experience at AUK suggests that they will be implemented and that the university will continue to thrive. AUK is leading the way in the progressive restructuring of Kyrgyzstan’s system of higher education and will become a model for the rest of Central Asia.

AUK Exchange Scholars at IUB

In April, visiting AUK faculty and administrators attended a reception hosted by IU President Myles Brand. Standing next to OIP Dean Patrick O’Meara (left) are Nurila Sharshekeeva, of the Program of British-American Studies, and Natalia Slastnikova, assistant to the president of AUK. A third member was Galina Bityukova of the International Relations Program (not shown). The three spent part or all of the spring semester at IUB under the IUB–AUK exchange project on faculty development and administrative training. Slastnikova spent time with various administrators at IUB, IUPUI, and DePauw University, while Sharshekeeva and Bityukova worked on curriculum development in their respective fields.

In the spring, Camilla Sharshekeeva, former provost of the American University of Kyrgyzstan, paid a return visit to IUB, as part of a national tour in connection with her new position as that nation’s Minister of Education and Culture. In Indiana, she paid her respects to IU President Myles Brand, met with International Programs administrators Patrick O’Meara and Charles Reafsnyder of the IU–AUK project, and also visited DePauw University, one of IU’s affiliate institutions within the International Consortium for International Programs (ICIP) that is participating in the IU–AUK partnership.