



## A Year of New Achievements

*The American University of Armenia continues to build its reputation for quality education in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh*

By **LAURIE ALVANDIAN**

**T**he 2014-2015 academic year was a whirlwind of events, celebrations, and achievements for the AUA community. Internally, the university was buzzing with fresh ideas and projects. AUA launched its independent student newspaper, *The Bridge*, and celebrated the commencement of the first graduating class of the new Master of Science in Economics program, with over half of its graduates finding employment with the Central Bank of Armenia. The AGBU Papazian Library welcomed valuable book donations from Richard Hovannisian and Vartan Gregorian, adding to the library's ever-growing list of materials. AUA also hosted a number of influential guest speakers such as Patch Adams, Noubar Afeyan, Yair Auron, Berge Setrakian, Pamela Steiner,

Serj Tankian, Ruben Vardanyan and Veronika Zonabend, to name a few.

This year's list of achievements has been matched by the university's long list of firsts, which have had a significant impact on Armenia and the region. Since its inception in 1991, AUA brought the first US master's degree programs to Armenia, and continues to be the only university in the region offering an American education. In addition to being the only English-language university, its focus on student-centered learning and the services provided by its Alumni and Career Development Office and Extension Program for continuing adult learning are unparalleled. AUA is also the country's first college campus to provide Wi-Fi and videoconferencing. It is home to Armenia's first and only university



library open to the public, which is widely considered the best English-language library in the country, with over 162,500 electronic and printed texts.

In this and many other ways, AUA is setting the standard for higher education in Armenia. As an institution, it has maintained a need-blind admissions policy, meaning that every student who is qualified and willing to learn is given the opportunity, regardless of the ability to pay tuition. This approach opens the university to an economically diverse group of students. It stresses the belief that education is not only for the elite. For those who do take out loans, AUA was the first to establish student loan and need-based tuition assistance programs in Armenia.

As is the tradition in Western-style educational systems, the many years of hard work and accomplishments of students are annually celebrated with a formal graduation ceremony—and AUA was the first university to bring this tradition to Armenia. These many firsts have provided effective alternative models for higher education in Armenia and the region based on American values and pedagogy. Creating a Student Union and Faculty Center are among the next important firsts that AUA plans to introduce to Armenia's higher education system.

### **Recognition and Partnerships**

This year, AUA's accreditation was reaffirmed by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) for nine years, through February 2024, solidifying its position as the only U.S.-accredited higher education institution in the region. Accreditation results in many benefits that spread not just throughout the university but through society as a whole. It directly benefits students by simplifying degree verification and acknowledging the value of an AUA degree. The university benefits by ensuring evidence-based and continuous process improvement, as well as diversity among its faculty and students. And society benefits because AUA graduates transition into the labor market with highly employable skills such as problem solving, creativity, leadership, and critical thinking.

AUA's attractiveness for students in Armenia and around the globe is increasing every year and part of its appeal is its affiliation with the University of California. This past January, at a ceremony on the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) campus, AUA and UCLA jointly announced the launch of a new AUA-UCLA Summer Intensive Program in Armenian Studies. At the same event, AUA signed a memorandum of understanding with the University of California at Irvine (UC Irvine) with the aim of promoting future educational and scientific cooperation between the two universities. This type of collaboration enables the exchange of ideas, values, and experiences, connecting students and faculty in Armenia with those on the other side of the world.

International students, both Armenian and non-Armenian, are an encouraging component of AUA's growing student body. After the launch of the undergraduate program in 2013, the number of applicants from outside of Armenia tripled from the 2012-2013 school year. In February 2015, Director of Admissions Arina Zohrabian set off on a 2,000 mile recruitment tour across California to encourage students to pursue their higher education at AUA.

In the coming years, AUA expects an increase in the number of its international applicants, adding to its already vibrant and diverse student body.

### **A Spirit of Philanthropy**

AUA's achievements this year and in years past could not have been possible without the generous support of individuals and organizations far and wide.

This year, AUA's endowment was increased by \$10 million thanks to a very generous benefactor. The total number of endowed scholarships has increased significantly to 16 thanks to the generosity of so many new donors who believe education is critical to the future of Armenia.

In April, AUA received a major \$1 million Student Scholarship Endowment from Mario Mazzola, Chief Development Officer at Cisco Systems, Inc., and his wife Luciana Cavallet. AGBU, which has supported AUA since the beginning, also committed to a new yearly scholarship program for AUA students in need of financial aid and in good academic standing. AUA also received two generous grants from American Schools and Hospitals Abroad (ASHA) to modernize student services and establish an Innovation & Technology Incubation Center.

At AUA, giving is contagious. The university community came together this year to raise over \$12,000 to go toward AUA Extension's "Learning for a Better Future" assistance program, which provides valuable educational resources to displaced Syrian Armenians. Alumni practiced their own methods of giving, contributing to the Alumni Endowment Fund that was established two years prior. This year, as a result of the combined generosity of four classes of AUA graduates, the very first student received a scholarship through the endowment.

This year, with its 25th anniversary around the corner, AUA is launching its *100 Pillars of AUA* campaign, with a goal of raising \$1 million in unrestricted funds every year for five years. As the university works to significantly increase its endowment, unrestricted gifts make it possible to improve infrastructure, hire highly qualified faculty, offer need-blind admissions, and fulfill the mission of providing the highest quality teaching, research, and service programs in Armenia and the surrounding region.

For alumni, many of whom have gone on to open successful businesses or earn advanced degrees abroad, their time spent at AUA has opened doors and helped them envision and establish a clear path towards their goals. Highly successful alumni, such as PicsArt creators Hovhannes Avoyan (PSIA '95) and Artavazd Mehrabyan (CIS '03), are setting examples to the AUA students of today and tomorrow that education, creativity, and innovation are the keys to achieving their dreams.

Following the June 2015 graduation ceremony, there are now almost 3,000 alumni, 63.5% of which live in Armenia or Nagorno-Karabakh. 75% of alumni secure jobs during their studies or within 3 months of graduating, meaning AUA graduates are quickly implementing their skills and knowledge gained in the classroom into Armenia's workforce. This summer, the classes of 1995, 2000, 2005, and 2010 came together to celebrate their respective anniversaries and continued the cycle of giving back to the AUA community through the Alumni Endowment Fund. Since the beginning, AUA alumni have made, and continue to make, an impact on Armenia's economy and have played a significant role in the development of Armenia as a whole. ■