

**M**uch has been said about how different and challenging the educational system at AUA is. After five years of existence, it is apparent that AUA provides much more than just a new kind of education.

When AUA graduates get together, we very often look back and ask ourselves "What did AUA give us?" the thought that immediately comes to mind pertains not only to the knowledge we have gained in English or computers, in advanced methods of business management, engineering, political science or public health. Beyond this basic knowledge, we recognize and appreciate the sense of confidence in our potential and abilities that life at AUA has given us, and the profound change that has led us to the realization that we are capable of undertaking projects and pursuing serious goals independently. This confidence and optimism provides an important base for future achievements in life.

The exclusive role of the Communist Party and the government made people

performance are acknowledged and appreciated. Under the previous regime most communist leaders mentioned only what was bad in the work done by their subordinates. Hardly ever would one hear the words "You did a good job" or "This is great." I remember many times, when after preparing large reports requiring several weeks of day and night efforts and finally making presentations which went well, no positive feedback followed. The principle was "If I don't tell you there's anything wrong, then you can assume I'm happy with your work." You may imagine how surprised I was when my supervisor at AUA said "This is a good start" when I submitted just the outline of a project.

To see the positive aspects first, appreciate the commitment and efforts, and only then suggest improvements provides a strong motivation which stimulates AUA students and staff to make even greater efforts.

AUA has also introduced new elements of communication. Americans working in Armenia often say that Arme-

During their association with AUA, students and employees find new avenues for developing initiative. They learn not to burden others with their problems, but instead explore all opportunities to find solutions before asking for help. They learn to maintain a stronger sense of respect for time (others' as well as their own), and to conduct efficient communication by expressing themselves clearly and concisely.

Compared to the autocratic attitude of managers toward employees which still exists in local companies the management-subordinate relationship at AUA is much more democratic. The staff feels free to raise questions and to make all kinds of suggestions on improving work procedures. Rather than simply performing tasks which are assigned to them from above, AUA employees understand that each of them has an important role in the overall functioning of an open and democratic university.

Armenia, being a community-oriented society, developed the philosophy of working together, sharing more, helping

interfere in people's personal lives.

The basis for this kind of attitude was that people felt they had the right, as members of a collective society, to take an active role in the moral development of others. It was generally considered appropriate to advise people on what is right and what is wrong and to give moral lessons, even though such interference was not welcome.

Under the centrally planned and managed economy, it was not customers, but instead positive reports to the government that were important to business. Accordingly, even the basic skills for providing services were not developed. People in recently privatized businesses are undergoing a psychological change, accepting new attitudes and skills. The typical mentality was, and in some places still is, that a customer gets something as a favor (sometimes even with the expectation of a mutual favor), as opposed to service as an inherent part of one's job. Though AUA is not a typical service business, it has its clients (students, library patrons, E-Mail users, visitors, etc.) Employees at AUA learn how to be more attentive to these clients, willing and happy to help, responsive to requests and providing timely assistance. While the prevailing approach used to be "It's not

my problem", "I don't know", now it has become "What can I do for you?", and how can I help you?" Visitors are pleasantly surprised by this new kind of attention. This new culture has a twofold result: our employees have a sense of importance for what they are doing, and our students and visitors have a sense of importance for what they are asking for or inquiring about.

These new attitudes make AUA a very special place to study and work, and they motivate students and employees to do their best. Particularly in the winters of the first years after independence, when other academic institutions were unable to function normally because of the energy crisis, AUA's building allowed people to feel "warmer" when it was terribly cold. This was due not to the temperature of the air, but because of

the exciting pace of life inside it. Therefore, the graduates, accustomed to the rapid pace of life and the work environment at AUA, encounter some culture shock when they start working in local companies. They feel like pioneers in disseminating those values in their new work places. And this is how it should be: this is AUA's aim in educating its students.

The values of the work ethic overlap with and reinforce the educational values the university instills in its students. AUA is not only an investment in education, it serves as a model for the development of effective communication and a positive work environment. As a new, independent Armenia enters the world business community, this model is of utmost importance to our society. □

# AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF ARMENIA

## *Academics Plus*

BY ANAHIT ORDIAN, Deputy Director of Administration

passive and indifferent toward many problems that they could have solved themselves. Young people underestimated their ability in shaping their own careers. While people were strong collectively under the previous socialist system each of them was somehow weak individually. This was a natural outcome of a system where individuals alone were not supposed to face challenges, take direct responsibility for their actions, or develop initiative.

That is why, among the transitional changes, the necessity of psychological change caused a great shock for the people in Armenia, as well as in other CIS countries.

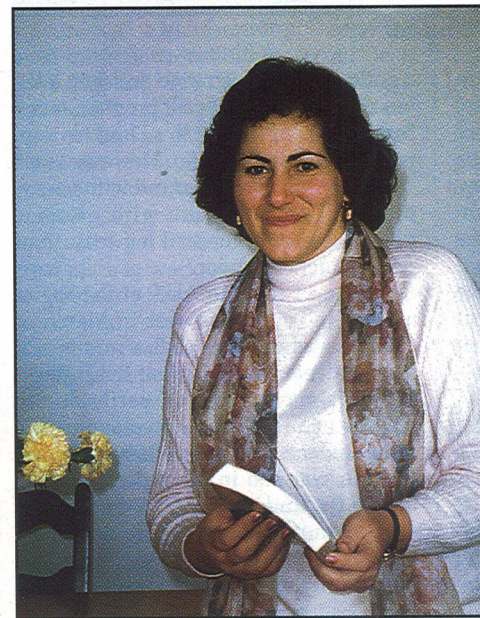
AUA plays a unique role in achieving this change: it assists in the development of new attitudes toward work, and a stronger sense of responsibility for one's own ideas and actions. While the inertia of the former attitudes and work methods still prevails in Armenia, employees at AUA work in a different environment with new, demanding standards and requirements.

Along with a fundamental change in education AUA promotes a new work culture among its students and employees, as well as the community with which it interacts.

The students and employees at AUA have been pleasantly surprised to see how their individual initiative and good

nians like to complain, but this phenomenon can be seen as arising from certain unspoken principles established in the society. Under the former philosophy, wherein each person was an equal member of the collective, people were reluctant to look successful, or to speak with pride in their accomplishments. Because of this fear of standing out, people would tend to accentuate the problems they faced rather than openly discuss their achievements.

The absence of the concept "competitive advantage" acted to suppress the natural desire to develop innovative, efficient approaches to the job. It also discouraged people from making their achievements known publicly. I remember a conversation with a school principal which took place more than ten years ago. The school had had some interesting experiences introducing new teaching methods. When I suggested to the principal that I describe this in my report, she said, "We do not want to look bad, but we also do not want to look very good". This kind of approach was a reflection of the concept of mediocrity that was fostered indirectly by the Soviet society. AUA's administration attaches particular importance to the performance of everyone, which in turn enhances the pride that they take in their studies and jobs and strengthens the feeling of professional self-esteem.



Anahit Ordian, AUA graduate.

each other more—and thus violating individual privacy. At AUA, employees learn to be more sensitive about one's personal life, to ask questions or express ideas without interfering with each other's business and personal "space".

This can be illustrated by looking at previous hiring practices. In employment decisions, not only were professional skills considered, but private life was also taken into consideration. Marital status was a required part of the application form. In some cases, a divorced person would not even be promoted to certain positions. Managers had almost no limitations in the range of questions they could ask during interviews. The atmosphere of control over everything, work as well as moral issues, allowed them to