

Report of the President to the AUBG Board of Trustees February 4-6, 2022

Introduction: I am very sorry that we will not be able to meet in person. The informal interactions and conversations we all have during face-to-face meetings, especially when they are out of our familiar local context, are extremely helpful in building relationships and solving challenges that, in the absence of direct communication, can become much more difficult than they normally would be. I think we are all suffering from our inability to have such meetings and I anticipate their return with anxious hopefulness.

The reports from the administrative team here comprehensively cover the various initiatives and projects ongoing at the moment, and we have made significant progress in a number of areas. I am particularly looking forward to discussing with you the strategic planning process and the ideas and potential solutions to certain challenges that have come to the fore in the past few months on Saturday afternoon. For other areas, I refer you to the comprehensive reports of our colleagues.

Covid, Covid Everywhere: As you recall, we had intended to have a mostly in-person spring semester, aided by our mandate that all people coming to campus have an EU GreenPass or equivalent, indicating either vaccination, recent recovery, or a very recent Covid test. This plan looked plausible until early December, when the Omicron variant appeared and began its rapid spread. By early January, it became clear that we would have to revert to the system we'd employed in the fall of 2020 and again in the fall of 2021, with hybrid courses where half the on-campus students would attend the classroom in person and other half online on alternate days. At that time we reopened the option for students to attend fully online, and only a small number who had previously chosen on-campus switched to online. The result is that we now have a substantial portion of students studying on campus (over 700 resident and non-resident) but a significant number fully online. Robert White's report has the precise numbers.

Compared to previous semesters, we have had a notably increased prevalence of Covid infections in all segments of the AUBG population in the past few weeks. As you know, we tragically lost a long-time, well-respected and admired faculty member, Serguey Ivanov, just after the first of the year. For the first time, we have faced significant staffing challenges across many areas as employees have been out for quarantine, family illness, or active infections, which has been particularly difficult in the canteen, which is also an area where infection control is obviously especially important. Several key areas staffed with only one person have also suffered when the individual was out sick or in quarantine, calling attention again to our need for functional redundancy and succession planning, particularly in offices that execute operations requiring specialized job knowledge.

Last week (January 24-28), according to the Deputy Mayor, only 38% of public-school students were in physical attendance. We came close to full capacity in our isolation area in the residence halls, which was worrisome as we do not have additional empty rooms to allocate to quarantine service. Blagoevgrad and the region were leading the country in infections and the consequent problems.

However, the good news is that things have improved greatly this week, so far. Last week we had 22 students in quarantine, while this morning (February 1) we had five, and Dr. Daskalov anticipated that we would have only one by the end of business today. Many of the employees who were out last week have returned to work, and new infections and quarantines are down considerably. We are beginning to discuss the options for reducing restrictions later in the semester, most probably after spring break, of course depending on the circumstances in the next few weeks.

More broadly, though, the leadership is increasingly concerned about the negative effects of two years of restrictions and uncertainty on the welfare of the university community. Obviously we cannot control the course of the pandemic, nor can we have much if any effect on the Bulgarian government's responses to new developments, but we now have two cadres of students who have not been on campus and who have not enjoyed the benefits of our culture and the formal and informal orientation being physically present provides to them. As such, we have had some challenges with academic honesty, adherence to deadlines, and generally taking the academic enterprise at AUBG sufficiently seriously. These issues are not unique to us—universities all over the world are experiencing them, and based on my conversations with presidential colleagues at the Council of Independent Colleges' Presidents' Institute in Florida early in January, our challenges are smaller than most. However, because the university's distinctiveness and comparative advantage lies significantly in our campus community, any deterioration in these areas poses special risks to us. A specific example is the risk to the future of one of our students' signature projects, the annual musical. This year's seniors are the last group who have direct experience with the entire production process, managing the tour, etc., and if that institutional knowledge goes away it is possible that this outstanding program will die. There are several other similar risks.

I am also concerned that we may be reaching the limits of our constituencies' resilience. We have made persistent efforts to communicate fully and transparently with our students throughout the pandemic, but it remains difficult to explain to them just how much we are at the mercy of factors we do not control. From the beginning, the faculty have had to devote considerable extra effort to delivering their courses simultaneously in multiple modes, which is new for all of them and dilutes efforts that might otherwise go into research, mentoring, and, simply, managing their own lives in an effective and healthy manner. I believe that the university has done about as good a job as possible throughout the pandemic, but worry that we are at, or at least near, the point where we will undergo long-term damage to the institution's health even as we strive to protect all our community members as well as reasonably possible.

The board is, of course, in roughly the same position and cannot provide solutions, any more than the administration can. All we can do is our best. Nevertheless, I want to alert you all to the potential future challenges that accrue to us daily as we continue to be beset by uncertainty and our inability to do our best work for our students and for the university. We will diligently strive to ensure that our students have the best possible experience under the circumstances, and that our community remains safe, but until the circumstances change, we are at risk.