

AUBG Strategic Plan: The 2020 Vision

21 May 2016

Forward

The Mission of the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG) is to educate students of outstanding potential in a community of academic excellence, diversity, and respect and to prepare them for democratic and ethical leadership in serving the needs of the region and the world. We are guided by our Mission at all times in our strategy, planning process, and related execution of tactical initiatives.

Today AUBG proudly celebrates its 25th anniversary with a list of achievements befitting an older university, including some key milestones:

- Produced 4,000 outstanding alumni who are successful both academically and professionally in Bulgaria, Europe, and on the world stage across business, social impact, entrepreneurship, academic, and government organizations.
- Providing a transformative liberal arts education to rigorously selected undergraduate students from 40 countries with the help of highly-qualified faculty from the USA, Bulgaria, and other countries.
- Expanded our mission into graduate education with the launch of the executive MBA program in 2003.
- Built a university campus in its first 25 years, and became the largest private employer in our home town with 270 staff
- Built a modern undergraduate library in 2007 featuring both print and electronic resources.
- Achieved and maintained full accreditation in both Bulgaria and in the United States.
- Raised \$26 million from private and government sources since 2011.
- Built an endowment fund from \$0 to \$20 million in less than 25 years
- Maintained a balanced unrestricted operating budget for each of the past 10 years

From its audacious early beginning as the first and only private university in Bulgaria, the only liberal arts higher education school in the South-East European and the CIS region and as a symbol of the support of the United States government to the democratization and reform of the region – AUBG has emerged as the highest quality liberal arts university in this part of the world. We provide our students with a transformative experience of learning in an environment that fully embraces and constantly fosters critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, ethical behavior, diversity, and respect, that would otherwise be out of reach to many of them.

Challenges for the university remain, yet the enormity of the challenges that have already been overcome renew our confidence in the future. This document outlines the major strategic decisions that

lie ahead, what obstacles we expect, what opportunities we anticipate, and how we plan to address them.

This plan is the successor to “Fulfilling the Promise” – the AUBG Strategic Plan from 2010 until 2015. What we learnt from the previous experience with planning and implementation was that “simpler is better”. We believe that if we are successful in clearly setting and defining goals that are strategic in nature, and focus the plan on a small but high-impact number of issues that matter the most to the long-term sustainability and growth of AUBG, we can effectively define, communicate, and execute on key priorities.

The Strategic Planning Process

The process leading to the writing of this document began with the discussion following the conclusion and evaluation of the previous strategic plan. The first step was to ask the AUBG community to participate in an online survey regarding strategic priorities. We received responses from 277 students and 286 alumni, as well as 81 members of the AUBG staff and administration and 51 faculty members. The 3 top priorities listed among all constituent groups were “development”, “enrollment”, and “undergraduate curriculum”.

The survey results and plan structure were discussed among the AUBG leadership at the retreat held in August 2015. In early September, 2015 – the faculty reviewed the survey results and provided input on strategic objectives. A Steering Committee composed of AUBG administrators, staff members, faculty, students, and an alumni representative met during the fall 2015 semester to consider all proposals and to draft successive versions of the plan document. The AUBG Board of Trustees devoted one day of its October 2015 meeting to providing input on the Plan, and the Board again reviewed the draft document at its January 2016 meeting. This document is the result of that work.

Environmental Challenges

1. Meeting Enrollment Targets

Our academic quality and the success of our graduates in business, academic careers, and in civil society is not as widely recognized by the public as we would like. A criticism heard frequently is that AUBG is “isolated” from the community of Blagoevgrad and from Bulgaria’s public life. This perception may contribute to the tendency for prospective students (and their parents) to overlook AUBG when considering a choice of university. The general public has a clearly-established perception that AUBG is “expensive” -- without having a clear idea of the true cost of attending AUBG, especially in comparison with the true cost of attending universities elsewhere in Western Europe.

Among both Bulgarian prospective students and among international students, Bulgaria is not considered a desirable destination for choosing a university. Among Bulgarians, Blagoevgrad is not considered a desirable destination for a university setting. Despite efforts to raise the profile of AUBG

and promote Blagoevgrad as a student-friendly locale, we struggle to attract qualified student applicants in sufficient numbers to meet enrollment targets.

The University's ability to attract international students is always susceptible to political factors beyond the University's control. When conflicts and political crises erupt within or among the countries from which AUBG recruits students, the ability to students from these countries to reach AUBG or afford the tuition can be impaired, even as the relevance of AUBG's mission to serve such students becomes timelier.

The type of international student attracted to AUBG is generally from countries outside the European Union. To such a student, Bulgaria can be seen as a step closer to "the West". Students from these countries are also subject to visa requirements, and these are particularly cumbersome and time-consuming, which can act as a deterrent. Even for American students (either degree-seeking or exchange) -- the visa process is lengthy. Any political issue that stimulates Bulgaria to tighten visa requirements makes the problem more severe.

2. Attracting and Retaining Quality Faculty

Maintaining a diverse faculty drawn from many different countries is critical to our ability to offer a multicultural and diverse educational experience to our students. It is also critical to our ability to attract international students and Bulgarian students who consider alternatives outside Bulgaria in order to obtain an education according to international standards. AUBG has difficulty attracting and retaining faculty and administrators in the international market. Our salaries are not dollar-for-dollar competitive with other international institutions (especially those in the Middle East), and Bulgaria and Blagoevgrad in particular do not offer opportunities for trailing spouses to pursue their careers, or opportunities for children of expatriates to attend English-language schools.

3. Development

While AUBG is much less expensive than US-based universities with similar missions, it is expensive relative to incomes and willingness-to-pay among our recruited students. During the past decade, generous donor support in the form of scholarships has been sufficient to bridge the gap between what students pay and what is necessary for the University budget. Some of the University's most important supporters have informed us of their intention to discontinue their scholarship support. AUBG therefore needs to identify new scholarship funding sources that will allow the University to continue to recruit and support students who have high academic potential but limited financial means.

4. Campus Environment

In order to provide a more complete portfolio of academic programs and majors for students; and in order to make the most efficient use of existing physical and human resources; and in order to undertake a more robust effort to fulfill our mission – it is the intention of the University to expand

enrollment up to an a goal of 1,200 undergraduate students by the year 2020. If we succeed in attracting enough students to approach this enrollment goal, some of our facilities will need to expand. The first of these challenges will be to provide residence hall capacity to house these students. We have the ability to expand the Skaptopara III hall, but the financing of such an expansion will have to be obtained. Longer term, the Skaptopara campus is intended to be the focus of the undergraduate academic experience, but the site of the campus provides very little prospect for expansion, and private development threatens to encroach on adjacent properties, limiting further the possibility for expansion.

5. AUBG Sofia

The Elieff Center for Education and Culture was established over 10 years ago with the intention of providing a venue through which the University could offer various types of outreach programs in the important Sofia market. The development of Sofia-based programming has not progressed as the early projections forecasted.

Based on conversations with representatives of corporations and entrepreneurs, we believe a gap exists between supply and demand of quality executive education and managerial professional training in Sofia, Bulgaria, and some neighboring countries. This presents an opportunity for AUBG to develop and deliver such programs, and to benefit from incremental revenue streams associated with such programs. A sustainability strategy assessment may be useful to us to help us identify potential growth areas in executive education, professional training, online and distance learning, and more. It is our intent to use our Sofia facilities as the base for such programs in the future, and we will be working to grow that base as demand is validated and tapped.

The Four Strategic goals

The survey of all stakeholders carried out in the summer of 2015 suggested that the ideal number of major initiatives in the new plan should be no more than 5 to ensure focus and effective implementation. The role of the Strategic Plan is to articulate what will be done over the next 5 years to ensure sustainable growth and adaptation to the realities of an ever-changing world, while relentlessly continuing to fulfill our Mission.

The first and most important theme that emerged from our discussion with stakeholders was that AUBG's next Strategic Plan should articulate how we will achieve the Mission and be guided by the values associated with that mission. By teaching at AUBG, working at AUBG, studying at AUBG – we affirm that we share the following values:

- All of our programs and activities must be characterized by the highest standards of excellence.
- We are committed to the values of a diverse and inclusive campus community.
- All of our activities must be performed to the highest standards of integrity.

- We embrace the values of open, democratic, and participatory governance both within the University and in the broader community.
- We value freedom of thought and expression.
- The most effective way to prepare students for successful and meaningful lives is through a rigorous academic program of active and engaged learning within the American liberal arts tradition.
- Faculty and students are committed to the quest of new knowledge through the process of discovery and creativity.
- The University contributes to the welfare of the broader community and promotes social responsibility among all its constituents.

From our discussions with the many on-campus and off-campus focus groups during the preparation phase of this plan, the 4 strategic goals that emerged were:

- Increase Enrollment While Maintaining Quality
- Promote Academic Excellence
- Improve the Campus Environment
- Build Capacity for Sustainable Growth

The strategic goals themselves are aligned with our values. Among the reasons to increase enrollment is that educating more students would allow us to fulfill our mission with more impact. A greater size of the student body would make the university more sustainable financially, and make some of our academic programs more sustainable pedagogically. The promotion of academic excellence is our core value, and the liberal arts model we embrace places a high value on learning that occurs outside the classroom as well as inside. Finally, our efforts will not have the lasting impact we wish if we do not consider sustainability and our social responsibility in all our practices.

These strategic goals are broad, and at times overlap with each other. Each enables AUBG to fulfill the Mission Statement and to leverage the values associated with the Mission.

While constructing the Strategic Plan, we aimed to outline initiatives that are SMART:

Strategic – informing the nature and direction of AUBG policy and priorities; to guide the university’s activities and decisions to ensure that these are aligned with our mission.

Measurable – the results of each initiative must be objectively quantifiable.

Attainable –can be accomplished by the university within our various internal and exogenous constraints.

Realistic –must be genuinely achievable.

Timely – delivered on time and aligned with the timing of optimal implementation for maximum cost/benefit impact.

The goal is to establish measurable outcomes for each initiative. These outcomes will be reported to the Board on a regular basis to ensure continuing attention to the strategic goals.

1. Increase Enrollment While Maintaining Quality

The goal of higher enrollment of 1,200 undergraduate students remains vital to the sustainability and strength of AUBG. Increasing enrollment will increase our ability to expand academic programming both through new programs and within existing programs (by offering more diverse electives). A larger enrollment also allows for more efficient utilization of our existing classroom and other facilities, which would lower the per-student fixed cost and create additional revenue from tuition.

We are not proposing to meet the numerical enrollment target by becoming less selective with regards to the academic qualifications necessary to enter AUBG. By maintaining high quality standards, we will not sacrifice our ability to offer a meaningful, high quality learning environment and learning experience for all students.

Analysis of the results of our admissions process shows that AUBG enrolls a high percentage of its admitted students. The “yield rates” (percent of admitted students who enroll) is particularly high for Bulgarian students, moderate in regional countries in which we recruit actively, and lowest in the most distant international markets. The efforts we propose are directed towards raising the awareness and appeal of AUBG among prospective students and the people who influence their decisions, in order to attract a greater number of qualified applicants.

Initiatives:

1.1 Define our market and peer group of competitors on an annual basis to adapt to the dynamic educational, demographic, and geo-political shifts

Responsible: Director of Admissions

Timeline: prior to Fall 2016

Key Performance Indicator: study designed, commissioned, and executed, and results available

1.2 Institute a rigorous market Segmentation, Targeting, Positioning (STP) approach to recruiting, which will inform our future priorities and initiatives to attract more applicants fitting the profile we target, and to increase yield.

Responsible: Director of Admissions

Timeline: Fall 2016

Key Performance Indicator: analysis and executed, and recruiting and enrollment strategy formulated

1.3 Make scholarship support a Development priority. Tuition payments from AUBG students cover only direct educational expenses; the rest of the cost of running the University has to be funded via scholarships. This makes scholarship money a major factor in our ability to fulfill our mission.

Responsibility: Executive Director of Development

Timeline: Immediately and Ongoing.

Key Performance Indicator: New dollars raised for scholarships meet the institutional target set for fiscal year 2017 and rise by 10% in each of the following years.

1.4 Measure, evaluate, and market a consistent academic image of AUBG to prospective students, and their influencers such as teachers and parents, with the objective to increase propensity to apply and help meet Admissions KPI's for inquiries, applications, and enrollment.

Responsibility: Director of Communications and Marketing

Timeline: Immediately and Ongoing.

Key Performance Indicator: Performance metrics of image campaign show increased awareness and stronger brand awareness of AUBG among key constituencies. Instruments include image study to be conducted every other year with metrics showing greater awareness and consideration in targeted markets.

1.5 Organize and increase the number and size of activities that most materially impact the likelihood of achieving the Admissions strategic goal, i.e. bring prospective students to campus for summer camps, competitions, conferences, etc., organize and implement school visits in conjunction with faculty lectures, leverage alumni and other supporters, etc.

Responsibility: Director of Admissions

Timeline: Immediate and Ongoing.

Performance Indicator: annual increase of 10% year-on-year in number of on-campus events and school visits and overall prospective student attendees engaged, .

2. Promote Academic Excellence

The tenet of excellence emphasizes three characteristics of the academic experience at AUBG. These are that our education is relevant and practical, that we maintain a constant focus on students, and that our faculty are committed to best practices in pedagogy.

Relevant and Practical

The liberal arts model affords students the kind of knowledge and understanding of broadly applicable principles that frees them from the need to recall numerous specific instances. The liberal arts model takes the broadening of students' minds or the training of the intellect as ends in themselves. Thus we

value as relevant not only those skills or aptitudes that are directly applicable (for instance in the workplace) but those that are more broadly “contextualize-able” (for instance, the capacity for critical thinking or critical evaluation). Another AUBG advantage is that by presenting all subjects through “the lens of the regions” our students come from, our education acquires more specific relevance to our students.

The value of liberal arts education lies in what it provides students: the promotion of a mode of thinking that could be called “critical” or “elastic” (in the sense of adaptable or versatile) and is not limited to a specific body of knowledge or to a single academic or professional field.

What should all our students understand and be able to do regardless of their majors? We distinguish between the curriculum’s “instilled values” (like the value of critical inquiry) and the methodologies or skill sets specific to a given academic discipline.

Focus on Students

The “focus on students” aspect of our tenet addresses the kind of students we want, and the kind of person they become. The characteristics we want for our students include aptitude for quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, research skills, and knowledge of the intellectual frameworks common to the humanities and social sciences. We also focus on our students’ attitudes and personal qualities. We want students to be ambitious, curious, adventurous, and dedicated to lifelong learning and the ethical conduct of their lives.

Best Practices

In order to achieve our goals, the AUBG faculty and administration are committed to following best practices in all our teaching. We believe “Best Practices” include:

- Modeling our beliefs in our personal and social behavior
- Engaging students in an active learning community
- Challenging students
- Acquiring knowledge through “doing”
- Learning “how to learn”
- Stimulating critical thinking

Initiatives:

Focus on AUBG’s values and on behavior that is aligned with Mission and Values

2.1 Evaluate and restructure the General Education program to emphasize interdisciplinary skills, and trans-disciplinary values in addition to discipline-based requirements.

Responsibility: Provost

Timeline: propose and approve prior to Fall 2017, implement during 2017-2018

Performance Indicator: Revised General Education structure approved and included in the 2017-18 Academic Catalog, and implemented for incoming 2017 fall semester classes.

2.2 Create mentoring and academic development opportunities in the curriculum for students for each year of their AUBG study.

Responsibility: Dean of Faculty and Provost

Timeline: For first-year students, May 2017; seniors, May 2018, sophomores, May 2019, juniors, May 2020

Performance Indicator: establishment of common development opportunity.

2.3 Expand the University's financial support for students who take part in academic competitions, conferences, etc. – by providing more support for conference registration and accommodation (as well as travel expenses); and by establishing a central repository for announcements of conferences and/or competitions.

Responsibility: Dean of Students

Timeline: Fund established during 2016-17, operational in 2017-18

Performance Indicator: establishment of fund, number of competitions supported

2.4 Invest in lab equipment, demonstrations, simulations, etc. in the natural sciences to support innovative teaching and active learning in the natural sciences.

Responsibility: Dean of Faculty

Timeline: May 2017

Performance Indicator: Report on updates of science curriculum support in May 2017 Board Book.

2.5 Devise measurement criteria and implement assessment of student achievement in the learning outcomes.

Responsibility: Dean of Faculty,

Timeline: Evaluation Plan during 2016-17, implementation starting 2017-18

Performance Indicator: Measurable (and measured) indicators of learning outcomes in General Education modes and in all majors by 2017-18.

2.6 Implement best practices in support for faculty development to increase faculty research and scholarly activity through conferences, publications, exchanges, etc.

Responsibility: Provost

Timeline: Progress reports beginning May 2017.

Performance Indicators: The number of peer-reviewed academic conference presentations increases by 10% per year. The number of peer-reviewed publications increases by 10% per year. The number of participants in cross-university projects and exchanges increases by 10% per year. There is increased support for commitment to best practice through research in the field, visits to others' classes, etc. (Note: this needs more attention to the questions of "how" the increase is to be achieved, and "where" the presentations and publications are to take place.)

3. Enhancing the Campus Environment

The strength of the liberal arts experience lies not just inside the classroom, but in providing a physical and social environment in which students live, learn, take on challenges, and take on active roles in the life of the community. Therefore improving the campus environment – broadly considered as a system comprising of multiple elements such as physiological/living and safety conditions, sense of belonging, esteem, and self-actualization dynamics – is as important to us as meeting our goals for the number of students or maintaining strong financial results.

For the time our undergraduate students are at AUBG, we provide not just their classroom instruction, but also their study environment, their living environment, and their social environment. We are responsible for promoting healthy lifestyles including fitness and healthy food choices; we need to engage in impactful and productive relationships with the local community and local authorities. Each element of the student campus environment complements the academic program, and is not separate from it.

Initiatives:

3.1 Provide quality housing enabling AUBG to provide a top-quality residential campus environment.

Responsibility: Director of Residence Life

Timeline: Ongoing.

Performance Indicators: Student satisfaction survey indicates more than 50% of students select top choice on Likert scale as their response to the question: "How satisfied are you with the quality of AUBG housing".

3.2 Expand campus facilities and services to encourage development of healthy lifestyle habits.

Responsibility: Board of Trustees

Timeline: according to indicator.

Performance Indicators: Outdoor sports facilities next to ABF Student Center completed by May 2017.

3.3 Ensure a safe and secure campus environment.

Responsibility: Director of Security Office

Timeline: Ongoing

Performance Indicator: Comprehensive campus emergency plan presented to and approved by the President by September 2016. One emergency drill for faculty and staff per semester (in addition to one fire drill per semester for the entire community) beginning in September 2016.

3.4 Encourage and support the establishment of healthy lifestyles through expanded wellness and mental health programs.

Responsibility: Dean of Students

Timeline: Established during 2016-17.

Performance Indicator: Increased participation in lifestyle programming each year.

3.5 Encourage life-long physical fitness habits.

Responsibility: Sports Director

Timeline: Beginning in 2016-17.

Performance Indicator: Increase in number of students participating in sports and fitness activities.

Building a Sustainable University

By the standards of academia, AUBG is still a very young university. In its earliest years, the university's main strength was its pioneering and entrepreneurial spirit. On the other hand, nobody could be sure whether the university would survive, or in what shape it would emerge from its growing pains. Long range planning could not be a priority under those circumstances.

We have now progressed beyond that early stage. We still have important work to do to create the kind of university we want AUBG to be, but the foundation is sound. The emphasis now is not how to "survive", but rather how to "thrive". This new stage both allows and requires more attention to long range goals, and the establishment of processes to ensure that purposeful steps are taken each year towards long-term objectives.

We use the term “sustainability” in its broadest sense. The use of the term has implications for how we manage our financial resources, but not only finances. We also mean it in terms of our student body, human resources, campus facilities, relationships with government, the academic community, local/regional/global community stakeholders, accreditation authorities, as well as with the natural environment.

Initiatives:

4.1 Monitor and fulfill the Board-approved “principles for financial sustainability”.

Responsibility: Vice President for Finance and Administration

Timeline: Ongoing

Performance Indicator: Reported data on “principles” in full compliance.

4.2 Make staff offices more resilient to turnover by reducing the incidence of tasks that “only one person can do” by organizing annual “cross-training days” where staff in each office devote the day to training each other on job-specific tasks.

Responsibility: Director of Human Resources

Timeline: Ongoing – first cross-training in summer 2016.

Performance Indicator: Number of participants in cross-training exercise minimum 20% of all professional staff.

4.3 Raise the profile of AUBG by establishing stronger connections between AUBG and local and national institutions. Establish stronger relations between AUBG and the world of business, politics, the academe, etc. through the organization of high-profile events that connect AUBG to the important developments in Bulgaria’s public life.

Responsibility: President

Timeline: Events planned during 2016-17

Performance Indicator: mentions of AUBG and AUBG events in Bulgarian media increase by 10% per year from baseline.

4.4 Undertake energy efficiency improvements on campus, particularly with the Main Building.

Responsibility: Director of Facilities

Timeline: Beginning in 2015-16 and ongoing.

Performance Indicator: Number of projects, reduction in energy consumption.

4.5 Assess staff development opportunities and target more training opportunities to improve staff retention and satisfaction while reducing the university's risk of losing a person in an "only-one-person-can-do" role.

Responsibility: Director of Human Resources

Timeline: according to indicator.

Performance Indicators: Number of individuals cross-trained to be capable of handling other duties increased by 10% per year beginning in May 2017. Number of staff members participating in internships, professional development programs, exchange programs, etc. increased by 10% per year beginning in May 2017.

4.6 Make further investments in information technology services to keep the level of support available to students up-to-date.

Responsibility: Director of the Office of Communications and Computing

Timeline: Ongoing, reporting to begin in May 2017.

Performance Indicators: Comparison of AUBG IT student services to Educause standards. Annual survey of satisfaction beginning in 2016-17. Annual reporting of age profile of AUBG IT infrastructure beginning in May 2017.

4.7 Establish a management process to allow flexibility within the organization and to manage change.

Responsibility: President

Timeline: Process organized during 2016-17, for launch during 2017-18.

Performance Indicators: Create and maintain knowledge and process database as repository for institutional knowledge. Improve and expand disaster recovery plans. Organize bi-annual review of organizational structure to respond to environmental changes.

###