

Educating Afghanistan's Future: The American University of Afghanistan by David Fox

In one of the final scenes of the film *Charlie Wilson's War*, Tom Hanks, playing Congressman Charlie Wilson, begs U.S. government officials for money to help rebuild Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. His requests are brushed off, and the film suggests that American abandonment of Afghanistan paved the way for the rise of the Taliban.

11 years later, following the attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent invasion and occupation of Afghanistan by NATO forces, the U.S. government seems to have learned from the mistakes of its Cold War era foray in the country. American foreign aid is funding a number of projects intended to have long-term impact on the social, economic, and political development of the country. One of the most promising of these initiatives is the American University of Afghanistan. Founded with a five-year USAID grant of \$42 million and supplemented by additional Afghan and foreign donors, the grant allows the university to hire experienced professors, cover running costs, and provide security for its students for just \$8.4 million dollars a year. To put this amount in perspective, the Pentagon has reported that it is currently spending around \$300 million dollars *per day* on the war effort.

Inaugurated in March 2006 with 53 students, the university (abbreviated to AUAF) has quietly built a reputation for high educational standards and respect for Afghan values. As Matthew Trevithick, the Director of Communications at AUAF explains, the process of building trust took time. Afghans needed to see for themselves that "we are not a Christian proselytizing center, we are not opening a night club, and we are not encouraging any untoward behavior with women," he says. Once a positive reputation was established, Trevithick goes on, "enrollment skyrocketed."

The university now has over 1,700 full and part-time students, 22% of whom are women. Curriculum expansion has been continuous since its opening, and each year has brought a new level of depth to the course offerings. In the fall of 2011 the university launched its Master's of Business Administration program with 29 students. Plans are underway to roll out a law degree program, in partnership with California's Stanford Law School. A Mass Communications Bachelor's Degree will soon be offered, joining the current selection of degrees in Business, Information Technology, and Political Science.

Although the university has made a point of respecting Afghan cultural red lines, that has not stopped professors from taking a distinctly American approach to education. "We've put up four walls around a five-acre campus, and we've said, 'in here, *some* of the rules will be a little different,'" says Trevithick. "We will ask you for your opinion, we will ask you what you think. This is the first time that these kids have been asked what they think. We challenge them to think creatively about themselves. This mentality is novel here."

The founder of AUAF, former Afghan Minister of Education Dr. Sharif Fayezi, set out to create the country's first truly pan-Afghan national university. Afghanistan is an

expansive, incredibly diverse country with numerous ethnic groups; Dr. Fayez hoped that by bringing together students from all over the country, the geographical, ethnic, and sectarian barriers would be broken down and a true Afghan national identity could be cultivated. Now students at the university represent 33 out of 34 provinces, from Nimroz in the West bordering Iran, to Badakshan touching China.

"We don't care - in the most benevolent sense - who is Hazara, who is Pashtun, who is Turkman, who is Aimaq," explains Trevithick. "To have these students see themselves as just a member of one country, regardless of their ethnicity or religious beliefs, is what we do here, and it is very powerful."

Although NATO forces are scheduled to pull out of Afghanistan in 2014, the university has no intention of slowing its pace of growth. In fact, 2012 witnessed the groundbreaking of an adjacent, 80-acre campus, with a women's economic development center as its centerpiece. While uncertainty hangs in the air about the future of the country following the withdrawal of Western militaries, officials from the American University of Afghanistan insist it is not going anywhere.