

AUCA COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
OF THE U.S. AMBASSADOR MARIE L. YOVANOVITCH
June 7, 2008

Honorable President Hurwitz, trustees, faculty, staff, parents and graduates.

Thank you all for coming today. I want to thank President Hurwitz and the Board of Trustees at the American University of Central Asia for giving me the honor sharing this day with you. Congratulations!

Congratulations, first and foremost, to the graduating seniors, the class of 2008! Molodtsy! And congratulations to the faculty and staff of AUCA for imparting the knowledge and critical thinking skills these students will need in their lives ahead. And congratulations also to the family and friends of the seniors for helping them reach this day with your love and support. Truly, this is a day to celebrate what you have accomplished.

And, it is a day to look forward to the rest of your lives. Today, I want to talk about the one constant in our lives: change. Today's world is changing fast and most of us here are undergoing profound changes in our own lives as well. This is true whether you are a graduate of AUCA about to embark on your career, a member of the AUCA community participating in the evolution of this fine institution, or a citizen of Kyrgyzstan seeing this proud country develop step by step into a market economy and democracy.

Change is constant, but our attitude - whether we embrace change and shape it or rail against it and deny it - makes a huge difference in how we live our lives and in how we influence events around us.

CHANGE AT AUCA

Let me start with AUCA. In twelve short years, this university has gone from a simple department of a larger university to become one of the premier educational institutions in the region. And today the university continues to change: the curriculum, personnel and the student body. With the right attitude and the right talent, which is here in abundance, AUCA will continue to progress.

I am confident in this because in my three years in Kyrgyzstan, I have gotten to know the spirit and the values of AUCA. It is more than simply a place to learn English, though this will indeed be a valuable skill in life and in work after graduation. In fact, I have found this to be a place that embraces freedom, allowing students to choose their courses, their majors and their opinions. It is a place that embraces honesty, giving students the grades they have earned and the teachers the respect they deserve. It is a place that embraces critical thinking, teaching students to seek answers to problems, seek creativity among routine, and seek truth amid darkness. It is a place that embraces diversity, helping students from many countries, many religions, and many backgrounds come together to stimulate and respect one another.

It is a place that continually strives for academic excellence, pushing students to contribute to life and learning within the university so that they will be prepared to contribute later outside. But perhaps, above all else, AUCA is a place that embraces personal responsibility, which is the necessary counterpart to freedom. Personal responsibility teaches us to take control of our lives, to consider and be accountable for the consequences of our words and actions, to take advantage of opportunities, and to play an active role in shaping our changing society and the world around us for the better.

CHANGE IN KYRGYZSTAN

It is in this society, in Kyrgyzstan and in Central Asia, that I hope all of you will use these skills and these values to make positive changes. In your lifetimes alone, Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia have become very different places from what they were twenty or so years ago, when you were born. And just think how it has changed since your parents were born in the aftermath of the Second World War. Just as each previous generation had to accept the challenges of the changing situation around them good and bad and shape it positively, you, the graduating seniors, will be confronted with change - but you will be prepared. You will be armed with the skills you have worked so hard to develop here at AUCA, so you will rise to the challenge and shape your own lives and Kyrgyzstan - or your home country - for the better.

Any country's greatest resource is its people. And that is why I am confident in Kyrgyzstan's future. When I talk to people all over this country, I am always energized and I know that the multi-ethnic people of today's Kyrgyzstan will find a way to balance the proper respect for their traditions and culture with a healthy desire to move forward.

Kyrgyzstan is a country that has won respect around the world for its economic reforms, joining the World Trade Organization soon after independence. It is a country that is continuing to improve the business climate today by lessening government involvement and lowering taxes. It is a country that has maintained a relatively free press and a vibrant civil society. And it is a country that has become famous as the host of the American University of Central Asia, attracting the best and the brightest from many countries.

And yet, much work remains to be done. This government came to power with promises of change and reform. President Bakiyev supports building a rule of law culture in Kyrgyzstan. So I'd urge you to support this endeavor. Use the values and skills you have received here at AUCA to ensure honesty, transparency, and fairness in business, in education, in government, and in everyday life. Use them to support freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, and freedom of expression – rights that are enshrined in the Kyrgyz Constitution.

Remember, always, that with this gift of freedom comes the responsibility -- particularly as graduates of an elite university like AUCA -- to work hard for positive change in your individual lives and in your country. You could, for example, make a pledge today to take a personal stand against corruption as you enter the work force.

This may cause you some personal hardship. But I think you'll find that resisting corruption will give you pride, dignity, integrity and satisfaction. Because you can always change a country for the better, one person at a time.

Just as your lives are changing, mine is too. In July, I will depart Kyrgyzstan after three incredible years. I saw much change, some disappointments, and many accomplishments, including rebuilding a close and productive bilateral relationship. This cooperation between our two countries will continue – despite the physical distance between us and our differences – because our common interests and our common values are greater and bind us together.

It will be difficult for me to leave, because Kyrgyzstan has not only been my home, it has become a part of my heart. I am not the same person that I was when I came here, because of the people I have met and the experiences I have had here. The same is true for all you seniors who have learned much and grown up at AUCA. It will always be in your heart and a part of your lives.

You are the leaders of the next generation. Use your AUCA experience to make a positive difference in your homeland, whether it is Kyrgyzstan or someplace else. Don't let change just happen to you. Embrace it, take responsibility and use your critical thinking skills to make your lives – and the world we all share– a better place.

I, as well as the faculty and your parents, expect great things from you and look forward to seeing what each of you makes of the gifts you have been given – the freedoms and the responsibilities to change your lives, to change the world.

Congratulations again and best wishes!