

The Asian University for Women

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As members of the ASIANetwork, you are accomplishing the critical task of preparing American students for an increasingly interdependent world, one in which Asian societies play a major role. We know that despite the region's tremendous impact on global economic, political, and cultural issues, millions of Asian women do not have a voice. In a cycle of disadvantage, women are denied access to higher education, to economic opportunity, and to leadership roles.

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan put it pointedly: "Study after study has shown that there is no effective development strategy in which women do not play a central role. When women are fully involved, the benefits can be seen immediately: families are healthier; they are better fed; their income, savings and reinvestment go up. And what is true of families is true of communities, and eventually of whole countries."

With this goal in mind, an international group of leaders is developing the Asian University for Women (AUW), an unprecedented institution of higher education, international in scope, and committed to serving women in Asia from all religious, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Our vision is to foster excellence, leadership, entrepreneurship, innovation and critical thinking. Linking knowledge with action, AUW will cultivate women leaders who will have a significant impact on their societies.

Two principles led to the decision to create a women's university. The first is cultural: many young women in Asian societies are simply not allowed by their families to live away from home in coeducational institutions. Education may be forgone entirely if it is not available in a single-sex living environment. The second reason for establishing a university just for women is empirical and based upon the experience of women who have attended excellent institutions of higher education for women in many parts of the world. These women excel. They occupy positions of leadership in their chosen fields in far higher proportions than women graduating in the same time periods from similarly ranked coeducational institutions.

At capacity, the University will enroll 2,500 students from across Asia, with at least one half of the total student population attending on scholarship—talented women from rural and other underserved communities. In its early years, the University will recruit students primarily from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, India, Laos, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Over time, student recruitment will extend throughout Southeast and West Asia as well as to other Muslim countries and populations where women have

traditionally had fewer educational and professional opportunities.

In order to ensure that students entering the university from underserved communities have the tools to excel, AUW will offer a pre-enrollment Access program, designed to allow each student to attain a prescribed level of proficiency in English, mathematics and the computer skills that will enable her to pursue the rigorous academic curriculum.

The University's program, rooted in the context of Asia, will center on cultural, social, political, economic, scientific, and technological development, and provide an education that cultivates critical inquiry and respect for cultural and intellectual diversity. A five-year program will lead to a combined Bachelor's and Graduate degree, and will draw upon a faculty recruited from throughout the region and the world.

The undergraduate training will include broad studies of the humanities, natural and social sciences, study in depth in particular disciplines and areas of study, and interdisciplinary and experiential learning through case studies and project-based service learning. The fourth and fifth years will focus on subjects that provide careers and leadership for women and are relevant to the Asian region's needs for social and economic development, including: Information Technology, Environmental Engineering/ Sustainable Development, Management, Education, and Public Policy. AUW is cooperating with Aalborg University in Denmark and with Imperial College in the United Kingdom on the graduate programs.

AUW is now focused on raising the support necessary to provide for student scholarships, curriculum planning and development, the building fund, and the Access program. Since this project began in 2001, we have received approximately \$2.2 million in grants from donors including the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Citigroup Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the UNOCAL Foundation and the Open Society Institute.

We have engaged an international team of visionaries, leaders and experts in education, development, policy and architecture to create an innovative curriculum, bring together a distinguished faculty, and build an aesthetically inspiring and technologically sophisticated campus. As a member of the Board of Directors for the AUW Support Foundation, I help to coordinate a management team of staff, consultants and volunteers who are shepherding the many facets of AUW's development. A growing number of corporations and financial institutions, non-government organizations and foun-

dations have joined us in our endeavor.

For example, our International Support Committee has a broad reach, including: Sang Chang, former Prime Minister of South Korea and Chair, Korean Council for Presidents of Private Universities; George Soros, Chairman of Soros Fund Management and of the Open Society Institute; Mark Malloch Brown, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme; and Mary Robinson, Director of the Ethical Globalization Initiative and past United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and President of Ireland. Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank, has been a strong supporter of the University.

AUW has the good fortune to collaborate with the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the design of its architectural plans. Participating students and faculty advisors made a site visit to Bangladesh in January to attend the AUW's groundbreaking ceremony, presided over by Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia. The event drew several thousand Bengali women

Following the University's anticipated opening in the fall of 2006, we will begin to focus on the active recruitment of visiting faculty members and the implementation of exchanges with American colleges and universities. At this time, we hope to reach out to the ASIANetwork to collaborate with us in this endeavor.

In closing, I quote the founder of Wellesley College, Henry Fowle Durant, who said in 1875, "Women can do the job. I give them the chance." We look forward to working with ASIANetwork in giving women in South and Southeast Asia "the chance to do the job" and the education that will enable them to do it. For more information, please visit our website at www.asian-university.org.

Alice Stone Ilchman is the Director of the Jeannette K. Watson Fellowship, President Emerita of Sarah Lawrence College, former Dean of Wellesley College and former Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Rockefeller Foundation.

Come a day early and participate in the Pre-conference Fieldtrip. Among the many stops will be a visit to Chicago's Field Museum special exhibit titled: "Splendors of China's Forbidden City: The Glorious Reign of Emperor Qianlong." Over 400 objects never before seen outside the Forbidden City will be on display. This special exhibit can only be seen in Chicago until mid-September. The exhibit will subsequently travel to Dallas for six months before returning to China.



A happy moment at the 2003 ASIANetwork Conference held in Greenville, S.C.