

Armenian students look to UC Berkeley as model for a new Soviet university

By Michelle Lin

For Armenian students, UC Berkeley is a model university.

At least that's the belief of a group of Armenian graduate students who have come to UC Berkeley to learn how an American university works.

The seven students, sponsored by the Armenian General Benevolent Union, an Armenian philanthropic organization, have come to the campus for the next five years to train to become the future faculty of the soon-to-be-built American University of Armenia.

Armen Der Kiureghian, a UC Berkeley professor of civil engineering who is heading the cross-cultural effort, believes that when it comes to graduate schools, American universities are far ahead of those in the Soviet Union.

"The key to success in higher education is free-flowing information," he said. "New ideas can flourish here because of the tremendous flexibility in the school system."

The concept was born after Der Kiureghian, who is the representative to Armenia for the American Association of Engineering Societies, paid a visit last year to Leninakan, a prominent city in the southwestern Soviet Republic of Armenia.

Less than three months before, a major earthquake, measuring 6.8 on the Richter scale, had struck Armenia, and most of the damages and casualties had occurred in Leninakan. A well-known polytechnic institute was one of the buildings that collapsed.

In a discussion among the engineers, the idea of establishing an American university in Armenia was mentioned almost jokingly, but Der Kiureghian took it very seriously.

He said he believes the best way to provide long-term help for the reconstruction of Armenia is to update technology. The best way to accomplish this is by bringing American education to the eastern country, Der Kiureghian said.

Many UC Berkeley students take for granted the campus' easy access to information found in books, computers and other sources. But for the seven recently-arrived Armenian students, such freedom is one of many novelties they hope to bring to their own country.

Der Kiureghian and UC Berkeley alumnus Mihran Agbabian, who was also involved in the investigation and study of the Armenian quake, submitted a proposal announcing the construction of an American university in Armenia to many major organizations in the United States.

The AGBU responded enthusiastically, volunteering to sponsor the program and enlisting the aid of UC President David P. Gardner, who appointed a task force, chaired by William Frazer, senior vice president of UC academic affairs. The members of this task force, which includes Der Kiureghian, traveled to Armenia on a fact-finding trip last July.

Der Kiureghian said he believes the University of California administration will help oversee the operation of the university in Armenia.

The Armenian government, which Der Kiureghian said is very excited and supportive of the new idea, is looking for a suitable location for the American University of Armenia.

Despite their transplantation to the United States, the seven students, all of whom live in the university's International House, say they have adapted well to life at UC Berkeley.

They're training to teach at a new American University of Armenia

But still, they marvel at their new-found situation.

"Even two years ago, I couldn't imagine being here, 26-year-old Rouben Amitbekian said. "(For me) nothing outside of the Soviet Union existed."

Many of the students said their decision to come to the United States was fueled by their belief that American universities could offer opportunities not found in their own country.

"I wanted to study here because (UC Berkeley) specializes in industrial engineering and the level of specialization is very high," Tigran Nazaryan said.

"Teaching and researching are at a very high level," agreed Sergey Sarkisian, who studies computer science.

The seven participants were chosen

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City moving to block faculty housing plan

By Imran Ghori
Staff Writer



Alan Goldfarb

The city of Berkeley has proposed more options to stymie UC Berkeley faculty housing at the former Presentation High School site.

Even as the university pressed ahead with the 75-unit project, City Council members and other Berkeley administrators discussed how such reuse of the Presentation site would affect the neighborhood and discussed ways they could interrupt the transformation.

Berkeley city attorney Manuela Albuquerque said Berkeley could use its regulatory power over subdivisions of property to influence the proposed development.

The university is proposing to split Presentation High, located at California and Addison streets, into two plots in order to separate the church and its facilities — which the owners would continue to use — and the proposed faculty housing area.

"The city would be in the same position as for any applicant asking for conversion," Albuquerque said.

Eve Bach, director of the Planning Commission, said the Sisters of Presentation High, the current owners of the property, do not have a use permit because the church predated the permit process.

She said the lack of a permit could be used to the city's advantage.

"If they sell any of the parking property," which is included in the Presentation High project, "they are changing the land use," Bach said. "Changing the land use requires getting a use permit to continue (the current use)."

But Albuquerque said the university is exploring avenues which would allow it to use its state agency status to exempt the Presentation

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Armenian students visit

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from a pool of approximately 120 applicants.

As with all new students, the Armenians are slightly overwhelmed by the size and complexities of enrollment at UC Berkeley.

"The first time around, you feel yourself lost. There are a lot of people here," Gevorg Nahapetian said.

Armenia's state university has a total of 12,000 students as compared to the university's more than 33,000.

The students said they have found some academic surprises.

When students enter a university in Armenia, they are placed in a study group. And for the next five years or so, the members of that group attend the same classes and learn from each other.

Nahapetian said the freedom to choose classes was a pleasant surprise.

"I like it, but the classes are harder," he said.

"In Armenia we had no homework

because our classes were six to seven hours long, six days a week. Here the professors leave a lot of stuff for us to do ourselves," Nahapetian said.

Despite the difficulties, the Armenian students seem content with their new home.

Amitbekian remarked that people in Berkeley are very friendly. "In our country if there are foreign students, their freedom is limited," he said.

"Back at home, we never say 'Hi' to unknown people," Nahapetian said.

Amirbekyan said he is looking forward to teaching at the first university in the Soviet Union that is independent of the government.

"We hope that it will have a big impact in our country. We want it to be an open university and teach people from all over the world."

Nahapetian added, "I see it as the center of scientific life in the trans-Caucasian region. It will prepare specialists in all the major fields of study. Armenia needs many specialists."



STAFF PHOTO BY WILLIAM WALLACE-FREEDMAN

Visiting Armenian students have found some academic surprises.

City continues to fight plan

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High plan from city zoning

The city has opposed the project — which could result in an additional 90