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

By Michelle Liu

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, are all Armenian philanthropic organizations have come to the campus for the past five or six years in order to become future faculty of the newly to-be-established American University of Armenia.

Armen Der Kiurghian, a UC Berkeley professor of civil engineering who is heading the cross-cultural effort, believes that he can see to graduate schools, Armenian universities are ahead of those in the Soviet Union.

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

The concept was born after Der Kiurghian, who is the representative of Armenia to the American Association of Engineering Societies, paid a visit last year to Los Angeles, 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 Armenian university in Armenia was mentioned almost jokingly, but Der Kiurghian took it very seriously. He said he believed the best way to provide a long-term help for the reconstruction of Armenia will be the realization of the American University.

"The best way to accomplish this is by bringing American education to the eastern country," Der Kiurghian said.

Many UC Berkeley students who have gone to the campus have access to information found in books, computers and other resources. But for the seven recently-arrived Armenian students, such freedom is one of many necessities they hope to bring to their own country.

Der Kiurghian and UC Berkeley professor of civil engineering Hrachia Aghababian, 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 raising the aid of UC President David P. Gardner, who appointed a task force, chaired by William Frazee, senator vice president of UC academic affairs. The members of this task force, which includes Der Kiurghian, traveled to Armenia on a fact-finding trip last July.

Der Kiurghian said he believes the University of California administration will help overcome the problems of the university in Armenia.

The Armenian government, which Der Kiurghian said is very excited and supportive of the new idea, is looking for a suitable location for the American University of Armenia. Despite their transnational 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 newfound situation.

"Even two years ago, I couldn't imagine being here, 36-year-old Rosbek Amirkhanian said. "Four men nothing outside of the Soviet Union could offer opportunities not found in their own country."

"I wanted to study here because UC Berkeley's reputation in industrial engineering and the level of specialization is very high," Vigen Nasranyan said.

"Teaching and researching are at a very high level," agreed Sergo Sarkissian, who studies computer science. The seven participants were chosen because of the qualifications of the university in Armenia.

City moving to block faculty housing plan

By Inna Chouli Staff Writer

The city of Berkeley has proposed moving to block faculty housing at the former Presentation High School site.

Even as the university presses ahead with its 75-unit project, City Council members and other Berkeley administrators discussed how such an action in the Presentation site would affect the neighborhood and discussed ways they could intervene to prevent the transformation.

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

The university is currently proposing to build 75 units over the former Presentation High School site. The city has two plans in order to separate the church and its facilities — the church would continue to use the building for its faculty housing.

The proposal is in the same position as for any applicant seeking conversion, Albuquerque said. 

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

"If they sell any of the parking property, which is included in the Presentation High project, the city would be interested," Bach said.

"Changing the land use requires getting a use permit to continue the current use," Bach said.

But Albuquerque said the university is exploring avenues which would allow it to use its own property for faculty housing at the Presentation site.