Founder Yervant Zorian discusses the launch of AGBU’s Armenian Virtual College

NEW YORK – The AGBU Armenian Virtual College (AVC) (http://www.avc.org/) went online earlier this year for a summer trial session that attracted hundreds of eager students from every corner of the world. They logged on to learn more about this innovative Internet-based accredited distance-learning program that provides courses in Armenian history, language, and culture, while allowing students to choose from six languages of instruction: Western Armenian, Eastern Armenian, English, Russian, French, and Spanish.

The driving force behind this groundbreaking Armenian school is AGBU Board Member and AVC founder Yervant Zorian, the vice-president and chief scientist of Virage Logic, an IT company operating both in the United States and the United States. He was elected to the AGBU Central Board last year during the organization’s 85th General Assembly. He serves as a trustee of Yerevan State University and chairperson of Armenian Silicon Valley, and was recently selected to be a Foreign Member of Armenia’s National Academy of Sciences.

On September 23, AVC will formalize its summer program, so we spoke to Zorian about AVC and its potential for the future of Armenian education.

A full-scale academic institution

AGBU: Now that the first trial session of AVC in Armenia’s Virtual College has concluded, how would you gauge the outcome?

ZY: The first term of AVC successfully attracted approximately 950 e-learners through courses in Eastern Armenian, Western Armenian, Eastern and Armenian History. One of the hurdles we are facing is to evaluate the e-learning method at the heart of the college.

AGBU: As AVC was aimed to become not merely a library of individual electronic courses, but a full-scale academic institution, with fully equipped virtual classrooms, effective student-teacher, peer-to-peer collaboration, and an authentic university environment. The success of our first trial term confirmed not only the academic quality of the courses’ content but also the effectiveness of our overall online learning method. In this sense, AVC has helped us realize the extent to which the two components, namely, the content and the method can create the optimal learning experience for the Armenian education.

AGBU: What has been the response of the students involved in this inaugural session?

ZY: Upon the conclusion of the first term, every student completed surveys, which assessing a key component of the AVC: the content methodology, and the technical quality and ease of use, and the online instructors. The overwhelming majority of the students were satisfied with their learning experience with AVC and plan to continue taking courses through the program in the future. Moreover, all survey respondents express their intent to recommend AVC to others. The majority of students highly appreciated the opportunity to interact with one another and found this peer-to-peer collaboration to be beneficial for their learning experience, especially for those participating in the Armenian history courses. Students were satisfied with the technical aspects of the program, and were impressed by the professional level of the individualized feedback. Furthermore, they appreciated the enthusiasm, approachability, and responsive nature of the AVC online instructors, who helped create engaging classroom environments. While the students in each of the six language groups – Eastern Armenian, Western Armenian, Russian, French, English, and Spanish – varied greatly in their background and their style of online interaction, they all shared an appreciation for the mission of the AVC and its role in the global Armenian community.

Surprising demographics

AGBU: Have there been any surprises?

ZY: Throughout the first term, we continuously adapted the college’s features and our learning methodology in order to address the unanticipated challenges and surprises that arose. Even during the earliest stage of the term – the registration period – we were surprised by the demographics of the student body. The number of people registering for the entire term far surpassed our expectations. Moreover, we were amazed by the span of their ages and their backgrounds. We were quite pleased to find that the wide range of learners of all ages were eager to communicate with one another through the discussion forums and peer-to-peer collaboration activity. Moreover, the variety in students’ academic background and their prior knowledge actually enhanced the level of classroom discussion and allowed for a richer experience. As the students were impressed by the number of hours students spent on the lessons, which surpassed our expectations. In fact, students spent on average the multimedia course multiple times each week and the level of online activity on the AVC portal increased repeatedly increasing our bandwidth on the host server throughout the term.

While the success of our first academic term is very promising, there is still much work to be done before the AVC reaches its full potential. In order to reach a wider range of learners in the global village, we will undoubtedly increase the number of languages in which our courses are offered. Over the past several weeks, I have already received requests to expand our six currently offered teaching languages, by adding German, Turkish, and Polish, among others. By the very nature of the college’s design, the scope of the AVC is unlimited, and we will continue to widen its reach until Armenian education becomes available to every Armenian across the globe.

In addition to expanding the community it serves, the AVC will advance in the education it offers. By widening the range of courses in the AVC curriculum, we can ensure that our e-learners have the chance to obtain the most comprehensive Armenian education. We are in the process of discussing a number of subject domains to add to our current curriculum. Most of our instructors are excited about the possibility of expanding our reach in the virtual learning community, so that we can deliver the cultural heritage to the world.

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