

Community

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

NEW YORK – The AGBU Armenian Virtual College (AVC) (<http://www.avc-agbu.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 and Eastern Armenian, English, Russian, French, and Spanish.

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

His passion and vision for AVC has ensured that the original idea continues to grow as the school and students work together to develop a system that can revolutionize the way Armenians preserve and promote their cultural heritage.

On September 22, AVC will formally launch its first full semester, 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 AGBU's Armenian Virtual College has concluded, how would you gauge the outcome?

YZ: The first term of AVC successfully attracted approximately 150 e-learners through courses in Eastern Armenian, Western Armenian, and Armenian History. One of the purposes of this term was to evaluate the e-learning method at the heart of the college.

At its core, the AVC is 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 communication, 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 methodology. In fact, this term helped us realize the extent to which the two complement each other in order to create the optimal learning experience for Armenian education.

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

YZ: Upon the conclusion of the first term, every student completed three surveys, each assessing a key component of the AVC: the content and methodology, the technical quality and ease of use, and the online instructors. The overwhelming majority of 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 expressed 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 multimedia components. Furthermore, they appreciated the enthusiasm, approachability, and responsiveness of the online instructors, who helped create engaging classroom environments. While the students in each of the six language groups – Eastern Armenian, Western Armenian, Russian, English, French, 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?

YZ: 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 learners registering for each course far surpassed our expectations. Moreover, we were amazed by the span of their ages and their backgrounds. We were quite pleased to find that despite this wide range, learners of all ages were eager to communicate with one another through the discussion forums and peer-to-peer collaboration activities. Moreover, the variety in students' academic background and prior knowledge actually enhanced the level of classroom discussion and allowed for a richer experience for all. As the term progressed, we were impressed by the number of hours students spent on the lessons per week, which surpassed our expectations. In fact, students often viewed the multimedia lessons multiple times each week and the level of online activity on the AVC portal necessitated repeatedly increasing our bandwidth on the host server throughout the term.



Yervant Zorian speaks to an Armenian audience in Istanbul about the newly launched AGBU Armenian Virtual College.

AGBU: How do you view AVC fitting into AGBU's larger educational mission?

YZ: AGBU's lifelong dedication to Armenian education is a well-known reality. As we all know, throughout the past century, AGBU has supported Armenian educational programs primarily through traditional schools and universities in Armenia and in the diaspora. Through the Armenian Virtual College, its newest teaching institute, AGBU will further its mission to promote education in the globally dispersed Armenian communities, using an entirely innovative approach. Through online education, the AVC provides learners around the world the opportunity to receive the same full-fledged Armenian education, regardless of their age, country of residence, or knowledge level. In this sense, the AVC not only reinforces the educational objectives of AGBU, but also widens their reach. Though unprecedented in its scope, the AVC neither replaces the traditional Armenian school system, nor serves as an alternative to the educational institutions AGBU has supported in the past. On the contrary, the new virtual learning community bridges the gaps in the current system – both bringing Armenian education to those in the diaspora who do not have access to traditional schools and complementing the curriculum of existing Armenian schools through multimedia resources. In fact, several day schools and Saturday schools, including some from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Argentina, and Uruguay, have already expressed interest in using AVC courses to supplement their current curriculum.

A college diploma

AGBU: When does the AVC team expect course accreditations to begin so that students can receive credit from their local colleges and universities for their work?

YZ: AVC learners can choose to earn credits for each course that they complete, ultimately leading to a diploma from the AGBU Armenian Virtual College by completing 24 courses. Alternately, students can earn a minor in a subject domain by completing 8 courses from a single department.

Since the courseware has been developed by the higher educational institutes in Armenia, we have already obtained full accreditation from the Academic Council of the Yerevan State University for the course developed so far.

Currently, we are actively pursuing the next level of accreditation from recognized educational institutions in North America and Europe. Such accreditation will help students transfer course credits from AVC to their corresponding universities and learning institutions across the world or obtain credit as Advanced Placement courses in their corresponding high school programs.

Alternately, AVC learners may also choose to participate in the program as an extension or continuing-education course with less rigorous requirements and no credits. Based on the demographics of our recently completed Summer Term, we have noticed that the number of these auditors is typically in the range of a third in each of our AVC virtual classrooms.

The possibilities are endless

AGBU: What is your dream for AVC? How do you see it changing in the future?


YZ: 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 adopted 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.

Due to the virtual nature of the institute, the possibilities of advancing the features available to students are endless. We are fully engaged in the global community of online learning and are collaborating with world-renowned online pedagogues and technology experts. We are willing to leverage the experiences obtained by the network of institutions in this community.

As the college thus evolves into a thriving virtual learning community, I foresee that it will foster both the cultural education and social communication otherwise out of the reach of most Armenians, and in so doing, will become the premier learning institute of the global Armenian community. #



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