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Cary Reid Named International Innovative Leader of the Year

By Meadow Hilley, TIE Editor

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For the better part of two years, Oscar (U.K.) has been researching the impact of large-scale commercial fishing on traditional communities along the Indian coast. Anna (Australia) has been exploring how women's experiences of social injustice might be conveyed through theater. As for Kate (Canada)—the third pioneer to embrace UWC Mahindra's new Project Based Diploma (PBD) spearheaded by Coordinator Cary Reid—she has devoted her studies to examining the ways in which conflict affects all stakeholders in a community at odds.

In signing on to United World College's (UWC) pilot program, these three remarkable students were looking for a more personally fulfilling and meaningful way to spend their final two years of high school than that afforded by the demanding International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Beyond achieving high marks in their custom-designed Cambridge Pre-U areas of study, these independent thinkers additionally hope to gain a strong theoretical and practical foundation that will equip them to make real, lasting, and positive change. If all goes according to plan, each will come away from the experience having produced something truly unique: in Oscar's case, a collection of stories; in Anna's, a performance; in Kate's, a documentary film. What's not to love about this model?

"The objective of the Project Based Diploma program was to make sure our kids were learning and not being taught," explains Cary, who received the International Innovative Leader of the Year Award at the Association for the Advancement of International Education's (AAIE's) annual conference in early February for his commitment to spearheading this phenomenal initiative. "Rather than fill their days with IB requirements, we wanted to create time for independent research, allow them to work with mentors and professionals, and make it possible for them to pursue field work."

Mahindra's experiential model grew out of a mandate embraced by all colleges in the UWC community right around the turn of the millennium. Through sustained dialogue, these educational pioneers took on the collective challenge of devising alternatives to the IB.

"The point is not to replace the IB," Cary insists. After all, the UWC movement—which now includes 17 colleges in 16 countries—was instrumental in creating the IB back in 1968 and continues to enjoy a strong working relationship with the organization. But the world has changed dramatically in the past 50 years. "We felt there was a different way we could engage with education," explains Cary. "It's about giving students options."

All UWC colleges are currently in the process of proposing new models intended to foster the development of empathetic and informed 21st century leaders. While some are partnering with Ashoka or the Red Cross, Mahindra's program takes a more customized approach, identifying mentors and partners that can support autonomous students in devising and carrying out projects that will address a specific need identified within their immediate communities.

With about 240 students from close to 60 countries, Mahindra is home to an intentionally diverse community. "We have refugees who walked out of camps with the shirts on their backs," Cary explains, emphasizing the range in backgrounds by adding that the king of the Netherlands is also an alum.

"Because virtually no one shares your context, our conversations take longer. But they're more interesting. And interesting is a good place to learn." This is one of the reasons that initiatives such as the PBD typically take so long to get off the ground, according to Cary. "We've chosen not to be superficial with this, because we want to get it right. Time is one of the trade-offs. We need time in order to go deep, otherwise it doesn't make sense."

Recognizing the common pitfalls when engaging with the community from a place of relative

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privilege or as an "outsider," UWC's educators have carefully designed the PBD program to foster shared growth. Designed to discourage a mode of engagement where "we show up and basically show off," Cary and his colleagues have paired each student with a context mentor with direct experience in the student's field of involvement.

"They help us connect more honestly, more richly with our communities," he explains, as they require participants to progressively refine their approach and learn to ask the right questions. "A big part of this initiative is being present for the learning. This sometimes involves being uncomfortable, and being OK with that discomfort."

While encouraging autonomy and independence in students, Mahindra's PBD is also expressly designed to provide each student with meaningful support. As such, participants also benefit from the insights of a theory mentor, who tracks their progress in light of UWC's larger mission.

"We're not trying to save anyone; we're trying to serve, and to serve honestly, and earnestly," Cary confesses he was happy to receive the award. "And I'm going to keep it," he laughs. "But it's not about me." Cary gives big props to Head of College Pelham Roberts along with colleagues Cyrus Vakil and Marija Uzunova.

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