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United World College Dilijan: A Lens Into The Future Of Education



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When I was 17 years old, I only had one friend who was not white.

I did not know anyone born outside of the United States. 99% of my high school was white. The first time I met a Latina was in college. She told me she was from Panama City. I thought she meant Florida. I had no clue why she had an accent. Yikes.

[The United World College](#) (UWC) makes sure other 17-year-old students will never write what you read above. I recently visited [UWC Dilijan](#), in Dilijan, Armenia, and was beyond impressed with what I saw. I interviewed the founders, students, teachers, and administrators. I turned dozens of pages of notes into the 10 most exciting reasons UWC Dilijan represents the future of [education](#), and here they are.



UWC Dilijan, Copyright "RVVZ Foundation"

A global alumni network: Let's look at the entire UWC system from a macro perspective. The UWC movement was founded in 1962. Its mission was to make education a force to unite people, nations and cultures for peace and a sustainable future. UWC colleges conduct educational activities on a not-for-profit basis. Instruction is provided to students aged 16-19 in English under the IB Diploma Program ([International Baccalaureate](#)), recognized by the world's best universities.

As of today, the UWC network includes 15 schools and colleges in Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, China, Costa Rica, Germany, Great Britain, Hong Kong, India, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Singapore, Swaziland and the U.S. The colleges in Germany and Armenia became full members of UWC in 2013 and welcomed their first students in 2014. In 2015, UWC Changshu China welcomed its first students. This year two new colleges are joining UWC movement. 15 schools around the world means 55,000 current alumni eager to help each other move into the borderless future. What a gift.

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A global student body. Moving from macro to micro, [UWC Dilijan](#) is committed to a truly diverse student body. Armenia, for the first time in the post-Soviet space, has opened a school where students from all over the world come to receive a good education. It opened its doors in 2014 to 95 students from 49 countries. In 2015, the college expanded its geography by 14 countries and welcomed 92 students, making in total 187 students from 63 countries. In one minute, I heard two Spaniards singing a song in Spanish, and the next minute I was surrounded by a great group of Middle Easterners going back and forth in Arabic. It was like an international paradise.

The founders have ‘skin in the game.’ Ruben Vardanyan and Veronika Zonabend are true visionaries. They founded the school as a part of their long-term vision of reviving Dilijan. Dilijan, a beautiful small town in the mountains, is situated an hour and a half north of Yerevan. It was once known as a revitalizing place where artists and writers could create. Ruben and Veronika are implementing several initiatives to bring the city back to the vibrancy and creativity it once enjoyed. This vision and commitment inspires the teachers at UWC, who recognize that Ruben and Veronika ‘have a real commitment to both the school and the city. It is clear they are not just throwing money at the issue and walking away.’

Future-focused and culturally sensitive faculty: The visionary founders have clearly attracted an inspiring team of faculty members and administrators. The teachers come from 5 continents from 17 different countries. Paul Murray, head of languages, shared his vision of what it means to be a great school, and why he is excited about working here. ‘The school can’t be great just because it is one of the United World Colleges. We want to make it a place that every day you wake up, and can’t wait to get here and learn.’ Dr. Zuzana Roby, a professor of Economics shared the importance of a culturally sensitive approach to teaching. ‘I teach economics, and I don’t want to make the students that come from developing countries feel bad about their countries when talking about GDP.’ What would it look like if all of our world’s educators thought this way?

Student driven learning style. Joyce Ngai, a Chemistry Teacher at UWC Dilijan, said she allows her students to explain how chemistry is taught in their countries. Instead of being tied to one way of teaching a subject matter, the students have a proactive role in teaching each other about other ways to think about the world for a truly dynamic learning environment. This flexibility and

freedom trickles down from the top. I asked John Puddefoot, founding head of UWC Dilijan, what he envisions the future of education to look like. He was reluctant to imagine what is the vision and future of the school because schools need to constantly think about re-inventing themselves as technology evolves. I found this over and over again. A commitment to evolution, not clinging on tightly to the traditional education system that has resisted change for decades.

An atmosphere for learning. Dilijan is one of the most peaceful places you can imagine. Clean air, babbling brooks, mountains and fresh breezes. It is a perfect backdrop for creative expression and output. Yerevan, a more bustling urban city, is a mere 90 minutes away. Students take frequent weekend trips to explore the big city offerings. Within UWC Dilijan, the school is designed for creativity as well. Desks are reconfigured as trapezia. Teachers are facilitators of learning, rather than just a provider of information. There are floor to ceiling windows everywhere. Light, sleek design, open spaces, creation.

Scholarships level the playing field. Close to 100% of the students at UWC are on scholarship, either partial or full. This allows for a truly diverse student body in every sense of the word. Geographically, religiously, culturally, and socio-economic.

The theory of knowledge. I loved this concept. Three times a week, a random group of students sit with each other to discuss the theory of knowledge. Essentially, these talks explore a more comprehensive look at the subjects students are studying. For example, in history class, if students are analyzing a memoir, they evaluate the source to see if it is trustworthy. They discuss the role of memory in storytelling. They ask questions like: Is my memory accurate? Should we trust memory being accurate enough to believe this memoir? The idea here is to create a culture of curiosity and question what you learn. They explore the 'why' behind everything.

Moving outside of your comfort zone. I spoke with 10 students during my visit, and they were all smarter than me. 16 years old, and smarter than me. I loved it. When I asked them some things they did to get out of their comfort zone, answers ranged from questioning their government, religion, and teachers. They questioned everything. When I was 16, I did exactly as I was told. I wish I would have asked more questions. Maybe I'd be smarter than 16 year olds if I had. These

students also go out of the country for externships, internships, and volunteer excursions two times a year.

When I spoke with Jill Longson, Vice Chair of the UWC International Board and Co-Founder of the UWC Dilijan Veronika Zonabend after [George Clooney's visit to the school during his Aurora Prize visit](#), they shared more of the grand vision. One that allows students to be educated in a world-class school with international classmates. The hope is they will come here, learn as much as possible about cultures from all around the world, then go back to their countries and make a real difference.

There was also one other thing I didn't mention that makes UWC Dilijan a magical place. Laughter. The students, the teachers, the leaders, the visitors. Everyone seemed to be laughing. There was joy and light and learning in the air. In some cases, I did not understand the jokes they told me. In the past, I would have laughed and pretended to get it. But something about the energy of this place made me vulnerable and curious and safe all at the same time.

'I didn't understand your joke,' I said to one student. He explained it to me with excitement. Then I got it. And I laughed. But perhaps most importantly, I learned something because I was not afraid. I asked why.

The students made me brave. For that day in the mountains of Dilijan, they were my teacher. When you can laugh and learn at the same time, that's a good day. And for me, the best predictor of a good tomorrow, is a good today. So, thanks for a good tomorrow, UWC Dilijan.

Yet one more reason why you are the future.

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