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Beloved By Entrepreneurs, A School That Could Be An Anachronism Thrives

Elizabeth MacBride , CONTRIBUTOR

Shelby Davis spends $40 million a year to make sure U.S. college undergrads are exposed to students from this school.

The UWC Atlantic College seems set in a dreamscape. The boarding school for students in their late teens from around the world is situated in a castle, briefly owned by William Randolph Hearst, on the Welsh coast of Glamorgan. To reach it, you pass sheep pastures bounded by stone walls and stiles, and a field of bright yellow rapeseed. A meandering path along the sea girds the castle property, which also includes a garden of stone monsters, a jousting lane, and classrooms and dorms, of course.

If you break one of the old windows, woe be unto you. “My roommate broke one,” said Mohammed Akel, a Palestinian refugee from Lebanon confided as he gave me a tour a few weeks ago. He is one of about 350 students at the school, of 90 different nationalities and many vastly different backgrounds. His roommate's family paid for the repairs, he assured me, with a wry wonder at the idea of fixing a problem so easily.

The UWC schools for students in their late teens were founded by Kurt Hahn in 1962 to promote diversity and globalism, in part as a reaction against World War II. The schools -- there are now 17 around the world -- could feel like an anachronism. Populism is sweeping some of the most important countries, from the United States to Great Britain to Turkey, and the world seems awash in disturbing headlines about the Trump administration -- which could hardly seem more in opposition to the ideals that shaped the 20th century.

But the UWC is thriving. It's grown by a third in the past five years. Five new schools have opened since 2014, in Armenia, Germany, China, Thailand and Japan, awarding 16- to 19-year-olds International Baccalaureate diplomas. UWCs have long drawn students from the Middle East to schools throughout the world, including Europe and North America.

"In the time of Brexit and Trump, it's a complex world we live in. There are no simple answers," said Peter Howe, principal of UWC Atlantic. "What the UWC stands for is the power of diversity, not the threat."

That power pulled Hind Ait Mout, the daughter of a building caretaker in Morocco, into the great hall of the Norman castle, where she talked to me about her decision to wear clothes not that cover her up, but that suit her. "It does change you, being around other people," she said.

The UWC ideals also helped breathe life into a small liberal arts college, Westminster College in Missouri, where enrollment is now up and one of the fraternities has had an Iraqi president.
And those ideals pushed Victoria Mora, the first person in her traditional New Mexican family to go to college and now the president of the UWC school in Montezuma, to write a recent op-ed for the local press.

"The parts of the world that President Trump's executive order targets are the very parts of the world that need more engagement with America and American students. A recent program evaluation for a Department of State exchange program with students from Muslim-majority countries showed that 94 percent of participants had a more positive impression of the United States afterward," she wrote.

I think of the UWC as a slightly kept secret of the global business and political elite, who support the schools and sometimes send their children to be educated alongside kids from all

backgrounds. The schools currently have more than 7,500 students. Tuition ranges from about $15,000 a year in some places to $40,000. Many of the students, like Mohammed, come on scholarships given by committees in their home countries, and are thrown together with the children, some on scholarship and some paying full freight, from their local regions. The UWC Atlantic College has about 55% of its students on scholarship; at other schools, like the one in Germany, 100% of the students are on scholarship.

Amal Clooney has supported UWC schools. Credit: ANGELA WEISS/AFP/Getty Images)

Much of the curriculum at UWC is based on hands-on learning and service. Students have gone on to run lifeboats rescuing refugees off Lesvos and to found a nonprofit that helps kids paint orphanages in Swaziland.

Some of the UWC's most devoted backers are entrepreneurs, who want the best talent to be able to rise in the world, and fiercely support meritocratic systems. I first heard of the school in Armenia, where Noubar Afeyan's Aurora Humanitarian Initiative built the school and funded a

scholarship named for Amal Clooney, who has also supported the school. Arif Naqvi, the CEO of the Abraaj Group, told me he took time off from his job as a junior accountant at Arthur Anderson to help students from Pakistan get to UWC. His Aman Foundation donates, he said, about $500,000 a year. His support includes two scholarships at UWC Atlantic for the friends of Malala Yousafzai, who were also shot by the Taliban but didn't receive the same attention.

In the United States, Wall Street entrepreneur Shelby Davis funded the world's largest private international scholarship program, supporting more than 2,500 UWC undergraduates from 152 nations. They go to U.S. colleges and universities. The program, which involves matching dollars from universities, spends $40-$45 million a year, according to its web site.

"When I started my business career, I took my own history lesson from Princeton: I learned how leaders make a difference, in their countries, in their centuries. So I invested in leaders, and that investment helped me to be successful. Now I am again investing in potential leaders of the future," said Davis, who founded asset management company Davis Select Advisors.
Applications are up this year so far.

The UWC does face challenges in the new world, but they are mostly internal to the United States, where the Trump administration seems to be deepening people's resolve to support the schools.

As the implications of the Trump administration's travel ban rolled over the country this winter, Mora asked three young Syrians to have faith. "Please," she remembers asking. "Stand in solidarity with us. This is a country of law. We have confidence the justice system will play this out."

The school in Montezuma, N.M., had issued invitations to the students to attend on scholarship. But she was watching the headlines. It was becoming obvious the Trump administration intended to fight to keep anyone from Syria or another "Muslim" country out. Eventually, she decided the right thing to do given the continuing uncertainty was to let them go, and asked the UWC school in Germany to take them. But, what a loss, she said.

"They could have shared with us the human impact of policies. For young people who are learning about the powerlessness or power of diplomacy and policy, this could have brought

perspective. … What you lose in the long run are the very people who are likely to be a part of rebuilding that part of the world."

After she wrote an op-ed for a local paper about her feelings and the evidence for diversity, she received a letter and a small check in the mail from two women, one of whom she had worked with more than 20 years before. The note said, "We read your op-ed. This is important work."
"I smiled a lot," Mora said. "I'm writing back to tell her thank you."

It was the role of diversity in shaping leaders that convinced Davis to become a supporter. He decided to launch his scholarship program after he met two students at the Montezuma campus. He had dropped by the campus unannounced and walked around alone for a while.

He stumbled on two students, and asked about their experience.

"I'm a Palestinian and I'm a second year," one said
"I'm an Israeli, and I'm a first year."
"They said, 'We're roommates and we could never do that at home,'" he told an audience at dinner that night.

UWC sends students on to colleges and universities around the world. They have had a big impact at small liberal arts schools in the United States. At Westminster, which has recruited 322 UWC students between 2002 and 2016, the influence of international students was so beneficial that the college decided to subsidize them into Greek life. The college has an annual enrollment of about 900; about 17% are international students. "They are more responsible," said Pat Kirby, a former dean at the school.

Not everything is measurable, of course, and many things of value aren't. A Trump travel ban affecting thousands is easy for the media to cover. The story of how one single international student, or a handful, can change the hearts of young men at a fraternity is much harder to capture, and yet may ultimately be more important, as the death of Tim Piazza shows.

When I asked Kirby for an example of how the students affected life at a fraternity, he told me about an Iraqi he knew, Ameen Amin, who became president of the Sigma Chi fraternity some

years ago. Then he said, “The fraternities used to do public service projects for the publicity. Now they do them genuinely.”

Those changes, expressing the ideals of diversity and globalization, largely go unremarked.

At the UWC campus, I walked with three students, feeling privileged to be spending time with people in that age bracket, which is “the gasp of honesty before pre-professionalism and cynicism,” as Phil Geier, the co-founder of the Davis Scholars program, said.

We went through a garden filled with statues of beasts. The legend, Mohammed said, is that if you find the one spot in the garden out of the beasts’ eyeshot, you will disappear. At the UWC pool, movie stars cavorted at Hearst parties. The joke goes that Hearst called his mistress, Marion Davies, to say, “I bought a Norman castle,” and she said, “Who is Norman?”

I asked Mohammed if there were a value so core to him that he wouldn't be able to easily talk across the boundary with another person. Politics, he said. It troubled him when people tried to impose their views on others.

The third student I met at UWC Atlantic was Fadia Chehadeh, another Palestinian refugee from Lebanon, where the family relied on UN funds to live. She and her brother had already been earning money to supplement their income, because her father is disabled. When she’d won the scholarship to attend the UWC, she told her mother, "Mom, this is the chance we have been waiting for since I was in kindergarten.”

Her older brother told her to go. He would work harder to support the family.

She will spend the summer at home. Mohammed is going on to a summer program at Yale. He thinks he wants to be a doctor. Hind, who is graduating and heading on to college, is considering journalism. She asked me for my thoughts.

I tried to explain: If you want to be a journalist, for many years, you will have to write the stories that your employers, the big media companies, want you to write, the ones driven by blood and numbers. If you’re lucky and work hard, you could rise high enough, or become a freelancer, and decide for yourself what to cover.

But it will be a long time before you can write the stories that aren't driven by blood and numbers, about the power of diversity and the environments that shape kids when they are 16, 17 and 18. Those stories are important, too.

Fadia Chehadeh, Mohammed Akel and Hind Ait Mout Credit: Elizabeth MacBride