



“There is hardly any corporation in Greece that does not have Deree graduates in its upper management echelons – frequently at the very top.”

School of Life

As Greece navigates a complex new global economic reality, the graduates of the American College of Greece are poised as “catalysts for change and drivers of progress”, says ACG President Dr. David Horner. Here, Dr. Horner expands on the “liberal, pluralistic and student-centered” US-style education offered at the ACG’s three entities: Pierce, Deree and Alba.



Pragmatically speaking, at the undergraduate level we require all students to complete a liberal education programme. The principle is about exposing them to wide domains of human knowledge; helping them explore things that might trigger their interests and passions - which might then connect to their vocational aspirations or to develop the skills to organise thought in a cogent or quantitative argument from different perspectives.

This is a foundation that makes sense no matter what the future holds. Alba, our graduate business school, was just awarded in January for creativity in teaching and curriculum in their MBA programme. It was the top award by the Association of MBAs, which includes 200 of the world’s best business schools. The Capstone course in ALBA’s MBA curriculum blends business disciplines with the performing arts of the Deree faculty. The aim is to enlighten in business graduates this whole notion of creativity –and a specific capacity for imagination

ACG celebrates its 140th anniversary in Greece. What are the biggest changes the institution has undergone? And what major trends have you personally observed in your graduates over the past decade?

The college was founded in Smyrna (Izmir in Turkey) in 1875 and came to Athens as a result of the 1922 catastrophe. So we were in a sense, a refugee school, and we are in another refugee era now. We had several locations until 1965, when we were next to the old Athens airport in Elliniko, before moving to our present campus at Ag. Paraskevi. But we have changed in scope, as well as location. We began as a girl’s school for elementary and secondary age kids of Armenian, Greek, Jewish and Turkish heritage, serving the cosmopolitan population of Smyrna that was wiped out in the catastrophe. ACG continued the female education tradition in Greece, and in 1965, offered the first higher education degree. Then in the 1980s, a Greek law abolishing single-sex education transformed it from an all-girls school to a co-ed institution. Something that has remained constant is the emphasis and values of the founding missionaries from Massachusetts - still very evident

“Education is meant to take us into a future we can’t grasp.” How does the ACG hope to equip its students with the right skill sets to expand their imagination?

Much has been written about change in the 21st century driven by high-tech and globalisation. My favourite pre-Socratic philosopher, Heraclitus, said that the ultimate component of reality is change - and he said that a long time before iPhones were invented. So although the 21st century might be one of tremendous change, as usual the early Greeks dealt with concepts at the heart of the question. Education fundamentally requires adaptation and preparing people to be flexible: an approach at the heart of the ACG’s liberal arts tradition of education. I’m a huge believer in education not being narrow or just skill-based. But based on human capacity building.

in our school motto, ‘Not to be served but to serve.’ An emphasis on education for not just for one’s own personal good but for social good.

Despite the economic climate, ACG has succeeded in growing its enrolment numbers. How have you managed this feat?

It is especially impressive as we have elevated our admissions standards - in the context of a shrinking market. It’s not magic. It basically stems from more assertive attention to the Greek market in terms of media relations and advertising. We have also expanded into international markets. In our annual report for 2015, we have over 500 students from 67 countries including students from over 120 universities from around the world. So we’ve grown in Greece but also internationally.

How do you incorporate Hellenic heritage into your programmes?

We are the strongest US Study Abroad offer in Europe because we offer the broadest curriculum - so students can come here and study not just classics, but they can also take up psychology, economics or history that can connect to their curriculum at their own institution. Broad curriculum aside, we have the best American campus in Europe, with the biggest student enrolment in Europe. We are the highest-priced private higher education institution in Greece but we probably offer the best American value.

More international students are travelling all over the world for higher education. We can be a player in that market – premised on two things: 1) the strength of the institution and 2) the context of Greece. Our story proves the inherent brand appeal of Greece. If you can combine a credible educational programme, a credible educational institution with everything that Greece represents in peoples’ imagination - and appreciation of history and culture, that is a very powerful combination indeed.

What is your personal view on the state of private education in Greece?

If Greece really wants the best higher educational system, it needs to develop that system around three pivot points: 1) Student choice 2) Institutional autonomy and 3) Philanthropy.

If you look at the American system and on how it has become the envy of the world, it is based on student mobility and choice. The US does not tell its students where to go. Students make that choice. The US tries to empower that choice through financial aid at the federal and state level, and through institutional support so that economics is not a barrier to a student’s choice of university.

The Greek system as you know, does not operate that way. Second, the American system is based on institutional autonomy – schools are substantially free on what curricula they are going to offer, whom they are going to admit, there is institutional self-governance through peer accreditation and not so much through governmental controls.

And third, American institutions, both public and private, depend on

philanthropy. The US system is geared to encourage that through tax incentives.

So my prescription would be: copy the American system substantially around those three points: liberate students to choose, liberate institutions to develop themselves as they should, and leverage philanthropy.

How receptive have Greek government policies been towards higher private education in recent times?

At a micro level, we have experienced incredible resistance and opposition. Our 2015 annual report expresses the Social Impact of the ACG in numbers. This ranges from the fact that we contribute more than 10 million euros a year to the State in taxes, to the fact that we have almost 40,000 people a year attending public lectures on campus, to other indicators such as our Institute of Public Health which has educated or engaged more than 4000 young Greeks on the dangers of tobacco use. So if you look at the long list of our contributions (beyond our student/graduate base) – and pair our financial contributions to the social impact we create through a variety of programmes, it seems that this country should want to encourage this as much as possible.

Our real problem being understood in Greece is that we really have no institutional peers. In the higher educational side, you have, of course, the public sector and the whole system is geared to enhance, protect and preserve that public sector mediocrity. On the private side, you have primarily for-profits institutions.

Our mission is more public service but from a non-profit independent base. All educational institutions in higher education in the US are organised the way we are: Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Caltech, MIT – all of the most prestigious universities in the US. But in Greece, almost none of them operate like this. There’s no real reason why you cannot have really strong not-for-profit private universities and good public universities co-existing in Greece too.

You find yourself in Greece at a very critical juncture in the country’s history? Despite the professional challenges, what does being in Greece mean to you personally?

I do think that it’s a time when differences are going to be made for good or for bad, and for that I’m glad for the point of view this institution represents. What we stand for is very valuable and very potentially useful for Greece at many levels. Greece needs to make good choices and follow up those choices with good implementation. We want to be positive contributors to Greece’s future.

I have a graduate degree in philosophy and so the history of Western philosophy is very personally meaningful. I seek my answers to a lot of basic questions on contemporary issues in pre-Socratic teachings. I also feel a strong connection to my colleagues, most of whom are bright, energetic, committed Greeks who are trying to make it, not just for themselves, but as the school’s motto suggests, also for the society they live in.