**Effective Ways of Establishing and Providing Support Groups for Veteran Students at Educational Institutions**

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Abstract

What needs do veterans bring to campus? Little is known about this emerging student population in Armenia. Throughout history, Armenia has always been surrounded with constant battles and wars. In the last three decades, there has been two major wars with Armenia’s neighboring country Azerbaijan and these wars have left scars on many veterans’ lives affecting the whole nation. The type of intensity and duration of service, along with transition from two years of military service to civilian life, may have a negative effect on veterans’ wellbeing. Such negative consequences, alongside with the growing veteran population, indicate the need for greater exploration of veterans’ physical, mental and social wellbeing. This Capstone project reports on the experiences and findings of Armenian veterans in order to come up with strong analysis and recommendations for establishing support groups for veterans at educational institutions. A thorough literature review, focus groups, individual interviews have been conducted for the project. The face to face interviews with veterans’ report on a range of mental, social and educational problems in veterans’ population.

**Introduction**

Have you ever thought of turning your mess into a message? We all have been in challenging situations where certain events shifted the direction of our lives and all of our dreams and goals seemed too far to reach. I was in the state of chaos and facing death caused by the Four-Day War between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which took place in 2016, in Nagorno Karabakh. Just like any other Armenian young man, I also had to join the Armenian military at the age of 18 and give my duty towards my nation for two mandatory years of service. I joined the military with great enthusiasm, however, little could I imagine that the last one hundred days of my military service would turn into a real combat battle between life and death. Being in an actual war allowed me to discover a pool of issues regarding Armenian men’s behavioral patterns, emotional state, and mentality. From kindergarten to joining the military, Armenian men suppress their emotions/feelings by burying down there somewhere as if nothing happened. In general, men’s mental health has always been underestimated and barely mentioned in any Armenian context.

This leads to myriad of problems in our young men today. Over the past few years, the number of suicides in the Armenian military has grown and it is more than evident that not enough research has been conducted to understand the underlying issues of the loss of those innocent lives. The Four-Day War caused a huge despair not only for the citizens but also for the soldiers directly involved in it. Returning from military I thought there was hope for me to pursue education and achieve my goals. It seemed the war was over, but in my mind, it was not. My life was a mess as I had lost the true colors of it, the real identity of who I was and where I wanted to go. The atrocities of the enemy seemed to haunt me for many nights through nightmares and flashbacks in my mind. I became extremely hesitant going out in the city, avoided crowds, noisy locations, had the fear of “something is going to happen”, and experienced high level of irritation when communicating with people who seemed not to understand the value of my service, as I had laid my own life for them.

One night, I remember waking up sweating from one of those nightmares as if I was in the war again, I started crying and writing on a piece of paper about what I was feeling and what I wanted to change. That was the day when I realized that I could start healing and deal with this inner battle because, in reality, the war had been over. I started using resources for mental health available online and communicated my emotions and thoughts with a couple of confidential people. I knew I was not the only one going through this and every time I saw guys at my age walking by, I knew what they were feeling and it was relatable. All of my reflections in a journal, reading self-help books and talking to a few trusted people have brought me to the realization that our military today needs a strong systematic mental health support for its veterans. This Capstone has originated from real-life experience and holds the vision to turn into a reality changing hundreds of men’s lives by providing them strong mental health support at educational institutions as they return from the military. Instead of allowing myself to fall back into the same cycle of nightmares and chaotic mess, I decided to turn this whole mess into a message to Armenia and the world.

 **Statement of Central Research Questions**

This Capstone aims to study veterans’ lives during and after their military service, collect data and conduct certain steps recommending the inclusion of social support and transition groups’ development at education institutions. As a Veteran from the Four-Day War in April 2016, I am passionate about conducting this Capstone, as it comes from my real-life story. There is no previous research using actual data to understand how bombings and shooting can cause unimaginable consequences for the returning veterans in Armenia. Just the mere fact that these veterans return, does not mean they are entirely present and can merge with the society easily. Some veterans come back with the hope of pursuing high-quality education, many veterans just quit the desire to continue or start an educational journey simply because they lack financial resources or are extremely traumatized after they had been serving in the military. The foremost problems are the high levels of distress existing among veterans who are caught up between military and civilian lives, feeling alienated from family and friends, also experiencing a crisis of identity. There are relevant questions to ask and alternative methods to apply in order to examine the underlying issues and behavioral patterns in those veterans. These questions include; “How to reach out to these veterans without making them feeling as if they have a mental “disability”?” or “What are some of the effective ways of integrating them into one place in order to assess data and establish support groups?” and most importantly, “How to work through this whole process of establishing support groups in order to make them sustainable?”. Establishing support groups for returning veterans is very crucial and essential for our society and we all need to take part in the process of it. In addition to all of this, it is my ultimate goal to find out better ways in educating friends, family members, and counselors so that they can adequately support the mental health of veterans.

**Literature Review**

There has been a significant rise in the number of veterans who are being treated for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and the number of veterans who are experiencing various types of mental health issues and drawbacks upon their return. It is expected that in the next couple of years there will be an increase in the number of veterans who will be returning from the military and looking for higher education; therefore, universities and colleges must take proactive steps to help serve the veteran population. As I am a veteran myself, I decided to illuminate this uncharted area by utilizing different investigative strategies in order to provide grounded solutions for establishing veterans’ support groups at educational institutions. Research indicates that veteran support groups are an essential component to positive treatment outcomes with veterans who just returned from the military and may experience various types of internal conflicts with their identity, their role in the family, society, and pursuing an education. The purpose of this action-oriented research is to provide effective ways and methods for educational institutions to provide a solid support platform for their veterans in order to reintegrate them back to society.

The first article called *Perceived Stigma and Barriers to Mental Health Care Utilization Among OEF-OIF Veterans* by Robert H. Albers, along with other authors provides important knowledge on the importance of mental health care for veterans and the dangers of stigmatization and labeling the veterans. The findings of this article can be easily (2009) referred to the Armenian military veterans’ issues as they get labeled and stigmatized after returning. It is important to learn that going to a therapist is not common in Armenia and if some people do, then they get pressured, looked down, and labeled from the society as if they are weak that they seek help from a therapist. This can be even worse in the case of veterans who after returning from the military have the urge and need to talk to someone and “pour it all out”, but are intimidated by the opinion or attitude of the society. The perceived stigma and barriers to mental health cause veterans to have lower perceptions and negative beliefs about themselves. Therefore, the author emphasizes the fact that the whole nation will be affected by this terrible reality, because eventually, veterans make up quite a huge population of society. Robert H., suggests that there should be a specified educating system for the soldiers in the military unit to teach them that intervention of mental health care makes a person even more powerful and confident.

However, before moving on to specific educational systems for soldiers, there are deeper issues to look at. *Invisible Wound* (2008) conducted by Terry Tanelian, leads to the essential yet unseen issue of veterans' internal/invisible wounds. The April War in 2016 was a huge awakening for Armenia and its military forces mainly for their preparedness and fighting the enemy. However, based on the current situations happening, inside and outside of the Armenian military, it becomes apparent that no mental care was ever provided for these veterans who fought in the Four-Day War. The author helps us to understand that it is not just the external look of the veterans and their service, but what is going on inside them. The importance of safeguarding the mental health of these servicemembers and veterans is an important part of ensuring the future readiness of our military force and compensating and honoring those who served our nation. Once there is a solid platform to welcome the veterans and “heal” their wounds, then significant changes will happen in the lives of those veterans. Moreover, the author makes connections between providing comprehensive mental health care and the improvement of our country’s economy, since people with strong mental health will make it prosper on every level.

Moving onwards to the core of this research paper, this is where the emphasis is accented on the role of an instructor in the classroom. *Supporting Veterans in the Classroom* (2008) by Alisa Roost, portrays a magnificent role model of a professor who provides the findings of his experiences with veterans in his classroom. The authors teach that as veterans spend most of their time in the classroom while on campus; this is where they must experience the visible care and attention towards them. This study shows that the professor realized that many returning veterans from combat find civilian life lacking in intensity and insignificance, which can contribute to depression as well as disengagement in the classroom. It is also worth mentioning that while in the military, these veterans are not encouraged to question authority to bring up objections; therefore, they find it almost impossible to think in different ways of completing tasks, think critically, and express themselves. Based on the research of this professor, he finds it lifesaving to have the veterans under his care both in class and outside of class (office hours). Making sure that aisles are not too narrow, limited loud and sudden noises or sounds as these will create a safe and peaceful environment for the veterans (especially those who came from combats).

 Researcher Anna Demars conducted research titled *When Veterans Return: The Role of Community in Reintegration* (2011) where they confirm the importance of the role of community in the reintegration process of returning veterans. In order to have crystal clear results and truly understand the veterans, it is important to initiate focus groups, individual interviews and online surveys to collect data that provide a thorough understanding of the struggles of these veterans’ experiences when they return. Demars discovers that many times these veterans are caught in between military and civilian cultures, and have a tough time readjusting themselves according to the environment. This causes them to feel alienated from family and friends, and most importantly, they experience a crisis of identity. Based on the results from focus groups, online surveys, and individual interviews, she suggests developing social support and transition groups, educate family members, friends, and peers about military culture and provide the information to college counselors and social workers.

Sayers L. Steven in his *Family Problems among Recently Returned Military Veterans Referred for a Mental Health Evaluation* (2009) researched and found out that veterans' mental health issues greatly affect family members as well. Since Armenia is quite a militaristic nation, there is a veteran or a currently serving soldier in almost every household in Armenia. However, the question lies whether these families know how to approach their veterans in a way that there is clear communication between them. Sayers L. study shows that veterans have an extremely difficult experience rediscovering their role in the family or renegotiating with their family members. The researcher states that families need to learn about military culture and how to support their veterans as they return home. This will help them to feel safe and cared for before stepping in to pursue higher education.

Candice Oster’s *The health and wellbeing needs of veterans: a rapid review* (2017) is a concentrated analysis of exploring the importance of understanding the needs of the veterans and how these needs can be addressed. The author has conducted thorough research in order to reveal the great need for full access to healthcare for veterans. Oster shows how significant it is to provide care for the attributes of mental, physical, and social health of the veterans since these are related to the rate of mortality. In the research, it was found that nearly 70% of the veterans felt that the general community misunderstood their experience. Therefore, two main questions developed, “1. What are the mental, physical, and social wellbeing needs of veterans? 2. What are the factors associated with the mental, physical and social wellbeing needs of veterans? “ which can help to connect the dots to understand the health and wellbeing needs of veterans.

*Returning Veterans on Campus with War-Related Injuries and the Long Road Back Home conducted* (2009) by Thomas E. Church shows the useful methods and strategies that can be utilized at educational institutions to help their veterans to reintegrate into the academic life. Church emphasizes the fact that first, there should be that solid platform of services available to veterans, and then they can be aware of that, seek support, and get help from there. Church suggests several important strategies such as scheduling breaks to prevent fatigue, supportive phone calls, and coaching. Organizing welcome events for veterans on campus can be a huge contribution to their reintegration into the university’s community. Thus, veterans will be able to socialize with both faculty members and their peers on the same level. Church also suggests that coaching and acknowledging these veterans will transform their lives.

Besides all of these straightforward and positioned studies and research, there is another important component for supporting veterans’ mental health care. Sam Delaney in his *Our goal is to halve the male suicide rate’: why no-frills therapy works for men* (2019)writes an article about a group of young veterans who come into one place once a week and share their experiences. This is exactly that veterans’ support group model and is a great way of achieving set of goals for veterans’ mental health improvement. Sam tackles the question of, “What’s better than a group of veterans coming together, having a transparent meeting, and understanding each other’s needs?”. The author suggests that there should be a strong sense of transparency in the group that helps veterans to easily empty the bottled-up emotions and feelings and feel connected. To establish veterans' support groups at educational institutions, it is extremely crucial to create space for these veterans to come into one place.

The aforementioned studies shed hopeful light on the issues of veterans’ mental health and how we, as a society should be prepared to meet those needs appropriately. Once a young man joins the military and then returns as a veteran, he is no longer the same person as when he left before. Families, friends, and peers should be educated and taught about the differences between military and civilian cultures to address their veterans’ needs adequately. Some of the above-mentioned authors emphasize the importance of strong mental health of returning veterans since it is similar to a chain reaction, where families, friends, campus life can be affected and thus the whole nation. There is a strong connection between home and campus life; and how these two environments deal with their veterans. Both of these environments should be prepared to utilize their obtained knowledge and skills to help their veterans' reintegration back to civilian and academic life. No study has been found in the field of the Armenian veterans’ mental health issues or just in general how they coped after the Four Day War. This itself proves that there is zero attention towards the importance of veterans’ mental health issues in Armenia. Thus, the mental health care system is dangerously in poor condition in Armenia. Therefore, this research documents the findings for establishing veterans’ support groups at educational institutions due to several strategies and methodologies.

All of these researches and findings conducted outside of Armenia prove that veterans have a greater risk to experience depression, anxiety, PTSD, and other symptoms that are strongly related to trauma, combat, and war. Increasingly, the veteran population is growing more and more and the current events happening in the world can add more stress. It is important to mention that this paper is being conducted in the midst of a chaotic event happening in the world called Covid-19. Current therapists and studies explain that veterans are currently experiencing higher level of emotional and psychological stress due to ongoing crisis in the world. Compared to American military, Armenian soldiers do not get deployed as many times as the US citizens do; however even a few deployments and changes of military environment can cause serious psychological damages to the soldier, as it requires a “new start”, which becomes even more challenging. Traumatic experiences dramatically raise the chances that veterans will experience difficulties readjusting to academic and civilian life. The officers, their attitude, the sanitary environment, food, and daily routine can indicate what type of adjustment a soldier may experience. The longer and unreasonable cruelty last, the more difficult it is for the enlisted individuals to cope and adjust. Duration of low or almost no psychological support for the newly enlistees can lead to psychological and physical exhaustion. Moreover, soldiers returning from combat or battlefield, such as many veterans did from the April War, are more likely to be associated with poorer adjustment compared to soldiers who did not have prior combat or battlefield experience. These invaluable literature findings prove that trauma survivors have an increased susceptibility of experiencing greater distress following subsequent trauma. Traumatic experiences increase the chances of one experiencing the symptoms of PTSD and depression.

In a literature review article called *Helping Veterans Transition into Academic Life through the Creation of a University Veteran Support Group: So We Can Better Serve Those Who Served Us*, Wesley M. Sargent Jr. thoroughly highlights an outstanding truth about US soldiers being deployed over 19 months in Vietnam were more likely to be classified as having PTSD compared to the other soldiers who served less than 19 months in Vietnam. Wesley emphasizes that, “The repeated exposure to traumatic events for an extended period of time was greater when one served in combat for 19 months or longer. Similarly, the veterans interviewed in this project share their experiences of being stationed near war-zone locations or right in the battlefield of the Four-Day War. April War tremendously increased the number of casualties, which is an additional stress and traumatic experience that veterans are expected to cope with.

Daily shootings happening in the frontlines of Armenia trigger emotional and psychological distress among soldiers. It is worth mentioning that the whole world is experiencing a traumatic crisis due to the Covid-19. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans, soldiers can be terribly affected even by the events that are happening in the civilian life. U.S. VA Department suggest finding ways to increase sense of safety which can moderate biological reactions that create panicky feelings and make them hard to accomplish their duties and function. It is highly encouraged to help the veterans increase their sense of safety by sharing trusted information and resources on how they can be at peace that the world is fighting against this invisible enemy. Helping the veterans to prepare for a range of possible scenarios is also another important step to support them.

Another eye-opening revelation that have come out of the literature review is that veterans who were involved in combat may have witnessed or lived through traumatic and life-threatening experiences, which make vulnerable to having an identity-crisis. However, veterans may be able to take small steps, prevent poor adjustment and the negative effects of war by having a strong and positive perception and identification within one’s social group.

These literature reviews also shed light on Social Identity Theory relevance in this report. Social Identity Theory perceives the self-concept as being a product of one’s personal identity. When veterans get enlisted in the military, they become part of a brigade, army branch or unit. Thus, veterans while in their military service are considered as a collective (whole unit). Many times, veterans find it extremely difficult to relate to typical college students because of their social identity. Therefore, establishing veterans support groups can help lessen the stress that veterans may experience from their academic environment. Professors also influence veteran’s perception of stressful events. It becomes quite effective to intervene and address the issues of veterans’ group as a whole than do this individually. This is where the importance of establishing support groups for veterans comes.

**Methodology**

After a thorough research and literature review, we can move on to the methodology section which is the core of future recommendation for the project. Articulated reading and discussion with Dr. Hilson provided a set of useful methods in order to collect background data about the veterans’ perceptions, experiences, coping mechanisms and afterwards develop recommendations with timely solutions. The sociocultural history of war in Armenia has been reviewed as this helped to better understand the needs and concerns of the veterans. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected in order to answer two section research questions which will help to design and implement a successful, effective, and sustainable veterans’ support group within an educational institution. The first section questions are the following: “How to reach out to these veterans without making them feeling as if they have a mental “disability?” or “What are some of the effective ways of integrating them into one place in order to assess data and establish support groups?” and most importantly, “How to work through this whole process of establishing support groups in order to make them sustainable?”. The second section questions include the following: “What are the perception that university veterans and non-military personals have of establishing support groups for veterans? Secondly, “What are the factors that prevent veterans from attending veterans’ events or wanting to participate in support groups?” Lastly, “What steps could be taken to increase veterans’ willingness to participate in a veterans’ support group?” Abovementioned central questions and hypothesis were only possible to conduct through the following methodology coming down below the paper.

**Design**

Focus groups were given the first priority while collecting data, background information and veterans’ experiences. One Focus group was conducted having consisting of five veterans, since this was an appropriate way to obtain in-depth information which allowed to recognize their shared similar values and experiences. This focus group experience served as a catalyst for generating innovative ideas that might not be revealed in individual interviews. I approached the veterans through online platform, email, and in person. Unfortunately, having two or more focus groups could not take place as a huge number of veterans did not feel comfortable coming into one place where there would be other veterans and sharing about their experiences. Even knowing some veterans quite well, who were outgoing and social, still some of them refused to be in the focus group, but some did not mind being in an individual interview. This indicates a few quite essential factors which will be discussed later in the paper.

With the support and advice of Dr. Hilson, we reserved a room at AUA on a specific day and time where the five veterans could come into one place and participate in the focus group. It is worth mentioning that it was not an easy procedure to gather even these five veterans in one day as everyone had different priorities and duties. It should be appreciated that even in the midst of their busy schedules, these veterans decided to take part in the focus group and provided some really essential information and insights on developing effective support group for veterans at educational institutions. I made sure to make them feel welcomed and not nervous. In order to provide a friendly environment and atmosphere, I set a small table full of candies, biscuits and juice since this was a sign of appreciation for their willingness to participate in the focus group. I had previously discussed with them about the approximate setting and themes that would take place, since these participants wanted to make sure that there would not be other people in the focus group.

**Participants**

In order to collect a thorough data, the priority was given to veterans since their reflections and answers would lay a strong foundation for the project. Thus, participants were divided into different categories: April War veterans, other veterans, AUA students, and the AUA psychologist. Again, most of the April War participants refused to participate in the interviews, but suggested answering to some questions via e-mail. It was evident that this type of a research-based focus group regarding veterans’ population had never been done and was something new for them. Some veterans embraced the new initiative, other veterans did not want to even talk about it. While approaching the veterans’ population, I was able to observe their behavioral patterns and responses regarding the veteran topic and this also provided quite some aspect on the research paper, which will be discussed later.

The rest of the participants included non-military personnel from AUA community. Participants were from various years and departments of studies. I approached most of them online and asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview regarding their experiences or perception of veterans. Most of them agreed and before Covid-19, I was able to interview two students from AUA community. The non-military participants were also given consent forms and informed about the procedure and confidentiality of the interview. Compared to veterans’ community, non-military participants were quite willing to participate in the interviews for obvious reasons. This explains itself quite much, however this phenomenon will be discussed later in the findings and analysis.

**Procedures**

First and foremost, since individuals were interviewed from various backgrounds and were sharing information and perceptions, none of this could take place without an official consent form. Dr. Hilson, provided the consent form which notified the interviewee about the purpose of the interview, date, and most importantly, that they had the freedom to choose if the wanted their identity to be disclosed or not. I printed out the consent forms ready with pens and provided them to the participants whether in focus groups or individual interviews. Confidentiality were thoroughly explained to the participants and maintained throughout the study. Most of the participants did not mind having their answers recorded in an audio on the phone, since this helped to accurately assess their answers in the paper. Questions of the interview and focus groups were clearly explained and were open-ended so that a discussion platform could be available for active participation.

It is quite relevant to mention that some of the interviews were conducted before Covid-19 took place in the world canceled every plan for everyone. While people and institutions were grasping the severity of the events happening in the world, there was no other choice than switching the rest of the procedures into online platform. Thus, the rest of the interviews, surveys and communications were conducted through the online platform. This procedure had both advantages and disadvantages. The advantage of interviewing people online was that now everyone was home, therefore any time of the day would work and we could go back and forth with the questions. However, the disadvantage of this was that during a face-to-face communication or interview, answers can be given differently or on a much deeper level. Now, this is a stressing time for everyone in the world and people may feel even more overwhelmed when being asked about PTSD or other stressful situations from the military or about the people that they know.

**Interview Questions**

A great amount of time was required to create the questions for the focus groups and individual interviews, since these two settings were different from one another. Questions for the online survey were also developed and discussed with Dr. Hilson. After a thorough research and self-reflection of what kind of questions could be asked, I came up with a list of various questions in different segments and discussed them with Dr. Hilson. The questions were aimed to be in accordance with veterans’ experiences. I also took into consideration the fact that there had to be a different set of questions asked to non-military personnel. Later on, the experiment showed that this type of interview had an organic flow and AUA students shared their own stories and experiences about the veterans they encountered inside and outside of AUA. As a veteran, student, and an interviewer I held the responsibility to always keep the feelings of our veterans foremost in my mind when asking those questions. I completely considered the fact that I ought to be sensitive to the feelings and emotions my questions could possibly evoke for them.

The interview questions contained several segments, each one based on a specific theme. Before finalizing the interview questions, I consulted with AUA psychologist Yelena Sardaryan. It was an eye-opening experience as Yelena helped me to understand and see the deeper questions that should be in first place. Discussing interview questions with Yelena provided a new insight about the order of questions as well. She mentioned the importance of choosing how to start the conversation in an interview. During our conversation we disregarded some questions that would either be inappropriate or irrelevant. As I am not an expert, I followed Dr. Hilson’s advice on consulting those questions with a professional therapist in order to avoid possible complications later on. The psychologist encouraged the approach and stance I had been taking towards the interview questions, this encouragement brought a bright light and shed some hope that these interviews would allow the veterans to share their experiences, suggest recommendations and help future veterans. Now, let us have a look at the relevant questions divided in different segments for the focus groups and individual interviews.

Segment 1: Jogging Memory:

1. *What did you know about the military culture before you joined?*
2. *What branch of the military did you serve in?*
3. *What were you doing before you became involved in the military?*
4. *Do you recall any particularly humorous or unusual event?*
5. *How long and when did you serve?*
6. *What special training did you receive?*

Segment 2: Experiences:

1. *Were you part of a military war or conflict?*
2. *What was your first reaction when the siren made a prolonged loud signal?*
3. *Can you recall one of your frightening experiences?*
4. *Describe your homecoming.*

Segment 3: Life:

Questions about life in the service and /or at the front or under fire.

1. *How did you stay in touch with your family?*
2. *Did you have plenty of supplies?*
3. *Did you feel pressure or stress?*
4. *How did people entertain themselves?*

Segment 4: After Service:

1. *Did you make any close friendships while in the service?*
2. *Do you ever feel uncomfortable in crowded spaces? Did you receive any appreciation from the Armenian government or Ministry of Military Defense? Did you receive any medals, awards o recognition?*
3. *How would you like them to show their appreciation towards your devoted service?*
4. *Are you a part of any veterans’ organization?*

Segment 5: Plans and Expectations:

1. *What was the most important thing you learned from the military?*
2. *What do you want to go on as a career after university?*
3. *Do you attend in any kind of reunions?*
4. *What is your attitude towards having a veterans’ support group at AUA?*
5. *If positive, what suggestions do you have for the project?*
6. *Do you find it necessary to have a professional male psychologist besides the general psychologist at AUA?*

Final Question

*Is there anything I haven’t asked you that you’d like to share?*

For the second group participants for the project, I interviewed AUA community students who did not serve in the military but could have someone in their family or knew a friend who did. The questions have also been discussed with Dr. Hilson and articulated thoroughly in order to get the most out of the interview with these individuals. Five students agreed to participate in the interview and provide outstanding and relevant perception on the topic.

Questions for individual interviews with non-military students.

1. *What's your relationship with AUA Veterans?*
2. *What members of your family are veterans?*
3. *What behavioral changes have you noticed in returning veterans?*
4. *What are some of the best ways to reach out to veterans?*
5. *In your opinion, what is that the veterans need the most upon their return?*
6. *What services should be available provided from the Veterans Affairs Office?*
7. *As a female, would you want to join the military? Why? Why not?*
8. *As a male, what do you expect the military to be like when you join soon?*
9. *What would like to see changed the most in the military?*
10. *How would you like to volunteer for a Veterans’ event in a way to give back to their community?*

Two AUA students were interviewed face-to-face and three other students were interviewed online after Covid-19 changed communication in the world for a while. For these individuals as well, consent forms and confidentiality were thoroughly explained and provided. Findings and analysis of these interviews will be provided later in the paper.

**Data Analysis**

Data from focus groups, individual interviews, and online surveys have been collected and analyzed. Due to the vast majority’s agreement to have their voice recorded, the recordings have been replayed, transcribed almost word for word in order to provide accurate information/data for the project. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected from the online survey platform which provided numbers and percentages of all the groups based on their participation and answers. An extensive review has been conducted on all the findings from every interview, thus providing a thematic analysis and recommendations for the project.

The primary source of data collected had been from the literature review, since information on veterans’ and their experiences are difficult to find. Armenia does not have a specified operational system which may collect or even provide information or data on veterans. Even if there is any, then apparently it is unknown and not accessible. Therefore, I conducted these extensive studies on veterans and their readjustment to civilian and academic life. The relevant data collected from literature review was distilled and synthesized into one project bringing up modern and significant recommendations for the veterans’ community.

The online survey had been shared with public through Facebook and around 50 participants took the survey and provided data. This was supplemental data which built another layer of strong foundation for the project. Google docs survey analyzed the quantitative data by analyzing the response rate and quantifying the responses into percentages.

The data collected from the focus groups conducted with veterans was used with the data collected from the literature review to develop a deeper and more interrelated understanding of veterans and the importance of establishing veterans support groups.

**Research Findings and Analysis**

**Focus Group Interview Findings**

For an extensive and thorough research, I conducted a focus group consisting of five veterans. All the procedures were conducted respectfully and consent formed explained in detail. One of the veterans decided to have his name and sensitive information to stay confidential, therefore during the report he will be named as **Veteran A**. An audio recording was made during the focus group, then transcribed word for word and put into data collection. Each transcript has been reviewed and replayed multiple times in order to assess the similarities and differences between the participants answers in order to avoid repetition and/or unnecessary information. Based on the given and studied data, the majority of the findings came out to be completely different from one another as the answers coming from each participant varied in all aspects.

A few days before the start of the focus group, I came across a few videos and articles on how to approach veterans in safer ways while asking them about their military or combat experiences. These findings allowed me to be prepared despite the fact that I was also a veteran, but had to be the observer in the group. Therefore, I observed and went with the flow of the atmosphere created by the veterans. I paid close attention to each veteran’s body language and response, as we were touching upon extremely sensitive issues. The focus group was designed to elicit richness and depth toward the experiences of the veterans and what message they had for the civilians regarding establishing support groups for them at educational institutions.

The first question that was designed to open up a conversation for the veterans in the focus group was asking them how they imagined the military to be. There was silence in the group for a second as it seemed that they traveled back into those time when they first learned about the military and how life was supposed to be there. Gurgen was the first one to start off saying that he learned about the military from his closest friends and cousins, however once he joined the military it turned out to be a completely different experience for him. “*Everything is different when you join the military, because every unit is different. My Dad shared his military stories, but those were different because he served in the Soviet Union military.”*, added Gurgen.

Sevak continued with his confirmation saying, “*Yes, I can also confirm that it is completely different from unit to unit. I joined the military being ready and having the mindset that I knew everything, but I found myself to be in a totally different place.”*

Babken brought up an interesting perspective on how he learned about the military through a TV show back then called, “In the Military”. As soon as Babken shared this, everyone laughed out loud and recalled watching the show and seeing so many “funny”, “weird”, and “cruel” characters. Babken added that as he joined the military, he noticed that the TV show portrayed quite similar characters in the show and that they actually exist in real military life.

Veteran A shared his thoughts and memories on how he learned about the military. He seemed to be the quiet guy in the room and his answers made sense. Veteran A said that anyone he knew served in the military and returned would share only the positive and funny things. He added, *“I noticed that veterans share stories of how tough they were in the military and everyone else was obedient to them.”* When asked, what he thinks of this type of reality. He said that this is part of toxic masculinity that exists in our culture, where men do not really want to look weak in front of others. He assured that there is no single one veteran who did not experience a fight or argument at least a few times in a month during their military service. His answers seemed to be quite accurate and real as everyone else nodded and agreed.

Next we moved on the next question of wanting to reveal what these guys were up to before their military service. Gurgen shared that he was a FLEX (Future Leaders Exchange Program) alumni and due to his English knowledge and language skills, he taught English at a center, volunteered for his community, earned admissions to AUA, but eventually joined the military in the summer of 2014.

Sevak finished his high school, found his hobby in cars and mechanical stuff. Sevak also earned admission to AUA, studied for a semester where he says that he made many friends, then joined the military in the winter of 2015. Sevak added, *“I made so many good friends during that one semester at AUA that I still keep in touch with them.”*

Babken’s story goes as he aimed to earn admissions to AUA, receive a full scholarship so he would not have to join the military right away. However, his desire to postpone military service did not come true as he became enlisted and drafted in the military in the summer of 2016.

Veteran A joined the military in the summer of 2014 as soon as he finished his high school. He earned admission to AUA after he returned from the military. He adds that it was not an easy process for him, however he had a goal to achieve and it came true.

In terms of military specialty, it varied from person to person. Gurgen was a truck driver and he would quite frequently drive a group soldiers to their trainings. Sevak was an ambulance car driver and had quite a lot of free time. Babken was stationed in four different division during his military service and he added, *“Every time I was moved to somewhere new, I experienced a huge amount of stress, as it was not easy at all to adapt to the new environment or even make new friends.”* Veteran A was in the infantry and had his shifts to the frontline every fourteen days. He had the specialty of a sniper.

When we came to the question of living conditions everyone had a similar facial expression indicating that this was something, they all ought to have in common. No matter the location or military base and unit, everyone expressed their disgust regarding the lack of sanitary and hygiene conditions. Dirty, nearly undrinkable water, muddy ground, overflowing toilets made their morning routine of “looking clean” process quite unachievable. One of them added that their military had to hire someone from the outside to come and clean the overflowing toilets once a week, since they would be clogged and the smell of it was unbearable. Only one participant assured that his military living conditions were ideal compared to others as he did not really face those issues like other veterans did. However, he emphasized the fact that he served in the biggest military base in Armenia and Kharabakh. In addition, he elaborated that the size of the military base could mean that it had to be the most perfect looking one, since higher authorities would not really have to pay that much attention to the smaller military bases.

Sevak added that his family would send him packages full of essential supplies (e.g. socks, shirts, toothbrush, toothpaste, shoe polish, soap, etc.). Gurgen, as well as other veterans added that they also received essential supply packages from their families, however they always told their families that they did not need anything as these packages could be a financial burden for their families.

What about entertainment?

*“We did not always enjoy those entertainments, especially when they were organized on Sundays, because all we wanted was to have a few extra hours of sleep and rest.”* stated Veteran A and other participants totally agreed on this point. However, they all had to follow the commands and participate in those “not so fun” entertainment events.

When we came to the segment of sharing about some of the veterans’ April War experiences, there was already some foundation and trust built within the group. As a result, those veterans who participated in the Four-Day War spoke up, while Babken quietly and respectfully listened.

Sevak: *“It was early morning 3 a.m. and I was asleep in our military base unit. I woke up in the middle of the night because of the loud bombings as they were unusually loud. I got up, took my weapons and went to the ambulance car. By the time I tried to reach the ambulance car, there was a big and loud shell falling right next to our military base. Everybody woke up and there was terror and fear all over. Helicopters were flying high and there was real chaos going on. I spent three months in the frontline until I came home.”*

Gurgen: “*I also sensed that bombings and shooting were unusually a lot. Then I noticed many officers in the military base with the highest positions and rankings running everywhere with a terror on their face, that is when I noticed that things were serious. Later on, I heard that those officers were killed on their way to a specific location. I saw our military unit officer crying and full of terror, I was shocked because if he, whom I knew was the toughest man in the world was crying, then everything was extremely serious. He said that he heard that there was a group of soldiers and officers who were killed and bombed from the other side. This really broke my heart.”*

Gurgen then went further into sharing that the worst thing that happened on that day was that their military base investigative officer was killed and all the location and confidential maps were stolen by Azerbaijani soldiers. This meant that their whole plan for settling in a location during combat was all collapsed therefore, they had to find a new location to settle and this was the biggest challenge at that time, because the opposite side already knew their next move. They had to cut trees and dig holes in order to cover up their location. Gurgen stressed the following statement, *“The main overwhelming feeling that I had, was why did it have to happen now when I had eighty days left to finish my military service? I experienced feelings of unfairness and anger, but then I fought tenaciously. I had a worry that I could serve longer than two years, that was really demotivating.*”

Veteran A: *“I was already at the frontline when the war started. I just started my fourteen-day shift and the first thing that really shocked everyone was the loudest bombing that took place around 2 a.m. a few hundred meters away from our trench.”*

Did you have enough supplies on the battlefield?

Gurgen: “*We did not have water to drink on the first day of war. All of a sudden, we notice a track full of food approaching us. We were shocked to see that in the middle of the war we still could be fed. We had someone bring us water in a bottle which had previously been used for carrying petrol. So, the taste was quite different!”*

Sevak: *“The food and all the help sent from Armenia lasted about fifteen days and all of a sudden it all was cut. Then, we had to survive on eating snakes, grass, or turtles.”*

Veteran A: *“It was disappointing that we were given buckwheat and rice and were told to cook it for ourselves while in the wildlife. I mean what were we supposed to be or do? Cook food for us while protecting the borders? We could not do it because we did not have the conditions to. Afterall, we were there to protect our country and not cook.”*

Describe your homecoming.

Babken: “*The last days I became more quiet and just by myself as I was counting the days and hours to return home. These last days seemed to be an eternity and went really slow. Also, I paused and thought about what I was going to do after the military. In the military you have the food, a place to sleep, but after all of this a different life is waiting for you.”*

Sevak: “*I came back in the winter and right after one week I started classes at AUA. This was a really tough transition for me. It is a completely big change of an environment. I had already planned out what I was going to do.”*

Gurgen: “*I returned in the summer and this was really tough because upon my return I still had two months to start my educational journey at AUA. Sometimes it was really boring, because after meeting all of my friends, relatives and family members, I felt like not knowing what to do.*

*There is a saying that after military service you may still be exercising your “power” on the civilians in life. This is what I did after the military and now when I look back I realize it was inappropriate, but I couldn't help it.”*

When asked about life after military, Veteran A replied, “*The military environment and lifestyle is so “criminal” that after the military you show quite an aggressive approach to many issues in civilian life. There are a lot of misunderstandings between the veterans and the civilians. Like in our military base, we had the following mindset, “ You either have to fully integrate the criminal and thug style in order to survive as a beast, or you will be trampled on and disrespected.”*

All the participant veterans except Babken agreed that there is so much pressure in the military to be extremely tough and the bad guy. Gurgen added, *“One of my cousins gave me advice that I had to follow and there was no other choice. He advised me to leave my heart at the entrance of the military and then enter into the service for two years. Because it’s the heartless that survive in the military not the ones who are compassionate and gracious. This was the advice I had to follow, because I wanted to survive. When I look back at how cruel I had been and mischievous I behaved in the military I feel awful about it. I was inhumane in many cases, otherwise, I would have been treated the same.*”

Babken: “*My experience was completely different. I did serve in the military base with other soldiers, but I joined the military with a mindset that I am simply going to mind my own business. I did what was required of me and nothing less or more. If anybody would try to dis me or come against me, then I could possibly be the same to him. However, it is just as simple as that, “If I do what is required of me, and you do what is required of you. Then we can all be set”.”*

Sevak: “*As an ambulance driver, I avoided all of those situations because I had no one commanding me or I was not surrounded with other soldiers during my day. I was always in my ambulance car and this gave me a lot of free time and freedom from those “who is the tough guy here?” environment.”* Sevak added that he simply minded his own business.

“*That is natural as you have been an ambulance driver”* added Gurgen. He explained that serving in the same military base and unit, yet having different military professions can greatly impact on how the rest of the military service would go. This is easy for many ambulance or truck drivers as they do not have to be with a group of soldiers, so there is no one pressuring. Then he added, *“Prior to joining the military, I was very open-minded and easy going. However, I joined and realized that I could not make a revolution there. In a place where forty to eighty guys think alike, it becomes impossible to change things there. I experienced a lot of injustice there and thus I also showed almost no compassion towards others. I studied in the US for a year and I was well-acquainted with people minding their own business and having personal space, whereas the Armenian military environment was a more judgemental and pressuring environment for me. Military makes you an animal there.*”

Right after this thorough and intensive discussions, Gurgen disagreed with Babken that he had to make sure, for example, if he had the choice of not doing something at the expense of a fight, he would choose the fight and not be belittled in front of others. Both of them had different perspectives on the ethics of following commands, thus their experiences were different. One veteran aimed to keep the balance and completing his duty, while the other veteran found being fierce and dominating to be the right path for survival at that time of his service.

Gurgen: “*If the officer is not in charge and does not do his responsibilities, then one soldier wants to become the dominant one and take over the others. This creates inequality, fights, pressure, and suicides happen. As long as some officers try to play the “thug guy”, then there is going to be divisions and higher suicides rates in the military.”*

Gurgen mentioned a personal story and how deeply he was hurt from the military officer in his base. He was supposed to receive a groundbreaking medal for his devotion and service to the Armenian military, however someone else who did not even participate in the war, received that medal. *“I witnessed this in front of my eyes and this was all result of corruption. However deep in my heart I know that it is not the medal that matters, but the fact that I laid down my life for my country, even for these corrupted ones.”*

Sevak said that he was supposed to receive a promotion in his ranking from ordinary to a sergeant, but it did not happen for obvious reasons.

Babken stated that he joined the military returned with the same military position/ranking.

Veteran A received his medals and a few certificates for his dedicated military service. However, he added that all that mattered to him was to return back home to his family safe and sound.

**Recommendations and Opinions for AUA’s initiative.**

As we discussed almost all the questions prepared for the focus group, everyone seemed to be quite relaxed and much lighter. This focus group provided substantial understanding and can be considered successful since there was no arguments, strong disagreements or biased opinions. This was absolutely a platform where the veterans had the opportunity to speak up and share their experiences. We came to the last segment of our focus group questions which was directed towards the AUA’s new initiative of establishing a funding and Veterans Affairs Office on campus.

All the participant veterans showed their enthusiasm and gratefulness for such an initiative mentioning the fact that this seems to be completely a new idea in the Armenian culture and educational institutions. Babken said, *“AUA always stands out from the crowd with its generous support and acceptance of its students from various backgrounds.”* None of them recalled an organization that had to support or include veterans in it. However, they mentioned that as AUA organizes an annual “Banaki Qef” “Party for the Returnees”, this event gives them a chance to get to know a few other veterans, chat with them and share common experiences. They still keep in touch with their military buddies and try to recall on the good memories.

Gurgen added that due to his supportive environment and AUA’s community he was able to recover and bounce back to academic life. *“Although I did experience concentration issues frequently and looked forward to talking to someone.”*

Sevak stated that he did not think a psychologist specifically for the Veterans Affairs Office would be necessary. He added, *“As for me there were not so many traumatic experiences from my service, although this sounds quite subjective. I think that it is more important the AUA’s community and society in general try to help veterans to get involved in the academic and civilian life after being away for two years.”*

Veteran A concluded that he hopes to pursue Master’s Degree abroad and his goal is to own a business which will allow him not only to support his family, but also to the Armenian economy.

Moving onwards to the next finding for this paper, this will be a big switch from group opinions and shared experiences to individual veterans. Two veterans were selected for the individual interview. All the procedures regarding consent forms and confidentiality were conducted accordingly. The participants gave their agreement to have their names and identities disclosed.

**Individual Interview- David Muradyan**

Prior to meeting with David, I knew him a little from class, but found out about him being a veteran later. David served in Meghri which is in the very south of Armenia from 2016-2018. He finished his freshman year at AUA and then joined the military in the summer. He expected the military to be a bad place, because his views were influenced by those who shared their military experiences with him. David added, *“Then when you personally join the military, you realize how different it is from what you been told.”* He served in different branches in the army. He witnessed a lot of injustice there. For example, soldiers coming from a wealthy family background did not have to do a lot of things in the military, while those who came from middle class families had to work and serve harder.

First when he joined the military he took a lot of essentials with him, but everything was taken away from him, because civilian hygiene items were not allowed in the military. Anything provided from the military had low quality and did not last that long. *“For example, men’s underwear would get stretched and we could not wear them even for a day. Thus, we would use them for polishing the boots. The building we were staying in was very old and we had to get out of the building every time we had to use the toilet. The toilet looked like an animal house/stable. There was not flushing water, the water was just dipping. We had to brush our teeth, wash our face, and wash our socks in the same area; which was very disgusting. Later, they built a new building and then we were relocated to stay in this building. Conditions were much better.”* strongly emphasized David.

When asked about food in his military base, David noted, *“The food was not good at all. For example, if it rained really hard, then the drinking water would be contaminated with the rain water and then the cooks would make buckwheat with that rainwater and it was awful. The smell was so bad not even to mention it was not edible.”*

David said that soldiers had the chance to go out in the nearby city for a few hours on Saturdays and Sundays. This would not happen all the time, but there were a few times that he went out, visited a family he knew, washed his uniform in their house, had a haircut, and took care of his hygiene. *“Movies were very boring, so everyone would preferbto have this time sleeping rather than wasting it.” added David.* He was demobilized from the military as a sergeant with medals- “Excellent Soldier” and “Brave Soldier”.

He felt quite uneasy when he joined the military first, because there were a lot of swearing and bad language, so it was hard to adapt to this new environment. David emphasized, *“Also, for an educated young man who comes from a civilized and educated family, it becomes quite hard not to compromise some values, thus you have no other choice than being like them. So you have to act like them, otherwise they will rule you over. Then once you come home, you look back and realize that it was an extremely uncontrollable situation and you had to “act out” the whole time being the tough guy.”*

He agrees that after coming back one has to act tough, serious and be cold-hearted. However, after some time, he came to himself that in civilian life no one is after you, *“so just chill and enjoy your time positively”,* said David. After the military he found it quite easy to adapt back to civilian life, he even planned two months before his military service what he was going to do because he realized that he was going to be quite behind track from his peers.
David has a viewpoint that even though military does not provide a good educational platform, it becomes one’s responsibility to self-educate and gain some skills. He came back motivated, passionate about pursuing education and finding a job.

He realized that under certain extreme circumstances he can change and become a totally different person. On the other hand, he shared that it was eye-opening for him to see that young men his age could be lacking so much education and knowledge. He learned to be self-reliant and trust only himself. David was talking quite disappointed from the injustice and corruption which he witnessed in the military.

He attended an AUA Banki Qef event once, which was really nice. He felt that he was appreciated and not ignored. David is aware of a “Armenian Wounded Heros” group on Facebook.

What is your attitude of having a veterans office at AUA?

He immediately asked, *“Mental health center?”* He really liked the idea of having the center which can help materialistically first- providing jobs, scholarships, and social support. Regarding mental health support, “. . .it is not a bad idea, since everyone needs that after the military”, said David. However, David brought up the cultural stigma that in the Armenian military they say, *“You are a grown man, it’s shameful for you to go to a therapist”.* Additionally, *“So, this will be challenging because our culture does not approve that. Our culture looks negatively at people who seek mental health support, they will consider the veteran to have been a nerd in the military. You have to be tough and be strong, so no need to seek help, after all you served in the military, right?”*

*“It is better to have a male psychologist with a military background, because this will make the veteran seeking mental health support to feel comfortable.”* Stated David. He feels left out and behind from some of his friends who did not serve in the military, yet they make a lot of money. He, however, has to ask for money from his parents. This is a gap he is concerned about. He would really want to have a job opportunity upon his return, so he would not feel that big gap due to the military service. He likes the idea of the veterans’ support group. He suggests planning out the main aspects for returning veterans. For example, *“It will be necessary to understand different kinds of psychological and social needs of returning soldiers.”* concluded David.

The second veteran was a must to interview since knowing a little about his courageous military service and experience, he could provide some really insightful revelations for project.

**Individual Interview: Shavarsh Muradyan**

*“I had a lot of friends who shared their military service experience with me. However I believe that once you serve that is totally a different experience. I grew up in a very patriotic family. My dad is also a veteran from the war in Artsakh in 1992. My dad had a strong influence on me and I wanted to join the military with all my heart. I realized that military service is another scene in life which gives you the ability to become a man, solve your problems by yourself, and understand your meaning. You face the real enemy which is our neighboring country. These two years gave me a lot of knowledge both about life and military wise.”,* started Shavarsh on his background and knowledge about military prior to joining.

When asked if he could share some funny stories, Shavarsh replied, *“These funny stories are mostly related to officers. Once there was an illness going on in our military unit. Once one of our military officers asked what was the reason that everybody was getting sick, no one answered, but I. I replied, “Officer, it is probably because we lack the sugar and sweets, that is why.” Everybody started laughing out loud. Then the officer asked, if we send you packages of candies and sweets, will you get better? I replied, “We will try!”. Then the next day, we received a lot of sweets, then everyone got better.”*

Shavarsh took a sigh and said, *“For the first year in my military year, I would say that the quality in everything was very bad. Then, the second year of my military year, I noticed significant changes in many aspects. Relatively, the conditions became better. However, we could not take much stuff with us to the frontlines. We needed a lot of wood to burn to keep us warm for a fourteen day shift.”*

The Four-Day War

His military profession was being in the infantry. He had his shifts right at the frontline and would spend 14 days in the military base and the other 14 days at the frontline. Shavarsh told, *“We were waiting for the main command to start our move as the siren went off. However, it seemed that the command was getting late, therefore we fought for 40 minutes in the frontline even without command.”*

*“We ran out of food for the first few days really quick. However, when the actual war started we forgot about food, because we were intensely focused on fighting back the enemy. We did not have food or clothes for quite a few days.*

*The worst thing that happened to us was that the military officers demanded every military item back from us. Some of us lost our military uniform belts, the jacket, or the hat. We were treated terribly for losing those, but we could not have done anything about it, because in the war you do not think about such things, but making sure that the borders and everyone is safe. We spent four days and nights without food or water. We drank rain water during those days.”* recalled Shavarsh.

When he returned home, Shavarsh shared that his brothers and friends came to meet him and just like everybody else it was the happiest day of his life. However, he did feel sad as well, because he had become way too adapted to the military life. He stated that his main purpose of his military service was to return home safe and sound. *“Also, my homecoming was similar to landing on Mars. Everything and Everyone seemed so new to me.”,* added Shavarsh.

*“Loud noises really affect me, because the war was full of noise and strong bombings. Also, being out in the public, entertainment places and seeing how younger people are having fun affect me. I feel like they are more energetic than me and have all the fun. Even though I am trying to adapt back to civilian life, it is still hard for me. Some of my professors were very helpful to me during those hard times. Some of the peers at the university seemed understanding as well, but you cannot make everyone adaptable to you, you must be adapted to everyone in civilian life.”,* said Shavarsh.

*“I received quite many certificates, medals, and letters.”,* proudly stated Shavarsh. He also received the Marshal Baghramyan medal, which is not given to just everybody.

*“I became self-reliant. I learned to become confident and overcome fear. Overcoming fear was the biggest thing for me because I faced death and I think there is nothing else that I cannot endure.”,* confirmed Shavarsh when asked what he learned from being in the military service.

*“I keep in touch with many veterans. Some April War veterans and I initiated a club called, “Union of April War Veterans”* said Shavarsh. The club includes all the heroes who fought in the April War, the wounded soldiers, and those who are very patriotic. *“We keep in touch, meet, organize various social events. We always show up in places where we know that we will be appreciated and taken care of.”*, answered Shavarsh.

Shavarsh shared that there is an organization for wounded veterans and they help their families with food or little financial support, but nothing psychological or therapoutical. However, along with other veterans they gather sometimes, talk, and share about their experiences. *“This helps us to feel better because there is no one understanding us better than we do.”*, said Shavarsh. Shavarsh believes that veterans can understand themselves much better than psychologists can. *“However, no matter how much we try to forget and heal, we will always have the consequences or memories in our lives. This is hard because we cannot just get over the fact that we lost friends and we were actually in a brutal battle. We witnessed all those with our own eyes.”,* Shavarsh concluded on the matter.

*“I really appreciate the fact that AUA wants to create such an environment where veterans can come into one place. This is a great platform where we can get to know each other well. I really would prefer the psychologist to be male with some military background, because it makes a huge difference. Providing scholarships is also a great motivational factor for veterans so they pursue high-quality education.”*

*“Another advice, I would like to make is that since there AUA has a lot of foreign professors coming from diverse cultures with different mindsets, and they had never been to war zone countries and have not seen wounded soldiers. So they do not have a big idea about it. It will be great if there could be a committee at AUA who will organize a thorough meeting for veterans and professors in order to help both sides understand the upcoming challenges.”*

*“From my own experience, I have had Armenian professors being very supportive of me and gracious regarding the deadlines. This gave me a sense of hope of being understood and respected in some ways. However, I have had professors from other countries who simply said, “I don’t care”, when it came to extending a deadline or discussing homework related things. This affected me so much, because it breaks you into pieces. It will be great to have a committee at AUA who will inform those professors about these new returnees.*

*Professors can have one-on-one meetings with those veterans to get to know them better. AUA has always been very supportive and loving towards students who have mental or physical disabilities, therefore it should be the same for the returning veterans. Everything changes for a veteran who comes back from the military. Veterans are the pillars of Armenia and they should be treated well and respectfully.”* excitedly answered Shavarsh.

*“AUA should start the Veterans office now. Another important factor is to organize events where they can get to know each other well. Also to be supportive of students who have a part time job, because many of them have to cover their financial needs. If AUA cannot partially support those veterans, at least to be flexible and more understanding in terms of schedules and timelines. This would be great!”,* concluded Shavarsh.

Shavarsh wants to pursue Master’s Degree abroad after his Bachelor’s Degree at AUA, become a skilled specialist in the military sphere and make Armenia even stronger.

**Online Survey**

Moving onwards in the research and findings, the next important step to gather data was creating an online survey through Google Docs. The survey has been shared on Facebook and sent to individuals through Messenger. One of the reasons why an online survey was necessary for this research was that it allowed AUA community to be aware of such a project and have a quick but relevant input on it. The online survey would take from 1-2 minutes to complete and submit. Apparently, 66% of the participants were female and 34% were male. The survey also showed that 82% of the participants did not serve in the military, and only 18% of the participants served or had a military background. Then 56% of the participants were friends with veterans and 18% best friends with them, and the rest, just acquaintances. Only 4% did not know any veteran. Evidently, 36% respondents’ results show that their veteran family member was their grandfather. Interestingly and equally, 16% goes to both having a brother or cousin veteran in the family. Below are some of the graphic and quantitative information based on the survey.



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Gathering data about behavior changes in returning veterans has been the most essential part of the research. Not surprisingly, 40% of the participants noticed that veterans get easily irritated, 36% noticed that veterans experience mood swings, 28% noticed veterans being more isolated. Interestingly, only 4% noticed substance abuse among returning veterans. The last portion of the quantitative data shows that equally 30% of the participants noticed that veterans are less concentrated on their studies and the other 30% did not notice any changes.

One of the takeaways from this survey provides an understanding of how other students are observant to veterans’ behaviors in class and in general. The fact that 40% of them noticed irritation, mood swings, and isolation indicates that there is quite some level of awareness. However, there is also another objection, which comes from the 30% of the participants who mentioned that they did not notice any changes at all. One of the obvious reasons of this is because in our culture, men tend to portray a tough figure and do not share emotional aspects of their lives. Again, suppressing their emotions inside and pretending everything is “OK” makes other students perceive them exactly the way these group veterans portray themselves. However, quite interestingly, not many of them can pretend they are “OK”, since lack of motivation, isolation, irritation already expose the underlying issues they carry. Thus, this survey allowed us to grasp an understanding of different behavioral patterns these veterans “perform” in given situations.

Participants in the survey were also given an extra window to add any additional behavior changes in veterans. Some of the most frequent responses were registered as the following, *“Sad and less motivated”, “Sad and not comfortable in the new environment”, “Less talkative”, “Constantly feeling pressured and extra careful to what they say.”, “Sensibility to loud voices”, “It depends on a person. I had some friends who after their return to university became more concentrated on their studies, but also had friends who were a little confused about the overall transition to their “usual” schedules.”,* and lastly, *“Totally a different person after the military.”.*

**Individual Interview: Hovhannes Nazaretyan**

For a deeper and further study on the research, I also conducted individual interviews with three AUA students. Hovhannes was the first student to share his views and experiences about veterans. He lived half his life in the United States and now is pursuing his Bachelor’s Degree at AUA. Due to his US citizenship, Hovhannes did not have to join the military in Armenia. However, he has a few interesting insights to share regarding his encounters with veterans.

The only person with a military service background in his family was his grandfather who served in the Soviet Union era. To the question of what kind of changes Hovhannes noticed in the veterans, he answered*,” One thing I notice for sure is that returning veterans become quite serious and their facial expressions seem to be aggressive at times.”*

What are some of the best ways to reach out to veterans?

*“Definitely providing counseling services to those who want to. Therapists should be available specifically for veterans. The US has this big problem of PTSD, but in Armenia people do not want to acknowledge that due to cultural stigma.”*

“What would you personally do if you noticed an isolated veteran?”

*“I would tell them that I am always there for them, if they need help with their classes or share their stories- I would be there for them.”*

Hovhannes stated that if he were to join the military in Armenia, it would not be a great place for him. He thinks that the military does make you immune in many things in life, *“. . . 5 years of struggle squeezed into these two years.”* One of the biggest changes that Hovhannes would like to see in the military would be an educational component- anything from computer to mathematics. *“Besides using a rifle or other weapons, it will be better if they learn other skills as well, so they get the most out of the military service.”,* concluded Hovhannes.

**Individual Interview: Anna Ispiryan**

Anna is a Senior student at AUA and has quite a few acquaintances and friends with military background. One of the first things that Anna shared when asked for an individual interview for the veterans was, *“I never knew that soldiers who return from the military are considered veterans as well, because in my mind I always thought them to be those grandfathers with more than ten medals hanging on their suits.”* This was quite a revelation since Anna cannot be the only who questions why returning veterans are considered veterans at all.

What changes or different behaviors have you noticed between military and non-military guys?

*“Well, I know that some of my friends who returned from the military seemed to be totally different people. I even felt uncomfortable being around them due to their extremely serious presence.”,* recalled Anna.

Based on Anna’s genuine answers, it became quite relevant that her experiences with veterans left her thinking why they behave the way they behave and why so serious. She tried to find avenues to talk to them and understand how she could help them, but she later realized that it was a matter of time, because these veterans started getting back to normal in a year or so. Anna emphasized the fact that she noticed how veterans could be isolated in the classroom and not wanting to participate in those AUA students’ parties or events. *“I strongly believe that having a veterans office at AUA will definitely be a safe place for them and they will get back on track much faster.”,* concluded Anna.

**Individual Interview: Armen Makaryan**

Armen graduated from AUA in 2019 and currently works in a business company. Armen served in the military from 2014-2016, participated in the Four-Day War. Before starting the individual interview with Armen, I asked him to position himself from the helper’s or supporter’s point of view. Many times, veterans are in the position of seeking help and actually needing that help, but this interview with a veteran from a different perspective has been significantly relevant for the paper.

When asked about his relationship with AUA veterans, Armen replied, *“I knew a few veterans whom I was friends with even before joining the military, but as AUA threw a party for the returning veterans, I met many of them.*”.

Regarding some of the changes in veterans Armen replied, *“This is a tough question, because I see many veterans and as we communicate, we both have similar feelings coming from the military, but we choose not to talk about those feelings. One of the most noticeable changes that I can tell for sure is that they (we) get isolated and depressed.”.*

Armen also mentions that he understands the frustrating feeling that every veteran has regarding to a two-year gap in their lives. This is described as being behind the track from others and trying to catch up. Armen praised the idea of having a Veterans Affairs Office which would help to create a veterans’ community on campus and be the first in Armenia. Armen believes that professors play a huge role in the veterans’ reintegration in class and academic life. *“It would be great to have AUA professors encouraging us to share our military experiences with other classmates in class, as this would help to make a bond and strong connection with other students.”* Armen concluded that believes in the importance of mental health support and having everyone taking it seriously, because according to him, if the mind is healthy and strong, then the nation will also be the same.

**Analysis**

The extensive research-driven data yielded was relevant, insightful, and informative. Data from focus group revealed that there is some interest among veterans to participate in a veterans’ support group. Moreover, there is a significant need to help and support veterans who are currently enrolled at educational institutions in the nation. Through the focus group and individual interviews with veterans it was revealed that unfortunately there is a cultural stigma attached to psychological and counseling services for men in general, yet alone for the veterans’ population, and this creates barriers to formulating and establishing those support groups for veterans at educational institutions.

Literature review provided a foundational knowledge and practices on the efficacy of veteran support groups that have demonstrated promising treatment results for veterans who developed PTSD and other psychological issues due to being in combat. Another important component from these literature reviews shows the importance of emotional, instrumental, trustworthy social support from family, friends, professors from university, and the public in general.

A really significant analysis that has been made due to focus groups, individual interviews and other veterans’ online survey participation is that even veterans can play an important role in the treatment and support process of other veterans for the support group establishment. It has been noted that when veterans see one or two other veterans standing up, sharing, and showing confidentiality, then they also feel inspired and encouraged to do the same.

Accordingly, online survey results indicated that veterans’ isolation, weak concentration, aggression, and demotivation can be considered the central concerns when dealing with deeper issues in the veterans’ community. Online survey results have also shown that even civilians notice PTSD or emotional withdrawals among veterans and that those issues cause the veterans’ readjustment process extremely difficult.

Both from individual and focus group interviews with veterans, it has become apparent that they all experienced some kind of trauma during and after their military service. All the veteran participants described their joining the military to be as if entering into a new world where the idea of sameness rules over. Being different, thinking differently, or questioning authority limited those veterans’ ability to grow during these two years. Participants also emphasized the fact that these two-year gap leaves them behind track of their peers or age group people. The difficulty of building up a resume or applying for a job causes them to feel powerless and useless.

Participants indicated multiple times that at the end of their military service they did not receive the medals or appreciation certificates from the military representatives. This is a clear indication of corruption in the country and this can be demotivational factor for many of those veterans who return and still believe that no matter what they do, they will not get appreciated.

Furthermore, analysis from these findings indicate that there is a huge need for comprehensive and holistic support system. This strategy for the care of veterans is both intentional and purposeful.

Below is an example of a highly suggested approach for a comprehensive care for veterans.

**Financial Aid**

**Counseling**

**Faculty and Staff**

**Veteran Population**

**Veterans’ Affairs Office**

**Annual Recognition**

**Veterans’ Academic Programs**

The change of the environment for the veterans also plays a crucial role in their emotional and psychological well-being. For instance, if they are placed in a military base where the sanitary and living conditions lack basic structure, then they feel overwhelmed and consider them unworthy of normal living conditions. Soldiers in the military always have to be presentable and clean, whereas living in those conditions where they cannot even shave or stay clean, often times they get beaten up or belittled in front of others simply because they could not make it on time. Based on the research and aftermath experiences it becomes evident that these kinds of events create imbalance and unexpressed anger towards the officials for demanding specific results without providing the conditions for the soldiers to accomplish them.

Findings from the veterans’ interviews bring to the analysis that the military does not provide an effective entertainment for the veterans and does not even consider making changes as participants share the same stories from different military service years. Sundays are supposed to be the “day-offs” from all duties and should allow the soldiers to rest on this day. However, based on the participants’ responses they felt dragged and forced into those not really fun entertainment and this made them upset. Therefore, once veterans return on campus, many times they have the same attitude towards university-related events and the participatory rate is really low due their lack of involvement. From personal experience, I have also noticed that many veterans do not even want to participate in the “Veterans’ Party” organized by the American University of Armenia due to various reasons. Based on my observations and conversations with other veterans, I have come to the realization that veterans do not want to participate in those events because they do not really know anybody there, assume there could be loud music, feel ashamed that they could be introduced to the public, and/or don’t really take those seriously.

Collected data from online surveys and individual interviews from AUA students who did not serve in the military provided helpful and concerning truths about what they realized when interacting with veterans. The overwhelming majority indicated that they noticed veterans being isolated, aggressive, and less concentrated on their studies. These are extremely concerning issues as they refer to one’s mental health and ability to find himself in a learning environment. The classroom, lights, PowerPoint slides with graphic images related to war, sounds, narrow aisles - all of these can be irritating factors for a veteran coming from combat. Non-military individuals also indicated in the interview that they noticed a personality change in veterans they knew before, as those who returned tend to behave and look more serious in aggressive manners. This is also concerning as the society needs to help their readjustment process by being patient, kind, and supportive of them. This research indicates that veterans experience a huge invisible clash between military and civilian cultures.

The findings of this part of the research also indicated a classic scenario where the non-military personals are willing to volunteer in “coaching/assisting” the returning veterans. Generally, the educational institution community students sign up to help the veteran navigate and deal with administrative hurdles, offer academic support/advice, and even provide some emotional support for a transition to civilian life. Those who have been in combat or mostly in the front lines will most likely approve this initiative. Faculty, staff, and a good pool of students could be willing to offer their time and resources for their returning veterans.

Interviews with Four-Day War participants provided a specific and clear information on the difference of experiences for those who were in combat and those who were not. Outstanding insights have come from these conducted interviews indicating PTSD and other psychological issues would most likely not be a central concern for those veterans who did not experience war or combat. Interviews with veterans provided significantly richer data on the individual experiences and emotions with which they live, whereas online surveys turned out providing limited data. After collecting the online survey data, I realized that it could have been better to send individual surveys to the non-combat veterans and another survey to combat veterans in order to allow them think and decide what other things they would like to share. Consequently, the in-person interviews provided veterans the platform to freely share whatever they wanted, but it became apparent that they would not want to discuss deeper and more sensitive issues since I was not an expert or a therapist. Nonetheless, surveys do not the offer the insight that interviews may provide.

The methodology in this research revealed to be effective at least unveiling a need to have support specifically for veterans. Thoroughly looking at the fact that most of the veterans did not want to participate in a focus group or individual interviews, are quite inactive in university-related activities and do not see a necessity of having a male psychologist in the university can indicate two conclusions: 1. There are underlying psychological issues and hidden increased need for counseling services, but those needs are not voiced because of cultural stigma. 2. Armenian men have the ability to overcome psychological issues by themselves overtime; they may welcome the materialistic support from the Veterans Affairs Office, but not necessarily the idea of therapy or counseling services.

AUA and other universities in Armenia open their doors to hundreds of veterans returning from their military service every academic year. Since Armenia is in constant danger of being attacked by Azerbaijan and there are always shootings happening at the borders, increasingly, many of the returning veterans will have already experienced depression, fear, anxiety, PTSD, and other symptoms originating of those traumatic experiences. This capstone research has demonstrated that there is an overwhelming majority in both veterans and AUA students’ community, who have an interest in the establishment of veterans’ support groups and are willing to show their involvement in the process. In order to raise awareness about such an initiative for veterans, this Capstone model can be exported to other educational institutions across Armenia, which will allow more researchers to conduct similar studies to better understand their veterans’ populations needs and concerns thus creating an environment for acceptance, understanding, support, and unconditional love.

**Avenues and Recommendations**

Based on the extensive research which included literature review, focus groups, individual interviews, online surveys and personal experience, the following recommendation and avenues have been formulated for the establishment of veterans’ support groups at educational institutions.

1. **Develop a strong and sustainable veteran-specific data and use it to establish policies, services, and programs.**

In order to be a more veteran-supportive campus it is critical to have a system which tracks and measures its veterans’ progress. Progress is a measurement of efficiency, and it allows the institution to decide on the justification, sustainability, and allocation of resources. The ability to objectively analyze events, programs, veterans’ behaviors further steps can be made to advance and improve. The following steps are recommended for tracking and collecting veteran-specific data:

* Total number of veterans currently enrolled on campus.
* Total number of current students serving in the military.
* Total number of veterans enrolled in each academic program and course.
* Total number of veterans receiving scholarships and those in financial need.
* Total number of veterans using and utilizing various available resources and services (math and writing center, library, counseling services, etc.)
1. **Requirement for Faculty and Staff to Attend Veteran Events.**

In order to ensure that the faculty, staff and institution are better equipped to serve effectively, it is highly essential to build cultural competency about veterans’ community. Many veterans deal with different issues in ways that traditional students do not. Some of these issues can be, being the first one attending college in their family, time-management, successful learning habits, and living with invisible wounds as a result of military service. The issues mentioned above are evenhandedly complex and may have substantial impact on these veterans’ transition onto campus and academic environment.

1. **Organize and Introduce the Campus to Veterans.**

Veterans from the Armenian military return having completed their service in the winter or summer, then they go on with their life. Those who return in the summer, still have some time to adjust a little back to civilian life, but those who return in the winter, have to immediately jump back to their studies. This transitioning to a new environment can been painfully overwhelming for most veterans. Veterans can find it really hard to use Moodle, find their classrooms, learn about the syllabus, or the available recourses. Thus, it is highly recommended for institutions to organize specific “campus navigating” events only for veterans. These kinds of introduction and welcome for veterans will familiarize them with campus.

1. **Demonstrate Welcome for Veterans on Campus, not Just Thank Them.**

A common and highly-accepted tradition at AUA has become throwing a “Veteran Party”. This is a sign of respect, acceptance, and support that communicates show gratitude for all the sacrifice the veteran made during his military service. However, not all veterans may look at this gesture as genuine or effective. This could be the reason why many veterans avoid even attending the “Veterans’ Party”. A relationship between veterans’ population and campus community can be made by inviting them individually and getting to know them a little bit. Once trust and clear communication have been established, then it will be much appropriate to call them and invite for the big annual “Veterans Party”. This careful and well-thought of gesture will increase the chances of their active participation and willingness in many university-related events in the future as well. For instance, there would be a poster on campus with the following statement, *“Welcome to AUA! We are honored and privileged you made the decision to start or continue your education at AUA. We’re here to help! “*

1. **Instructor-Veteran Connection and Communication**

Before starting the first day of classes, it is highly advisable for professors to check their list of students and receive data if there are veterans enrolled in the course. Veterans will appreciate the professor taking the time to get to know them better and even allow them to share some stories of their military service in class, if they are comfortable about it. In addition, an office hour should be organized to explain the syllabus to the veteran, expectations, and general communication in and outside of class. This kind of friendly yet well-balanced approach will most likely increase the veteran’s interest in class assignments, they will not feel isolated, will stay engaged and their performance will not suffer. Thus, staff and faculty should pay close attention to their veterans and once they notice signs and indicators, they can reach out to veterans in private if deemed appropriate.

A good example of how a professor may start a conversation with a veteran can be *“I would like to take a second and welcome you in my class. I’m really excited that you are enrolled in this course and I want you to know that I’m here to help and support you. Please feel free to approach me any time after class with any questions you might have. Additionally, there are amazing programs and services to help you. Some of these services include… For more information please visit…”*

1. **Conduct Veterans’ Academic Focus Groups to Identify Their Needs.**

Some educational institutions in Armenia have a higher number of veterans than others. What works for one institution may not work for others; however, one thing that all of the educational institutions can have in common is organizing a Q&A session for its veterans, hear their concerns, suggestions, and needs in order to better formulate and assess the further steps for their support groups. Veterans’ group is the best place to start for collecting data and gaining insights on the impacts that the university is having. Furthermore, the university can decide on what areas to prioritize and augment the influence of their efforts.

Here are some recommendations for Academic Sessions

* What factors influenced you to attend the courses you chose?
* Where else did you think of applying before coming to our university?
* What suggestions do you have for our veterans’ or university’s website in general?
* As a student veteran, how well do you feel supported by our institution?
* How often do you use the various available service on campus?
* What areas would you like the university to support in the veterans’ community?
1. **Veterans on Campus and Students on Duty Need one Point-of-Contact.**

Military culture is very specific and has structure and collective thinking. Soldiers are expected to learn about each military officer, their ranking, rules and regulations. Whenever a new soldier comes into service, there is one point-of-contact (usually a sergeant) who teaches them basic structures of the service. This creates a connection and responsibility for both sides. Similar point-of-contact can be adopted on campuses, where a representative frequently keeps in touch with his current students who are on duty in the military. This representative can be a staff member from the Veterans’ Affairs Office. Then when the student returns on campus already as a veteran, he knows where to go and who to ask if he has specific questions without being lost in the crowd.

1. **Launch a Mentoring Program for Student Veterans.**

Once veterans return from the military, they also have developed really good habits in terms of strong and punctual mentality. Many times, veterans feel compelled to help others, and this is because of the deeply rooted teamwork mentality that is instilled in them during their military service. Teamwork and helping one another is a great component in the military. Educational institutions can utilize a peer mentoring program where a veteran volunteer can mentor the newly enrolled student veterans on campus. This way the new veteran student can successfully and peacefully navigate through campus and academic semester without too much pressure and stress.

1. **Initiate Opportunities for Veterans to Volunteer within the Campus and the Local Community.**

Serving in the military is absolutely the best way to give back to their nation. Many veterans may appreciate the fact that they will be given scholarships through their educational institution. However, this can be a win-win approach if the veteran receiving financial assistance for his education will also be “required/requested” to choose what kind of volunteering he would like to do. Many may choose to organize a clean-up in their community or near the campus, some of them may want to volunteer for a peer mentoring program, others may want to visit the currently enrolled students in the military providing them with some personal hygiene kits and other essential supplies. Through these types of initiatives educational institutions allow their veterans to leverage their talents and skills, thus providing meaningful ways for them to stay engaged on campus and give back simultaneously. No doubt, this will lead to accomplishing academic goals, dreams and even to careers for veterans.

1. **Designate a Portion of Housing for Veterans from Regions.**

Many times, veterans return to their families with a desire to start or resume their educational journey but they not only lack the financial means, but also, they are from regions and finding housing can be a big challenge. Typically, students from regions have less money, no relatives in the city where they could stay with, and a desire to both work and study. Therefore, educational institutions can set aside a certain amount of financial resources specifically designed for providing housing only for veteran students from regions. In return, veterans will be expected to maintain quite a high GPA and volunteer work within the campus and/or the community. This will most likely increase their academic achievements.

1. **Give Recognition to Veterans during Graduation Ceremonies and Other Major Events.**

Based on the research it has become apparent that veterans always want to be acknowledged for their dedication and service to their country through their military service. Recognizing the veteran population during graduation ceremonies will give them the chance to be known and celebrate their achievements as a whole. It is highly suggested to give the veterans a distinguishing cords or pins to wear. This act of genuine appreciation and recognition can have a tremendous amount of positive effect on veterans’ mental health and self-esteem.

1. **Provide the Veterans with a Platform Where They Can Bring Suggestions and Voice Their Concerns.**

In order to show that the educational institution cares about its veterans and wants to keep a finger on the pulse of their progress, they should organize meetings, put up a box for suggestions, and interact with them on a daily basis. Genuine and simple gestures like these can contribute to building a relationship with the veterans’ population.

1. **Communicate with Local Business Companies to Create Job Pipelines for Graduating Veterans.**

Based on the conducted intensive research it has become apparent that all those interviewed veterans were students and this factor indicates that they have a passion for education and chose an academic program which will most likely give them employment after they graduate. Some educational institutions frequently send job opportunity announcements to their students; however, this announcement list can be overwhelming for many veterans. Once a veterans’ affairs office is established on campus, they can categorize and send most appropriate job opportunities to their veterans’ population.

**Conclusion**The research for this Capstone project has been tenaciously extensive and the findings from this study point to the need for a comprehensive and holistic system approach for the veterans’ population. Veterans bring lots of diversity and life experiences with them to campus. Many of them have interacted with diverse individuals and some of them participated in an actual war/combat. Provided the opportunity, many veterans could possibly welcome the idea of sharing their experiences with their educational institution. This study suggests that there is a high probability for other students benefiting from hearing about these experiences and gaining an actual insight what it feels like to be in the military and return. Educational institutions are the place where they welcome and embrace diversity, thus the veterans’ population should also be a big and visible part of this welcome and recognition.

Very little has been known or discussed about veterans’ population in the Armenian culture. Media always reports the events happening in the frontline, but never corresponds on the consequences of those events. The mental health, tuition fee needs, or the living conditions of those veterans are never portrayed or discussed by higher authorities or representatives. This Capstone project presented a report on the experiences of a few veterans during and after their military service on educational institutions. One of the limitations of this project was the amount of time available for a thorough and much deeper research. Additionally, most of the veterans would not want to participate in the focus groups or interviews. This probably has to do with the approach which could have been articulated in much better ways. For further research, it is suggested to decide a specific and preferably longer amount of time to gather more date and information. Another important limitation of the project to mention was that only veterans from the American University of Armenia were interviewed, therefore, the results from the research have been limited only to this specific educational institution’s veterans. Respectfully, a broader research and bigger number veterans could provide more data and reliable information on the overall picture of veterans at educational institutions in Armenia.

Faculty members represent a huge part of these efforts for veterans’ population. Results from this research based on individual interviews, indicate that veteran students desire to have their professor understand and acknowledge them. This has to do a lot with their transitioning from obeying military officers to a professor who still has some “power” over the student. Conclusively, most students look for a special status or appraisal given from their professors; a sense that their professors appreciate and acknowledge what they have been through and support them to overcome their academic challenges. Making faculty members and the campus community aware of the procedures to be utilized for the veterans’ community can be a challenge as well. Thus, professional guidelines are necessary for those professors to help them better understand the needs of those emerging student groups.

Regardless of the limited amount of research time and resources, it is undeniable that the mental health and academic success of returning veterans continue to remain an important concern for educational institutions. However, the questions are the following: *“Who does notice and take those concerns into consideration?”, “Are educational institutions well-prepared or even prepared at all to provide various services to its returning veterans coming on campus?”* How today’s veterans’ mental health is dealt with in general and how counseling professionals communicate this issue should be put on a display and discussed nationwide. Undoubtedly, additional research in the area of veterans’ mental health support is needed on a greater level.

This rigorous capstone project was an effort to find out about the transitional challenges both combat and traditional veterans experience as they return home and then resume or start their education journey at an educational institution. The findings and analysis substantiate that the majority of the veterans’ population needs their campus community to work with them and meet their needs. For many veterans participants in this research, the transition to civilian and academic life was the most difficult challenge they encountered. Veterans identified connecting with their campus community, time-management, deadlines, financial barriers as major aspects of readjustment process. Given the potential that a possible war could escalate in the borders of Armenia and Kharabakh with Azerbaijan, there is a higher risk that more emotional, physically and mentally wounded student veterans could come back to their educational institutions. Preparedness and mitigation of veteran-specific programs should be ready in hand, as it would be a dis-service to treat and handle this veteran population as if it were invisible.

This Capstone is just the beginning of acknowledging the magnitude of work ahead to address veterans’ mental health issues. Participants’ narratives about their experiences of war and homecoming revealed their confusion, frustration, distress, but also their hopes, aspirations, and requests for future initiatives. Many veterans are experiencing a crisis of identity; therefore, a continuum of services-both formal and informal- is needed to support them. Opportunities to develop integrated personal narratives could provide a way to prevent or at least mitigate poor mental health outcomes. The costs of ignoring veterans’ mental health are great, and we owe it to them to provide the care and support they need to imagine themselves in new ways, reintegrate into civilian and academic life, and live healthily and productively.

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