The AES Business Meeting in San Francisco was devoted to a session on “The Human Costs of the Iraq War.” AES Treasurer Linda Green (U Arizona) began a project two years ago to engage her students with members of their community, and they developed a collaborative project focused on US veterans of the Iraq War.

The AES Business Meeting panel included three graduate students involved in this project: Julie Armin (U Arizona), Brian Burke (U Arizona), and Erin Finley (Emory U). The University of Arizon a
students described the project, which strives to develop long-term working relationships with veterans in order to share their experiences with a wider public. As Burke explained, “We wanted to find new ways of bridging anthropology and the public … to explore how anthropologists can communicate more effectively and in a more timely manner [about important contemporary issues].” Such a concern also includes exploring alternative forms of media—such as podcasts, radio broadcasts, and webcasts—to disseminate veterans’ stories. One of the goals of the project, according to Armin, is to explore the various processes of adjustment that veterans experience, whether they return to universities, jobs, families or other situations. Although each veteran’s experience is unique, Armin notes that there is a shared recognition that “everything’s changed since their deployment.”

Two Iraq War veterans also participated on the panel, and each provided a powerful and distinct narrative of their own experiences as veterans and students. Matt Randle, an undergraduate at the University of Arizona and the Outreach Director of Vets 4 Vets, and Anthony Allman, an undergraduate at UCLA and Board Member of Student Veterans of America, shared their own stories of coming to terms with their identities as veterans, and discussed the particular challenges of being veterans on university campuses. Randle eloquently expressed what he saw as a common aspect of veterans’ adjustment: “Coming home is like a junior high school dance: no one knows which way to go, people are stepping on each other’s toes… it’s awkward.” He went on to emphasize how important it is for university instructors to be sensitive to the needs of the veterans in their classrooms. “I almost plead with you,” Randle said, “as teachers, as faculty members … be sensitive to the fact that we may not be ready for direct discussions about this stuff … When kids come to college, this is when we’re supposed to ‘find ourselves.’ But I did that in the Army … we’re not peers [with other students]; we’re in a social vacuum.”

Both Randle and Allman indicated that the need to be aware about student veterans’ issues will only increase in importance, as the numbers of veterans entering colleges and universities will dramatically increase in the coming years. “Because of the new GI bill, your campuses are going to have a lot of us on them … and campuses aren’t really good at dealing with veterans,”

Randle observed. The new GI bill, which becomes effective on August 1, 2009, provides the same educational benefits to veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as those who served in World War II. Allman, who was involved in developing the bill, noted that the new generation of veterans is trying to prevent some of the mistakes made with Vietnam veterans. Randle put it in more stark terms: “There are 1.8 million veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan … Do the math: there will be 2 million before it’s all over. With guaranteed tuition, they are coming to your school.” Although both Randle and Allman continually emphasized that university faculty and administrators should be sensitive to veterans’ social and psychological needs, Randle also suggested, “With the right supports, we are your most prepared and mature students … I mean, I couldn’t believe how much class people skipped … The idea of not being where I was supposed to be was foreign to me.”

Part of the challenge for current veterans lies in the very process of identifying as veterans. As Randle noted, “We’re not the people that come into your mind on Veterans Day. But we’re not the people who come into our minds on Veterans Day either.” The image of veterans is still dominated by World War II and Vietnam veteran stereotypes. Randle and Allman, in the midst of struggling with various adjustment challenges, are also trying to claim a veteran identity for themselves and their peers, and in the process change the public imagination and discourse regarding veterans. Their participation in Green’s project—as well as their own efforts through Vets 4 Vets and Student Veterans for America—are bold steps in that direction.

AES showcased the Iraq War veterans project as part of our “Working Projects” initiative. This project can be a model for other graduate students eager to connect their research to issues of contemporary concern. Stimulating and supporting projects of this kind is the central concern of AES leadership. If you are interested in learning more about AES working projects, please contact AES President David Nugent at david.nugent@emory.edu .