

# THE STUDENTS OF THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF ARMENIA

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Datevik Melikian and A. Michael Conrad.

**W**ho are the graduate students of AUA? They are the sons and daughters of retired engineers, financially-strapped government workers and teachers, underemployed doctors, nouveau riche traders and shop owners, and of just ordinary people who are still trying to adjust to the newly-independent status of their ancient nation. They are young men and women who are optimistic about Armenia's national treasure: the children. Finally, AUA students are local Armenians who are very open to learning Western theories and practices—in spite of the generally "conservative" nature of their culture.

What are AUA students like? The academic behavior and attitudes of AUA students are generally similar to U.S. graduate students, except for some major differences apparently caused by the collective-like culture that characterizes Armenian society. For example public display of "competitiveness" is generally frowned upon. Along these lines, fellow students (especially the high-performing ones) are "expected" to help students who are doing poorly. Another difference is that all students here meticulously compare their examinations and term papers—and grades received—for even the smallest of discrepancies. Also, an interesting phenomenon occurs when AUA professors and administrators make "exceptions", even justified ones, in decisions concerning students: the exception immediately becomes known to all who then seek to turn it into a "rule" that applies to everyone. A final example is when a student or small number of class members are unhappy about a professor,

a policy, or administrative decision: a letter, signed by virtually all program members, is sometimes sent to a Dean "in support" of the classmate(s). However, such "protests" are not carried out with malevolence. They are done with extreme politeness—another striking feature of AUA student behavior.

When I came to AUA at the beginning of the academic year in March of 1993, it was obvious that a number of new students had a difficult time adjusting. This may have been partly due to unclear or unrealistic expectations that some students had about studying here—as AUA was still in the process of fine-tuning its academic policies and procedures. Another potential contributing factor was that the education then was, by necessity, free—which meant that students, especially those who had unclear career goals, had no financial commitment to motivate them. A final factor—possibly the most powerful—was the grim state of the students' personal lives then. They were starting graduate work after a devastating winter had left them visibly undernourished and emotionally burned-out. With almost no electricity in Armenia that year, doing homework assignments in cold apartments under candlelight could do nothing but negatively affect AUA's attempt to socialize them. Despite the trying times, AUA students persevered and the academic year ended on a high note—with graduation of the first class of students (who entered AUA in 1991). Being the first formal graduation ceremony in the history of Armenia, it was the highlight of the students'—and my—academic career.

What a difference four years makes!

With a thorough student orientation program to promote accurate expectations and time-tested academic procedures/policies to guide student behavior, their adjustment to AUA has drastically improved. Students now pay \$100 per quarter, with tuition waivers and scholarships awarded to high-performers. Today's AUA students are truly committed to their graduate work. This is partially due to the fact that AUA has established a solid reputation in the community as a merit-based and corruption-free institution. Furthermore, the improved living conditions in the country have allowed the students, many of whom work part-time, to better concentrate on their studies. Most students enjoy the informal, friendly atmosphere that exists at the University. For some students, AUA has become a "second home" as they meet their friends here on weekends to study or to spend free time "surfing" the Internet. A small number of students have recently formed a Toastmasters Club which holds weekly speaker meetings. Also, a growing number of students are participating in organized sports and exercise programs. But, some lingering student-related challenges and issues remain. For example, it has been difficult to maintain a highly active

Student Government, possibly due to the fact that student councils did not exist in local institutions (and thus their democratic value has not been fully appreciated yet). Also, since all current AUA students are commuters, many of whom travel great distances by public transport, it remains an elusive dream to build a true "campus atmosphere".

Another compelling reason why today's AUA students are dedicated to their education is the growing opportunities for employment that now exist for AUA graduates. While most factory-related jobs of this once highly-industrialized country have vanished, new career opportunities have arisen in recent years. For example, a number of AUA graduates from the 1993 and 1994 classes went to work for technical assistance and humanitarian aid organizations, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Technical Assistance for CIS (TACIS), and the United Nations. In fact, only 17 percent of employed AUA 1993 and 1994 graduates went to work for local State and private organizations. However, 43 percent of employed graduates from the 1995 and 1996 classes are working for local State and private firms. Thus, many of AUA's early graduates have been helping indi-





rectly to reform the country and its economy through foreign organizations, while a significant number of recent graduates are helping to put Armenia "back to work" from front-line positions.

Arthur Lalayan '93, a Senior Specialist in Department of Foreign Relations at the Republic of Armenia's Ministry of Energy, is one of these graduates whose job has a significant impact on the lives and work of Armenians. Arthur, age 31, is responsible for the coordination of and reporting on all United States private-company and government-related activities in the reconstruction of the Republic's energy sector. Working at the Ministry since 1993, he is also Armenia's contact point for the Black Sea Regional Energy Center in Sofia, Bulgaria. Arthur completed an Intensive Learning Program at Bradford University in the UK after graduating from AUA with a Master's in Industrial Engineering. He comes from an engineering family—his mother's specialty is metallurgy while his father is a mechanical engineer.

Karine Sarkisian '93, is one of the growing number of MBA graduates recently hired by transnational companies which are setting up operations in Armenia. After attending a month-long training program in Switzerland, thirty-one year old Karine became the Country Manager for Johnson & Johnson on February 13, 1997. She is responsible for all aspects of the Johnson & Johnson consumer business from a local market perspective, which includes activities such as strategic analysis of market position, sales forecasting, and insuring achievement of product distribution objectives. After graduating from AUA, Karine attended the Kellogg School of Business at Northwestern University for a year as a Muskie

Program Fellow. Prior to joining Johnson & Johnson, she worked at the United Nations in Armenia as a field officer. Both of her parents were employed in an agricultural equipment plant.

Tigran Bayburtski '94 (M.S. Earthquake Engineering) has been working since January 1996 at Midland Armenia Bank as General Services Officer. Tigran, age 29, is responsible for supervising all renovation/construction and maintenance activities of the bank's buildings and automatic teller machine (ATM) booths in Yerevan. Prior to joining Midland Armenia

Bank, he was an administrator on the project to reconstruct the Giumush hydroelectric plant. Tigran has been a student of engineering since his teen years—when he studied engineering at a military school in Riga, Latvia (1984-1986) prior to graduating from the Yerevan State Engineering University in 1992. He is the son of a pediatric anesthesiologist (mother) and a retired construction engineer.

Mariam Sianazova, M.D. '95 (Certificate in Public Health) became the Medical Coordinator for the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in August of 1996. Mariam, age 32, is responsible for supervising and reporting on all of the organization's medical programs in Armenia. She also provides managerial and reporting assistance to the Armenia Red Cross Society. Mariam is a general practitioner who came to the Red Cross after working as a medical researcher for the Armenia Research Institute for General Hygiene and Occupational Diseases. Dr. Sianazova is from a family devoted to medicine: her father is psychiatrist and her mother is a retired general practitioner.

Astghik Grigoryan '96, in December of last year, became the Referent Assistant to the Prime Minister of Armenia, Armen Sarkissian. Twenty-five year old Astghik is performing duties related to her Master's Degree in Political Science and International Relations. She is responsible for attending and reporting on ministerial meetings that include dignitaries from foreign governments and international organizations. Astghik is also responsible for writing executing summaries of all incoming correspondence to the Prime Minister's Office. Prior to becoming Referent Assistant, she worked as an interpreter for the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Astghik is the daughter of semi-retired civil engineer (father) and a gynecologist.

What do these five AUA graduates have in common? They all love their jobs because they see tangible results of their efforts in the cities and villages of Armenia. To a person, they are very grateful that they had the opportunity to study at AUA. They realize that their educational and work accomplishments—and those of AUA graduates to follow—must continue if AUA is to fulfill its mission in the Caucasus region. As U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said when she visited AUA in 1994: "Education at an institution like this has a long-term payoff..." AUA students have convinced me that they can rise to the long-run challenge that lies ahead in rebuilding Armenia. They will face uncertainty and difficult choices in their careers. But, AUA students will cope better with the stresses of life as long as they keep the newly-found freedom to determine their own fate. □

Datevik Melikian, the Communications Specialist of the Student Academic Affairs Office, contributed to this article.

# IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

BY HAROUTUNE K. ARMENIAN

AUA President and Coordinator of the Public Health Program

**F**our years ago when I first joined AUA as the Coordinator of its Public Health Program, I asked myself what makes AUA special? Now that I have accepted the responsibility of the Presidency of AUA, I have to explain to others why AUA is unique and special. I have spent a number of years as a student, faculty member, and Dean at the American

University of Beirut. I have developed my career as a professor of epidemiology and an academic administrator at one of the most prestigious institutions in our field; Johns Hopkins. Why do I need to take up the additional responsibilities that my new position at AUA will require of me? There are obvious answers to the latter question, like commitment to the future of Armenia, or a return to our roots. But above all what makes AUA special and a great place to work, are the students who are trained there and the people who work there. AUA is special as an institution by the challenges it has chosen.

AUA is not just a large building, laboratories, and computers. AUA is a unique institution, a beehive of academic programs and development projects in Armenia. Although it is a more recent addition to AUA's academic offerings, the Public Health Program conveys very well what makes AUA special as a university.

Receiving e-mail from students and responding to them gives me a great sense of satisfaction. Let me summarize a few of these e-mail letters that I got recently.

■ *I am back from Canada and the United States, informs me Gary Arslanian. I have so much to share with our colleagues here in Yerevan. We are making good progress with our educational programs in dental health education as well as in our assessment of fluoride levels in drinking water. Part of my time, I will be working at The Center for Health Services Research at AUA to move ahead with these projects.*

Gary Arslanian is a dental graduate from the Yerevan Medical University and belongs to the first promotion of students of our public health program at AUA. Early in his education he has realized that there is a more effective way of practicing



dentistry than just filling cavities. He is strongly committed to make a difference by introducing preventive dental public health programs and services in Armenia. At the invitation of the Canadian federal government he spent about four months last summer getting hands-on training in his area of expertise. This trip was also an opportunity to establish a close working relationship with Dr. Myron Allukian in Boston, a past president of the American Public Health Association and one of the eminent leaders in the field of dental public health. At the request of Gary, Myron is ready to assist in program development with AUA in this important field in Armenia. Gary is a prime example of the AUA graduate with a very high level of integrity and a commitment to change.

■ *I would like to thank AUA for the great opportunity to develop ourselves, states Nouné Mangasarian at the beginning of her e-mail. Last week the Minister of Health invited us to a meeting to offer various positions within the Ministry. I have accepted the position of Director of Medical Services and I report to Terenig Toumanian the Deputy Minister of Health.*

Nouné Mangasarian is a rheumatologist who has practiced her specialty for a number of years. Following her exposure to the public health program at AUA, she is now actively involved in the development of new systems for the delivery and evaluation of medical care in Armenia.

■ *In a discussion with Dr. Oona Campbell, I was asked to contact you to find out whether it will be possible to develop my PhD dissertation while working at AUA, asks Tamar Kabakian from the American University of Beirut. I will be doing my doctoral degree at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical*

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Medicine of the University of London. I am ready to assist in the teaching at AUA and contribute in field survey research.

Tamar Kabakian is a very bright graduate of the Master of Public Health program at the American University of Beirut. Over the past few years she has developed an extensive experience in field survey and research methods in Lebanon. She has been encouraged by her mentors from London to develop a Ph.D. thesis based on data collected from Armenia. We responded positively to her request. In a similar approach, the Center for Health Services Research at AUA has already accommodated four graduate students over the past three years who are doing their doctorates at Johns Hopkins University about topics related to health services in Armenia.

■ Attached for your review, writes Arthur Melkonian, is a copy of the paper I am going to present at the international earthquake conference in Kobe, Japan, in January 1997. In addition to the analysis on injuries and deaths from the 1988 earthquake, I have included in the paper, the data from the four year follow-up of our study group of 33,000 survivors.

Arthur is a young physician who following graduation from the Medical School in Yerevan, spent a year as a fellow in the Department of Epidemiology at Johns Hopkins. He joined our team of researchers as a medical student and it is through this experience that his interest in Epidemiology developed. Recently he has been in charge of the analysis of data from the long term follow-up of 33,000 survivors of the earthquake. A number of scientific papers have been written about the long term effects of this major disaster. Arthur has also participated in the teaching of Epidemiology and Biostatistics within the Public Health Program at

AUA. Arthur is an example of scientists in Armenia who have benefited from the resources of AUA to develop projects and linkages with colleagues in the United States and on the international scene.

■ We have finished our data collection in all the regions of Karabakh, Alina Dorian reports on the e-mail. Your presence and discussions with the Minister of Health, Dr. Aghabalian, were very helpful in delineating the framework for the health plan. I will send you a first draft of the health plan next week and some of the tables from the preliminary analysis of the data. Dr. Lazarian, the Deputy Minister of Health, has been wonderful in her support to me and the project.

I have rarely experienced such warmth and dynamism in a health professional as I have with Alina. She is engaging, has a strong missionary spirit, and has an enthusiasm that is infectious. She established such a great relationship with the people of Karabakh, that following her stay, a baby or two have been named Alina in Stepanakert. Currently she is in the final phases of writing her doctoral dissertation for the Department of International Health at Johns Hopkins about the health situation in Karabakh. As a member of the team at the Center for Health Services Research at AUA, and with the support of the Ministry of Health in Stepanakert, she has finalized the first Health Systems Plan for Karabakh. The Karabakh Health Plan is an example of a project where AUA is an active participant in social development at a critical juncture of the history of Armenia.

■ The news is good, says Kim Hekimian in her regular e-mail report about the Public Health Program and the Center for Health Services Research. We have made very good progress on our children's project with the Jinishian Foundation, and the Ministry of Health would like to do a follow-up of our last year's breast-feeding promotion program with Wellstart. Our students are such a good group of individuals.

The story of Kim's involvement in Armenia and at AUA is one for a wonderful novel yet to be written. A third generation Armenian-American from Massachusetts, she has made Armenia her

home for over three years now. She is one of the brightest Ph.D. students in the Health Behavioral Sciences area at Johns Hopkins. As the Associate Director of the Center for Health Services Research at AUA, she has more achievements in her field than many of the faculty members back home.

I can go on exposing you to my e-mail and the faces behind those letters. I can describe the project that Robert McPherson, a junior faculty member, is developing for primary care physicians with Americans and the Ministry of Health. I can describe the positive experiences at AUA of Dr. Marie Diener West, the star biostatistics teacher at Johns Hopkins. These are illustrative of the breadth of activities that our Public Health Program is involved in. The planning of the Public Health Program was started in 1992 following a consultants' visit to Armenia by Dr. Rudi Schmid, the previous Dean of the Medical School at the University of California at San Francisco and Dr. Krikor Soghikian, a distinguished researcher and educator from Kaiser Permanente. An affiliation agreement with the School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University was signed in 1993. The admission process of the first intake of public health students was started in the spring of 1994. Two successive intakes for a graduate certificate program led to the initiation of a Master of Public Health degree program in the spring of 1997.

A Center for Health Services Research was started concurrently with the educational program in public health. The Center is self supporting through funding from a number of grants it receives. The Center has implemented several projects that are very important in addressing the major health problems of Armenia.

AUA is a new university with a tradition of excellence based upon the American graduate academic model. Beyond exposing students to cutting edge technology and knowledge, the University develops solid management and problem solving skills that are useful in addressing current and future issues within the practice environment. With its broad approach to education, the University encourages the development leadership skills in future graduates. Today, you will find AUA graduates in various roles in government and in the private sector. Whether it is in the Office of the Prime Minister, in the Ministry of Health, or in the Midland Bank of Armenia, our graduates are effectively contributing to the social and economic development of Armenia.

For an emerging country like Armenia, there are major problems that need to be addressed. The expertise of the faculty at AUA is an immense resource helping Armenia overcome its social and economic problems. To date, six Centers at AUA have been involved with several projects that are important for the development of Armenia. These Centers also serve the problem-based educational needs of the academic programs at AUA. □

