

# WRIISC Advantage

SPRING 2010

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**Veteran Students**  
moving to success

# Supporting Veteran Students from the Field to the Classroom



**V**eterans recently returned from deployment often decide to pursue their education at a college or university. Some do so to achieve a career goal; others may not have been sure about a career path before their service, but have developed a clearer idea following their separation. Some Veterans feel that now is the time to return to school to obtain a job that matches their skill set. Veteran students are generally more disciplined than other college students, because of their training, combat experience, and often their age. They are also often more focused than younger students. In addition, their military schooling and training can serve as a foundation for their higher education experience.

In spite of these advantages, the step back into the classroom is not always easy for Veterans. Many Veterans have physical and psychological health issues such as musculoskeletal

pain, sleep disturbances, traumatic brain injury (TBI), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depression, all of which can complicate adjustment into the school environment. In a 2008 study by DiRamio et al., which interviewed 25 students who served in the current Iraq and Afghan conflicts, students reported that learning study skills, connecting with peers, and financial concerns were major barriers in the adjustment process. This study also concluded that Veterans are a population with specific and unique needs and suggests that it is important for colleges and universities to work with Veteran students to meet those needs.

Some of the suggestions made in DiRamio's study are being implemented in schools across the country. These include appointing transition coaches to help individual Veteran students adjust (coaches help the Veteran deal with administrative hurdles, offer academic advice, and provide support for the emotional aspects of a transition), increasing on-campus awareness of Veteran student support needs by college administrators, creating Veteran student organizations for peer support, and collecting Veteran student data to track the progress of the Veteran student population in the academic environment. The development of more advanced services for students who have physical disabilities or psychological issues continues to be an area of focus.

Several organizations exist on a state and National level to ensure colleges and universities have adequate

**AT THE WRIISC**, our social workers are trained to respond to Veterans who have questions and concerns about returning to student life. During WRIISC evaluations, social workers provide Veterans with support, guidance, and information about continuing education. The social workers also encourage Veterans to explore other supportive services on their student campuses. Social workers also follow up with WRIISC Veterans after an evaluation to check progress and provide further assistance if needed.

services available to assist our Veterans' with re-integration. One such organization for Veterans living in New Jersey is *Operation College Promise* (OCP). OCP was established by The New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities through a grant provided by the Wal-Mart Corporation. OCP's primary goals are to provide access to information enabling service members (both active and separated) to utilize their education benefits and hence, ease transition from service to study. OCP also aims to develop an atmosphere for Veteran success at each and every one of the nine state colleges and universities.

Within the last year the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC), located in East Orange, NJ has worked

**“NJ WRIISC’s partnership with OCP has helped to establish a very positive experience for our returning Veterans seeking higher education, while fostering WRIISC involvement with the community and education on Veterans’ unique concerns and challenges as they re-integrate into their respective communities.”**

*-William M. Keyes, QMC (SW), USN (RET),  
Outreach Coordinator, NJ WRIISC*

Wendy A. Lang, Director, Operation College Promise, New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities, states, “Ensuring knowledge of and access to valuable transitional resources and programs in the state that can assist our student Veterans is an integral part of the OCP mission. We are very pleased to have forged this effective collaboration with the WRIISC program.”

## WRIISC Veteran Spotlight

Like so many other Veterans, Charonda Taylor faced numerous health obstacles when she returned home from deployment. But with the help of Veterans Affairs (VA) resources and her resilient attitude to overcome adversity, her life greatly improved.



January 2006, Kuwait. Charonda was ready for business from Day One of her deployment on the way to Iraq.

In 1999 following high school, Charonda decided to enlist in the Air Force. As an intelligence analyst providing critical information to air crew members and higher headquarters, Charonda was deployed twice. The first was to Qatar in January 2003 and the second was

to Iraq in January 2006. “Once we deployed, it was game face on. We didn’t have time to think much about home. I had to keep my air crew alive and that was my focus,” she explained. After finishing her second tour in Iraq, she was stationed back in Japan before separating from the military. Throughout her military career, she received numerous awards and decorations for her outstanding performance and abilities.

When she returned home, Charonda’s readjustment back into civilian life was difficult. “My family was the first to recognize that I was not the same person - I was flying off the handle, yelling at the T.V. or crying over silly things,” she explained. Her back and joint pain, which began when she was deployed in Iraq, also continued to get worse. Once an avid basketball and volleyball player, she was now having difficulty walking. Even acknowledging her own issues was not easy at first. “I was feeling helpless, hopeless, and like my life would never improve, but it occurred to me that I needed to do whatever it takes to get better because I wouldn’t be able to help any other Veterans if I stayed this way.”

closely with OCP. One of the goals at OCP is to help educate and train state college/university staff about the needs of Veteran students. To help OCP meet this goal, WRIISC staff members have presented at conferences for college/university staff, attended Veteran student events, and are in the process of planning a webinar (seminar accessible on the internet) to take place sometime Fall 2010.

Charonda made the decision to reach out and ask for the help she needed. With the support of her family, she contacted the Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom coordinator at Delaware VA. She started therapy and medication, which helped with her symptoms, but she knew there was still a long road ahead. She also got a referral to the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) in East Orange, NJ, where she went hoping to get some of the answers she needed and learn what she could do to help herself. Charonda was struck by how comprehensive her evaluation at the WRIISC was and more so that the team of clinicians looked at “the whole picture,” asking questions about her entire medical history. Charonda appreciated getting specific recommendations on what she could do to improve her quality of life. Charonda recalled, “I really liked getting the WRIISC ‘roadmap,’ which included tips on exercise including aqua aero-



Charonda takes a short break at Senator Kaufmann's office in Wilmington, Delaware, where she now works.



Charonda enjoys the aqua aerobics component of her therapy at her local YMCA.

bics, healthy eating and stress reduction techniques.” She met with the entire team of clinicians who all helped her to not feel overwhelmed and to better understand the plan she received. “I felt like I was able to better put the pieces of

the puzzle together.” That roadmap has also helped Charonda to follow through and implement a number of changes that have helped improve her overall quality of life.

Today, Charonda still has her good days and bad days, but her health is much improved. She is no longer walking with a cane and finds enjoyment in her day-to-day activities. She’s active in her church, loves to sing and feels like her family has grown closer. She continues to help other returning Veterans cope with the readjustment process. She now serves as a military and Veteran constituent advocate for U.S. Senator Ted Kaufmann and is responsible for addressing constituent concerns brought to the attention of the Senator’s office. Charonda believes her own military experience has given her a unique perspective enabling

her to better relate to and advocate for other Veterans in need. “I feel grateful and honored to be in this position,” she said. “I can talk to Veterans as another Veteran who understands the system which enables me to better advocate and assist them.” When asked what advice she would give to Veterans about life after deployment, she states, “Deal with whatever issues you have no matter how difficult they are to confront. There are resources out there and it’s up to you to take advantage of them. Do whatever you have to do to advocate for yourself. Approach the mission to be healthy with the same energy you approached your military life and combat.”

Lisa Pickett, WRIISC social worker, had the opportunity to speak with Charonda periodically throughout the year to see her progress since her visit to the WRIISC. “A year ago I met with Charonda and her goal was to make it through the day. It is remarkable how this young woman has strived to achieve her goal in all aspects of her psychosocial well-being.”



## VA's Post Deployment Integrative Care Initiative (PDICI)

“Our returning combat Veterans deserve no less than care that is fully attuned to their combat service and the many sacrifices it has involved. We are fully committed to supporting them and their families on their journey back to healthy, post-war lives.”

*-Dr. Stephen Hunt, MD, MPH, Director, PDICI*

Caring for post-deployment Veterans continues to be an important focus at VA. Veterans are often faced with simultaneous health issues across the different spectrums of health (i.e. physical, psychological, and social). Health related quality of life for deployed Veterans, or how well they feel they are functioning day-to-day despite living with health problems, has been shown to be poorer in comparison to civilians and non-deployed Veterans (Kazis et al., 1998, Voeleker et al., 2002). The VA Health Care System strives to improve health outcomes for deployed Veterans through supporting and implementing advanced methods of care.

Dr. Stephen Hunt, MD, MPH of the VA Puget Sound Health Care System, Washington, is the Director of the VA's *Post Deployment Integrative Care Initiative* (PDICI). The program was instituted to promote the concept of “integrated post-combat care” whereby a variety of health professionals with specialized training and interest in deployment health issues work closely together to ensure single point access and full integration of services for all returning OEF/OIF combat Veterans. The team provides an initial comprehensive evaluation and follow-up care during the transition to civilian life. The PDICI takes the big picture of a Veteran's health into consideration. This big picture includes physical, psychological, and social health, how a Veteran feels about their health, and how well they are functioning day to day despite their health problems. It calls for clinicians to focus

on how a Veteran's war experience has impacted health and also takes into account the Veteran's perception of what he or she needs to live the best life. Goals for this type of care are to maximize a Veteran's overall function, manage symptoms, and improve quality of life.

The PDICI is consistent with the WRIISC comprehensive model of care in evaluating Veterans with post deployment health concerns. WRIISC comprehensive clinical evaluations for Veterans include a medical, psychological, and social work evaluation, a meeting to discuss potential deployment related exposures with a specialist in occupational medicine, a social work consultation, and an education session. The WRIISC works closely with Dr. Hunt and his staff to help make the PDICI a success through activities such as training health care providers. The WRIISC also works to ensure that our resources and center model support the efforts of the PDICI. Dr. Gudrun Lange, NJ WRIISC Director, is excited about the WRIISC's upcoming collaborations with the PDICI- “We are partnering with the PDICI in developing and implementing training modules for providers addressing exposure concerns and assessments and military culture.”

Our Nation's Veterans deserve the best, most comprehensive health care. The efforts of Dr. Hunt and the PDICI team have us headed towards improved health care for all deployed Veterans. 

# Around the WRIISC News

## East Orange, NJ WRIISC welcomes Brigadier General Falca-Dodson as Assistant Director for Outreach

The NJ WRIISC is pleased to welcome Brigadier General Maria Falca-Dodson as its new Assistant Director for Outreach. At the WRIISC, we strive to improve the lives of Veterans and serve as a resource for primary care providers. We continuously try to get the word out about our program and services. General Falca-Dodson's primary responsibility is to perform and oversee NJ WRIISC outreach functions throughout both VA and non-VA communities. Her experience and background are assets in helping the WRIISC achieve greater visibility among the Veteran and provider communities.

In addition to working at the WRIISC, Brigadier General Falca-Dodson is the Assistant Adjutant General - Air, New Jersey Air National Guard which includes two Air Wings, the 108<sup>th</sup> Air Refueling Wing at McGuire Air Force Base and the 177<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing in Atlantic City. She is chair of the Long Range Planning Executive Steering Committee, the Weapons of Mass Destruction Advisory Committee, and is the Adjutant General's designee for the New Jersey Domestic Security Preparedness Task Force.

Brigadier General Falca-Dodson states, "My hope is to make a difference for Veterans through the WRIISC program. If I can facilitate Veterans getting into the WRIISC for clinical evaluations, educate providers, or recruit study participants to further our research efforts, I will feel personally and professionally successful."

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## Palo Alto, CA WRIISC Study Examines Effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury in Vietnam Veterans

Palo Alto WRIISC is engaged in an ongoing effort to study Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) to better understand the effects of each. As part of this effort, researchers at VA Palo Alto are studying the relationship between TBI and blast injury history, age, PTSD, and cognitive decline among Vietnam Veterans. The nature of the effects of experiencing a brain injury (loss of consciousness, cognitive, and neurologic problems) can

make it difficult to get an accurate report from Veterans. A striking example of the problems faced in collecting accurate reports was highlighted in a recent interview with one study participant. In response to the question, "Have you ever had a head injury?" the Veteran answered, "no." The Veteran was then asked a series of seven questions regarding TBI and head injury including if he had ever lost consciousness following a head injury and to each question the Veteran responded, "no." However, in response to the final question, "Have you ever lost consciousness for any reason?" the Veteran replied, "yes," and then went on to explain that he had once been in a coma for ten days following a motor vehicle accident. This is just one example that highlights the difficulty in obtaining accurate information regarding TBI and the need for researchers to carefully craft questions using language that the Veteran understands and to ask important questions in more than one way to insure we get complete and accurate information.



*For more information, contact: Mylea Charvat, MS at 650-493-5000, extension 67575 or email her at [Mylea.Charvat@va.gov](mailto:Mylea.Charvat@va.gov).*

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## Washington, DC Brain Imaging Research: The Inside View on an Integrated Approach

Exciting advances are occurring in brain science! Brain imaging allows medical professionals and scientists to view inside the living brain. In combination with other medical information, these images can help health care professionals with:

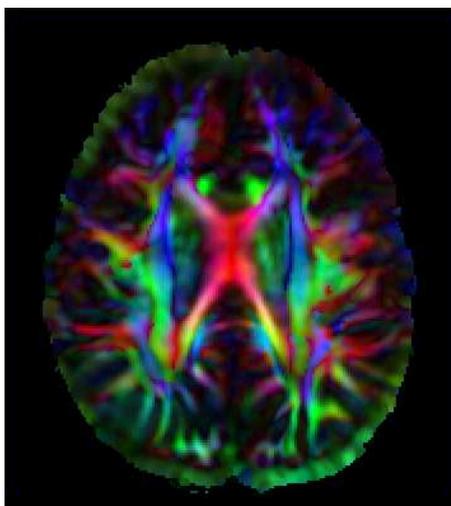
- Diagnosis
- Monitoring of findings
- Evaluating the effects of treatment

Scientists use brain imaging to:

- Examine relationships between brain location/function and behavior
- Understand how medical conditions impact the brain
- Develop treatments for these conditions

The DC WRIISC is currently recruiting for several research studies that utilize advanced brain imaging methods like diffusion tensor imaging (DTI), positron emission tomography (PET), and functional MRI (fMRI) to identify markers

of early disease or subtle injury. The brain operates through interactive networks, so that most central nervous conditions impact multiple brain systems and structures. It is important to use multiple methods of brain imaging as well as other mea-



surement tools to investigate what is occurring in these different brain locations and systems. DC WRIISC research integrates advanced brain imaging with neurologic, cognitive, endocrine, and physiologic measures. These funded studies include examinations of Brain Injury, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Type Two Diabetes.



For more information, contact: Dr. Julie C. Chapman at 202-745-8000, extension 7553 or email her at [Chapman.Research@va.gov](mailto:Chapman.Research@va.gov).

## WRIISC Presentation to Gulf War Committee, March 2010

An important part of WRIISC's mission is to improve medical care for Veterans through research. Recently, Gudrun Lange, PhD, Director of the NJ WRIISC presented an update on the national WRIISC research program before the Research Advisory Committee for Gulf War Research on March 2, 2010. The mission of this Committee is to make recommendations to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs on government research relating to the health consequences of military service in the Southwest Asia Theater of operations during the Persian Gulf War. Included in Dr. Lange's presentation were a brief overview of the National WRIISC program and an update on WRIISC Gulf War research projects. Research at the WRIISC for Gulf War Veterans focuses on understanding and treating deployment related health conditions and symptoms. Dr. Lange also elaborated on ways that the WRIISC touches the lives of Gulf War Veterans. The presentation was well received and WRIISC efforts were praised by the committee. 

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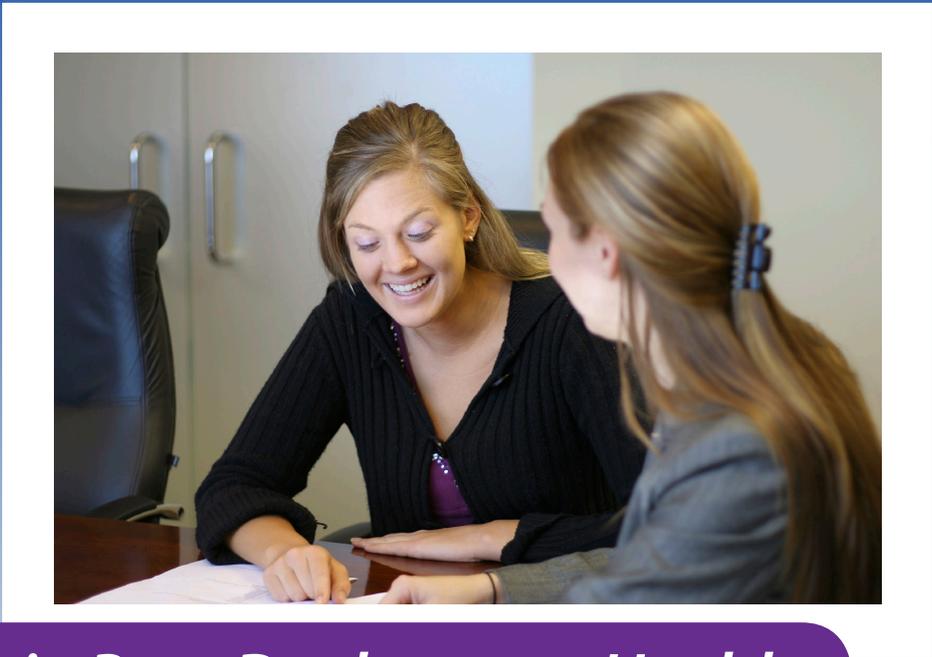
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