



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

# VAanguard

July/August 2011

*Honoring the Fallen*

*Core Values and Characteristics*

*Operation Mend*

*Kidz Camp*

## VA Learning University Hosts First Social Learning Summit

Since humans could first communicate, learning from each other has been a means of survival. As was the case centuries ago, we continue to grow communities of knowledge around stories and experiences so others can prosper from what we have learned and continue to learn. What has changed is the way we immediately and relevantly collaborate.

Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, and collaborative spaces like SharePoint and communities of practice, provide us tools that help harness the ability to learn socially. To transform into a 21st-century organization, VA is leveraging these tools to connect the collective knowledge of its employees and foster a continuous learning environment.

That's what drove the VA Learning University to host the Department's first Social Learning Summit in Washington, D.C., on July 20. The Summit brought together social learning thought leaders in VA and industry to engage in dialogue with VA employees about social learning concepts, strategies and technologies.

"Most importantly, we wanted to start a conversation," said VALU Dean Alice Muellerweiss. "Through this conversation, we wanted to explore what social learning is, and inspire people to think of ways it could benefit VA."

The Summit was the brainchild of Muellerweiss. She challenged Dr. Reginald E. Vance, the director of VALU Learning Infrastructure, to design, develop and deploy a social learning event that would engage learning leaders about how VA can incorporate social learning into

a 21st-century VA workplace. Vance assigned a dedicated team to the task, and appointed Sara Barker, VALU program specialist, as the project leader for this effort.

The Summit began with Elliott Masie, a recognized thought leader in workforce learning, business collabora-

tion and overlapping interests together to learn from each other, but using the technology is half the battle. He emphasized that social learning is more about learning how to learn from each other than it is about communities such as Twitter, Facebook, or the myriad other social media tools.

Steve Radick, the founder of Booz Allen Hamilton's Digital Strategy and Social Media practice, built on Masie's thoughts through a composite character named Alex, a successful young VA employee "stuck in a rut." Alex was disenchanted that his learning at VA was limited to his job description, and despite promotions and praise, he was not adequately developing as an employee. Radick demonstrated, through Alex, that effective social learning invigorates employees through connections to people and information.

Charles Gluck, a Booz Allen Hamilton expert in communities of practice, continued the story by showing Alex's experience with a community of practice. "A community of practice is a group of people who share a concern or a passion, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly," said Gluck. "In joining a community of practice, Alex was able to learn from expertise across VA on his own terms."

Lauren Bailey, deputy director of Online Communication in the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, detailed how VA is improving communication with Veterans through social media. Bailey outlined three social media best practices: push fresh content at a reasonable pace; know your audience; and be real with that audience. These three principles, according to Bailey, help establish trusting and collaborative relationships through social media.

The Summit also spotlighted two upcoming tools that will enable social learning to occur throughout VA—the

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**SOCIAL LEARNING SUMMIT**

**VALU**  
VA LEARNING UNIVERSITY

**VALU your Learning...**

**Harness the Power of Community: Maximize social learning and social media in a 21<sup>st</sup> century VA workplace**

**July 20, 2011**

810 Vermont Street Room 230 and broadcast live through the VA Knowledge Network  
9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Special Appearance by:  
**ELLIOTT MASIE**

**ADVANCE** U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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*The Summit brought together social learning thought leaders in VA and industry.*

tion and emergent technologies. He stepped out of a class he was teaching to appear live via videoconference, using the situation as a teachable moment.

Masie stressed that technology can bring groups with

The reason to bring social learning to an organization, Masie said, is to harness the power of conversation, and create a continuous learning environment. "Social media helps, but if people aren't engaged, then who cares?"

## Craigslist Founder 'Likes' What He Sees at San Francisco VAMC

Following a recent visit to the San Francisco VA Medical Center, Craigslist founder Craig Newmark blogged about the good work being done there and the partnership that's developed between the medical center and the City College of San Francisco, where more than 1,000 Veterans are enrolled under the GI Bill.

"The blog by Craig is very gratifying," said Gregory Hinrichsen, VA's Community Mental Health consultant. "His blog not only highlights our efforts for Veterans at the San Francisco VA Medical Center; it brings attention to our important mental health outreach efforts at Bay area colleges and universities. As Craig notes below, this outreach program is one of our model sites for the T21 initiative regarding partnering with colleges and universities attended by Veterans on the GI Bill."

Here's what Newmark blogged:

*"There's a lot of good stuff happening for veterans everywhere in the US, and a whole bunch happening in San Francisco. CCSF, the City College of SF, has a lot of student veterans, over a thousand, using the new*

*GI Bill. They have a good student lounge, and I've written about it and my small support for it, and have asked for your help also.*

*"Turns out, there's a great VA Medical Facility in SF, getting help directly to student veterans at their facility. (First, do me a favor, check out their Facebook page and Like it.)"*

Newmark is referring to the Veterans Outreach Program, developed by the San Francisco VA Medical Center.

"We provide a one-stop shopping experience at a convenient location on campus where Veterans can access information, enroll in VA health care on-site, and receive on-site mental health services and assistance in navigating both VA and university services," explained Keith Armstrong, Veterans Outreach Program director for the San Francisco VA Medical Center. "Providing mental health care on campus allows for earlier identification and treatment of mental health problems after deployment. This, in turn, may help prevent long-term disability and improve outcomes for younger generations of Veterans."

"This program is changing peoples' lives," said Derek Blumke, co-founder of Stu-



*Bridget Leach, a social worker with the San Francisco VA Medical Center, talks with student Veteran Juan Valdez about the many different VA services available to him.*

dent Veterans of America. "These kinds of partnerships with universities around the country are very much needed and are giving Veterans the opportunity to focus on what's important: getting a college degree."

Dr. Antonette Zeiss, VA's acting deputy chief mental health officer, noted that Veterans with complex mental health needs are less likely to "slip through the cracks" when they have convenient access to comprehensive mental health care on campus.

"In addition," she said,

"VA's location on campus destigmatizes mental health treatment, and may ensure that student Veterans receive the services needed to achieve their academic goals.

"Our hope," she continued, "is to take the model that we've developed in collaboration with City College of San Francisco and its student Veterans and replicate it, in some form, not only at Bay Area colleges and universities but also at colleges and universities across the country. Student Veterans should have easy access to VA care."

### Summit cont.

Leadership Portal and MyCareer@VA. The Leadership Portal is a website that hosts a series of online communities. On the portal, VA leaders will be able to connect with each other and subject matter experts to share content focused on improving leadership.

Victor Geary, program manager for Leadership VA, spoke about the success of piloting the Leadership Portal in

LVA. Participants are sharing information and collaborating in ways unseen in previous LVA classes. According to Geary, students are soliciting each other's expertise on a grander scale, and taking ownership of the class because of the Leadership Portal.

VALU Deputy Dean Dr. Arthur P. McMahan highlighted the upcoming tool MyCareer@VA, a cutting-edge career development program

that helps VA employees map their careers. He demonstrated throughout his presentation how social learning and an individual's career arc relate.

"The three things that drive us to work every day are to be people-centric, forward-looking, and results-driven," McMahan said. "Social learning allows us to do all three." MyCareer@VA and the Leadership Portal are scheduled to launch in the fall.

VALU plans to hold additional Social Learning Summits across the country. "This was a great start," said Muellerweiss, "but we're just getting started."

To learn more about social learning and how VA is using it, visit the Social Learning Community of Practice and Vance's blog at [vaww.infoshare.va.gov/sites/VALU/006vcl/SocialLearning/default.aspx](http://vaww.infoshare.va.gov/sites/VALU/006vcl/SocialLearning/default.aspx).