Are you interested in getting research experience in psychology? Drs. Erin Berenz and Ananda Amstadter at the Virginia Institute for Psychiatric and Behavioral Genetics at VCU are recruiting an undergraduate research assistant to volunteer on a clinical laboratory study (see study abstract below), starting spring semester 2013. A one-year commitment is required.

Duties include: literature reviews, data entry and management, photocopying, IRB amendment preparation, and running participants through the laboratory protocol. Additional training and research opportunities may be available for outstanding undergraduate volunteers.

Interested undergraduate students should: (1) complete a research assistant application (attached), and (2) send an email with the completed application and CV to Dr. Berenz at ecberenz@vcu.edu.

Study description: Young adult combat veterans from the Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF) conflicts are meeting criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at high rates (i.e., 12-18%). Combat veterans with PTSD are more likely to experience a range of difficulties compared to those without a diagnosis, including increased stress-related drinking, decreased quality of life, increased risk for suicide, and increased physical and mental health comorbidities. Current prevention and early intervention strategies are less targeted and efficacious than they could be. An improved understanding of the potential risk mechanisms underlying PTSD etiology and maintenance is needed to improve such programs. Prevailing theory, as well as preliminary evidence, indicates that individual differences in fear conditioning play an important role in PTSD etiology and maintenance. Further, it appears that the experience of and reactions to physiological arousal may be important for understanding fear conditioning in PTSD. The current study will investigate role of physiological arousal and associated panic reactivity in trauma-relevant fear conditioning. The unconditioned stimulus (UCS) will be administrations of 35% carbon dioxide (CO$_2$)–enriched air, a well-established paradigm for inducing temporary physiological arousal in the laboratory. Participants will be shown two trauma-relevant pictures, one of which will be paired with the UCS (i.e., CS+) and the other of which will be unpaired (i.e., CS-). The primary aim of the current study is to examine the effects of combat trauma exposure history (three groups: no exposure [Control]; combat trauma exposed [TE] but no PTSD; combat trauma exposed with PTSD) on individual differences in fear acquisition and extinction, assessed with both subjective and physiological measures. It is hypothesized that individuals with PTSD will evidence the strongest fear acquisition responses and will evidence delayed extinction compared to those without PTSD (TE and control), as well as greater generalization of fear to the CS-. The secondary aim of the study is to examine the role of laboratory panic reactivity in trauma-relevant fear extinction. It is hypothesized that individuals endorsing greater panic attack symptoms during the fear acquisition phase of the study will experience delayed subjective and physiological fear extinction. Exploratory analyses related to understanding interactive effects of the primary variables and examining patterns of physiological responding during the fear conditioning challenge will also be conducted.