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Establishing a Model Professional Science Master's Initiative for Veterans

California is home to 2.3 million military veterans, nearly 10% of the nation's 23.4 million. Serving veterans is a high priority for the California State University (CSU). Under the leadership of Chancellor Charles B. Reed, the CSU has played a pivotal role in California's *Troops to College* program, a national model of a comprehensive initiative delivering high quality programs and services to military veterans.

In the past, most veterans-serving programs focused on helping former service members complete an associate or bachelor's degree. Few programs were available that provided graduate education, fewer still offered graduate professional education to veterans who held a bachelor's degree or had completed some graduate education. Approximately 20% of California's recent former service members fall into that category.

The CSU *Professional Science Master's Initiative for Veterans and Active Duty Military* will deliver professionally-oriented graduate education in science and technology fields. It draws upon existing Professional Science Master's (PSM) programs which have incorporated a variety of advanced online certificates that can be applied to one or more PSM programs offered within the CSU. Participants will typically earn the certificate on their way to the master's degree although they may choose to complete their initial post-baccalaureate work with the certificate.

The California State University Graduate PSM Veterans Initiative

The initiative derives its vision and direction from a partnership of education, military, industry, and state government leaders who share a culture of appreciation and support for veterans. The initiative is designed to recognize the contributions of those who have served our country by offering education programs that prepare them for attractive positions in high-demand fields. PSM programs, presently offered at 14 CSU campuses, have features that make them ideally suited both for this population and for this purpose. PSM programs: (1) are in fields having high workforce demand; (2) include paid internships; (3) involve partnerships with employers who have a substantial interest in hiring graduates; (4) are clustered in science and technology fields that build upon the technical expertise

gained by veterans during their military service. They are, in addition, in fields that contribute substantially to the current and future economic vitality of the region and the nation.

The CSU PSM Veterans Initiative design includes two primary components:

1. An initial online certificate program enables military personnel to begin graduate work before transitioning out of active military service. This approach provides service members who already have earned a bachelor's degree with the opportunity to return to civilian life with an advanced certificate in hand. The certificate alone may equip the former military member to secure a job in a science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM) field. This certificate, like the PSM degree program described below, is available to current service members or those who have retired from active duty service.

2. Online, face-to-face, or blended PSM programs constitute the second standard component. Veterans and active duty military may apply all of the credit earned through one of the online certificate programs toward a PSM or other master's degree, or may earn their PSM degree separately in any one of several high-demand STEM fields offered by CSU campuses.

The certificate programs serve as a logical first part of a master's degree program and provide a meaningful stand-alone professional education. The courses consist of carefully chosen, rigorous graduate courses that are amenable to effective delivery in fully online modes, making them suitable for beginning master's degree study while an individual is on active duty status.

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A program in the high-demand biotechnology and bioscience fields is a good example of this model. An online certificate in Regulatory Affairs provides individuals with a thorough understanding of key issues in national and international regulation that are key to product development and approval in the biotechnology, pharmaceutical, medical devices, and diagnostics sectors. The courses that comprise the certificate satisfy various PSM degree program requirements in CSU's PSM programs in biotechnology, bioinformatics/medical informatics, and biostatistics.

Another example is in Computational Sciences, in which four of the courses in the PSM program are offered online as an advanced certificate. A veteran completing the certificate will be equipped with knowledge of computational research, computer sciences, and business skills for the information economy that together provide a highly marketable skills set in high-demand fields. All four are rigorous graduate courses that satisfy PSM degree program requirements.

Key Steps in Successfully Delivering PSM Programs for Veterans and Active Duty Military

Development of a Partnership with the Military Community: Military bases have an infrastructure for delivering educational programs that provides a solid foundation for a strong partnership with a university. Bases have an Educational Services Officer (ESO) or otherwise designated education personnel who oversee planning of educational opportunities for service members and assist individuals identify programs to meet their needs. A model that has worked especially well for CSU campuses is a Regional Task Force that links the campuses in the region to all of the military branches.

State Agency Approval of Programs: In order for military personnel to use their VA education benefits to enroll in a degree or certificate program, the program must first be approved by the State Approving Agency designated by the US Department of Veterans Affairs. If a program has not yet been approved, the documentation required for approval must be submitted to the State Approving Agency. The process of approval for a formal degree program is straightforward, but should be initiated quickly if a program intends to be ready for veterans to enroll by the August 1 implementation of the new GI Bill.

Conducting a Demand Survey: CSU began its initiative with a survey of demand, which demonstrated high levels of interest in graduate programs in business and management, computer sciences and information technologies, criminal justice, public administration, health care administration, and educational leadership and technology. A relatively strong interest was shown in programs in the life sciences and biotechnology fields, particularly when targeted to management roles and positions.¹ Considerable interest was

also found in programs in emergency services and in environmental sciences.

Online Delivery: Program access for active duty military and for many former military service members typically requires fully online delivery, at least for initial courses in the certificate program. It is not necessary, however, that an entire program be totally online.

Streamlined Application, Admission, Enrollment, and Financing Procedures: Obtaining transcripts and letters of reference can be challenging for service members, who are distant from a campus, perhaps even overseas. Admission, enrollment, and fee payment procedures need to be readily accessible, with one-stop access to graduate program student services. CSU established a streamlined application process through extended and continuing education divisions for the initial certificate programs. The full graduate application is completed while participants are taking certificate courses.

Transferability/Transportability of Credit: A particularly significant need on the part of veterans and active duty military is transferability and transportability of credit. They need to be able to complete courses overseas or while on a military base in the US and to be able to transfer their course credit to other colleges and universities across the country.

Graduate Policies and Procedures: Addressing the needs of veterans requires flexibility in institutional policies and procedures in areas such as application procedures and transfer of credits that must be addressed in the early phases of planning. Faculty and graduate deans need to be involved throughout the development process to ensure the careful design of programs responsive to veterans needs.

Funding in the Post-9/11 GI Bill Makes Graduate Education Affordable: Beginning on August 1, 2009, the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act will provide more than 2 million veterans with significant funding for education, at the graduate as well as undergraduate level. The new bill will support programs like the CSU initiative and includes funding for:

- the cost of tuition and fees, not to exceed the most expensive in-state tuition at a public institution;
- a monthly allowance for housing; and
- a yearly book and supplies stipend of up to \$1,000 per year.

Institutional Commitment and Leadership: Essential to the success of a veterans initiative is having high-level institutional commitment. The CSU Chancellor and presidents have created campus environments friendly to veterans with top-level support from senior CSU leadership and management. Chancellor Reed has made clear the CSU commitment to these programs and their graduate professional components:

“California State University is fully committed to delivering excellent higher education programs to active duty service members and veterans who have served our country. Through our *Troops to College* partnership,

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veterans have access to the largest...Professional Science Master's Initiative in the United States, which includes programs in high-demand fields delivered at the majority of our 23 university campuses in California.*

¹The survey was conducted online and is available on CSU's PSM website at www.calstate.edu/psm. A video about the Initiative is available at www.devildogs.info.

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