

ALL CHANGES ARE IN RED AND MARKED WITH THIS SYMBOL *

**STATEMENT OF OBJECTIVES (SOO)
ACCELERATED LEARNING PROGRAM**

*** February 19, 2015**

I. Background:

In support of the Administration's priority to connect America's Veterans to meaningful civilian employment, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is developing initiatives to bridge the gap between Veterans' separation from service and their civilian employment outcomes. VA assessed the landscape of information technology (IT) accelerated learning programs (ALP) to determine its potential as an alternative or supplement to traditional education that yields career competitive skills and employment opportunities for Veterans.

Most Servicemembers will spend more time in civilian employment than in our armed forces. Therefore, acquiring in-demand skills for civilian jobs is critical to supporting the economic opportunity and wellbeing of our Nation's Veterans. Moreover, building their skills, funding their education, and providing them with training and counseling strengthen our communities, support our economy, and help our Nation remain competitive.

The demand for IT skills continues to grow in the U.S., but there are not enough Americans with these skills to fill these positions. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, by 2020, there will be 1.4 million computer science related jobs available in the U.S., with only 400,000 computer science graduates to fill them. Furthermore, employers provide anecdotal reports that employees hired from traditional computer science programs are unable to demonstrate the functional IT skills required for their positions and require further hands-on training. Due to their focused, immersive nature, as well as their wide availability, IT ALPs may provide the critical hands-on training employers say their employees need.

Veterans have the potential to benefit greatly from innovative learning models. Particularly in high-growth industries and in-demand occupations like IT, accelerated learning may offer Transitioning Service Members (TSMs) non-cost prohibitive training within their last six months of service for seamless career transition into the civilian workforce. Accelerated learning also offers Veterans cutting-edge vocational rehabilitation and education, and the rapid pursuit of career tracks that secure economic legacies for their beneficiaries.

Accelerated learning is a non-traditional form of education that engages multiple learning styles to increase learning effectiveness, tap learner potential in an expeditious way, and generate measurable increases in skills and knowledge. Aspects of accelerated learning of particular interest to VA are:

- The process by which individuals who have career competitive skills gaps pursue intensive or self-paced learning in curricula with a career or industry skills development focus.
- The degree of “novelty” in the program design – that is, the use of technologies, blended learning environments, and innovative curriculum – to accommodate diverse and contemporary learner preferences.
- Programs that are tailored to specific employer needs and possess a mechanism to help place graduates in jobs.
- The degree to which the skills taught are in high demand and forecast to grow or continue experiencing sustained demand.
- Programs that are competency based and allow people to progress based on demonstration of what they can do.

It is important to note that the various models of accelerated learning have design elements or intrinsic features that may be a better fit for some learners but not others. For example, self-paced programs may be optimal for highly driven, independent learners, but someone requiring more structured instruction may not thrive in such an environment. An initial survey of the ALP landscape revealed several formats in the current tradespace each with own advantages and disadvantages:

- Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) - MOOCs are online courses that have completely open and unlimited participation and scale across the globe with minimal infrastructure or resource requirements. These courses are often sponsored by individual universities and may be taken through a specific university website.
- Bootcamps - Another type of widely adopted ALP is the bootcamp. Bootcamps are short but intense training programs that provide immersive education in areas applicable to a specific occupation, often in a specific programming language or job function. The primary goal of these programs is to quickly provide the learner with skills desired by employers. Bootcamps are held in high demand fields with good job prospects.
 - Classroom Bootcamps - Classroom bootcamps often have a more hands-on approach than traditional classroom programs, while focusing on information directly relevant to gaining skills necessary to find employment. The goal of the bootcamps is not to simply improve general

knowledge, but to directly learn coding and programming languages, as well as “soft skills” for the purpose of obtaining employment.

- Online Bootcamps - Online bootcamps contain an online learning module. These programs often have a blend of the benefits of bootcamps and MOOCs – the job placement, in-depth training, and guidance of bootcamps, and the learn-at-your-own-pace, cost effective aspects of MOOCs. In some cases, online bootcamps have introduced “gamification” in their curricular designs. Gamification is the concept of applying game-designed thinking to non-gaming applications to encourage participant involvement and engagement in the e-Learning experience.
- Accelerated Certificate Programs - Accelerated certificate programs offer learners a credential associated with a specialty in an occupation or field of study. One key point to note when discussing certificate programs is the difference between the certificates and certifications. Certificates are a formal recognition of academic achievement but of lesser distinction than a diploma. These certificates often correspond to a certain track of courses within a program of study. Certificates are also different from certifications in that they are not granted by vendors, but rather by accredited institutions. Certificate programs are learning-based, building overall foundational knowledge, as well as skill; this may not be the case for certifications. However, the value of a certificate is dependent on the recognition and value placed on it by industry and employers hiring for those skills.
- Apprenticeships - Apprenticeships, offer a job placement or job assistance program with companies. These are often placement internships or apprenticeships to help learners gain OJT after their in-class coursework is complete. Bootcamps that have incorporated these aspects are plentiful. However, programs that are purely apprenticeship – rather than blended designs – are less common in the IT sector.

II. Scope:

The purpose of this SOO is to solicit Statement of Work proposals to develop new or tailor existing IT ALPs to meet Veteran employment needs by facilitating appropriate IT certifications. The result of this certification/training will be employment in the IT field with a prospective career path. This SOO reflects current VA policies and practices, allowing offerors to propose and price a solution to known requirements. The following characteristics of training are required:

- Approximately 3 months, no less than 4 weeks and no more than 6 months
- May or may not include a diploma/formal degree

- Learning-based (i.e., knowledge and skills) objectives rather than test-based (i.e., certification) objectives
- Requisite on-the-job training or career skills curricula
- Focused on a IT industry; design may be partially based on employer needs
- Result in appropriate IT certifications
- Facilitates employment outcomes (such as job placement assistance or a guaranteed job)
- * Program focused on economic communities with greatest Veteran employment need – **Phoenix, AZ; Los Angeles, CA; Riverside, CA; San Diego, CA; Colorado Springs, CO; Washington, DC; Jacksonville, FL; Miami, FL; Atlanta, GA; Honolulu, HI; Chicago, IL; Kansas City, KS; Louisville, KY; St. Louis, MO; Las Vegas, NV; New York, NY; Cincinnati, OH; Nashville, TN; Dallas, TX; El Paso, TX; Houston, TX; San Antonio, TX; Richmond, VA; Virginia Beach, VA; Seattle, WA**

III. Period of Performance;

The base period of performance is for one year with one option year from contract award.

IV. Performance Objectives:

An ALP's viability for aiding Veterans in civilian career competitiveness relates to the cost and scale structure of the program, specifically its ability to be applied or deployed in multiple environments or settings. It should maximize availability across significant communities of Veterans, produce similar outcomes regardless of geographic or online accessibility, and offer value at a competitive cost. For the purposes of discussion in this SOO, viability decision indicators include but are not limited to:

1. **Cost:** offering the program at the best return on investment for VA funds and at no additional cost to Veterans.
2. **Scalability:** providing online or similar infrastructure for multi-student delivery.
3. **Replicability:** demonstrating consistent persistence rates, job placements, and other predefined program objectives over time and locations.
4. **Intended Outcomes:** through IT certification, indicate the program's ability to generate a demonstrated improvement in IT career competitive skills and/or employability within the IT industry.

- *Employment:* Veterans seeking employment hired within the IT industry at end of ALP and not past 6 months after completion; long-term employment stability within desired field
- *Bridge Education:* Veterans choose to pursue degree-granting or formal education in the IT industry in place of more immediate IT employment
- *Employer Commitment:* IT employer testimony that learners are “job-ready” or a commitment to hiring additional Veterans from ALP

V. Operating Constraints:

1. **Candidate List:** VA Benefits Counselors will provide “ALP-ready” TSMs and Veterans. These individuals will be educated on the benefits and challenges associated with ALP instruction. They will also have a desired career path and education plan to achieve future employment goals. Active duty participants should provide a copy of the commander’s authorization letter detailed in DOD Instruction 1322.29.

2. **Reporting Requirements:** Evaluation of ALP performance requires a baseline to understand Veterans as they enter a program, their current employment status, compensation, and the types of jobs they qualify for prior to ALP completion. Additionally, offerors will share data on Veteran completion status, Veteran completion timeline, and job placement rates. Due to the personally identifiable information (PII) requirement, it is critical that VA continue to own this data including Veteran demographics (age, race, sex, marital status, dependents, disability, location, and military occupation code MOC code of current/former enrolled student). Offerors will provide data to VA NLT that first of every month.

- Program Completion Verification – If the ALP program is successfully completed by the Veteran, the vendor will provide a copy of the Veteran’s IT certification received upon completing the program.
- Employment Verification – If job placement is successful, the vendor, working with the Veteran, will provide VA with a valid job offer letter from the employer.

3. **GI Bill® Usage:** The GI Bill® will not be used for training costs.

4. **Scale:** VA is anticipating for approximately 1,000 Veterans in the first contract year and 1,000 Veterans in the second contract year distributed among multiple awardees.

5. **Cost:** Payment structure will be based on three factors: enrollment, completion and employment.

6. **Certification:** Training will result in appropriate IT certification potentially leading to employment.