

Panetta welcomed home

By Thomas Sumner
For The Salinas Californian

After serving in President Obama's cabinet for over four years as CIA director and secretary of defense, Monterey native son Leon Panetta was welcomed home Thursday during a reception at California State University, Monterey Bay.

"I never forgot that Washington was where I worked and this is my home," Panetta said. "I was born and raised in this area; it is my home and it always will be my home. I love it very much."

After stepping down as White House chief of staff in 1997, Panetta and his wife, Sylvia, founded the Panetta Institute for Public Policy at CSUMB. Panetta says the goal of the center is to train the next generation of American leaders.

"I look forward to getting back to the Panetta Institute and try to again inspire young people to get involved and take that same ride I took in public service and, hopefully, to fulfill the same dream of giving our children a better future," said Panetta.

As a congressman, Panetta helped found CSU Monterey Bay following the closure of Fort Ord in 1994. Panetta had served at Fort Ord in the Army during his two-year military service from 1964-66. According to Panetta, the base accounted for 25 percent of the region's economy and founding the university was needed to keep the region afloat.

"What we've done is converted swords into ploughshares here," Panetta said. "We're giving young people at this campus

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the opportunity to be able to give back to their country through developing their education and giving them the opportunity to succeed."

According to Eduardo Ochoa, interim president of CSU Monterey Bay, the

university now attracts students from all over California, making it a "destination university."

The Panetta Institute provides master's degrees in public policy and takes students from all 23 California State University campuses. The institute runs the Monterey County Reads reading program and sends students to Washington, D.C., to serve

as congressional interns. This year's program focuses on the theme "2013 — Gridlock or Action?"

"I've always believed that there are future leaders who will make their way to Washington," said Panetta. "I hope that they will be able to make the right decisions. The work of the institute is the work of trying to inspire leaders to get involved."